

# NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

# LIFELINE

WINTER 2012

## ALIYAH UPDATE: New Arrivals Under Fire

Dear Friends,

I'm very happy to say in this Lifeline that despite all obstacles – including missiles from Gaza – the aliyah from Ethiopia is continuing.

If you read our last letter, you may recall that hundreds of newcomers from Ethiopia were settling into a new absorption center called Ibim, opened with NACOEJ assistance.

Since then, more have arrived and the numbers have swelled to 500. By the time you read this, there may be 600 new arrivals in this facility – the maximum it can hold.

That should leave around 1,000 approved Jewish men, women and children waiting in Gondar for their turn.

The Jewish Agency says that they will continue to bring in as many as they can house in Israel, and expect to complete the aliyah in 2013.

Of course, vacancies in absorption centers depend in large part on the departure of immigrants already in them, and that depends on the immigrants finding permanent homes, getting government help with mortgages, and, if possible, finding jobs that enable them to support themselves.

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*Tigist Bitau was an honored guest at an event celebrating the Sigd holiday (see p. 3) at the Israeli Presidential Residence, where President Shimon Peres and she greeted each other like old friends. You can see everyone's delight. Photo: Jossef Avi Yair Engel: Advisor for the President*

## “I was afraid I'd never walk again...”

**T**hese emotion-filled words come from 16-year-old Tigist Bitau, the very talented Ethiopian-Israeli runner we've been writing to you about since she was in fourth grade in our Limudiah in Nes Ziona.

At that time Tigist signed up for a race, was mistakenly put in a group of older girls, and went on to win! Since then she has gone from triumph to triumph. Now in high school with a sponsor from the NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program, Tigist has been called Israel's most promising runner and was being groomed for the Olympics...

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## TIGIST | CONT. FROM PAGE 1

...until the day she went out on a training run with other Ethiopian-Israeli athletes. A group of young men in helmets and sunglasses started circling around the group on dune buggies, spewing dust into their faces.

The runners asked them to please stop. One of the men turned his dune buggy around. Then he drove straight into the group. One runner was slightly injured; Tigist was very badly hurt. The driver and his friends fled.

Tigist was taken to the hospital with an injury near her eye. Her leg was broken in many places and her knee seemed shattered. The extent of the damage was unclear. Would she ever run again? At NACOEJ we were all devastated.

When news came from the hospital, we all cheered. After surgery, the doctor said her leg would heal, her knee would be okay, and "She will run again." Tigist is a fighter. From that moment, she began the long battle back.

But it's an uphill fight, and it is still going on. Tigist went home from the hospital to a fourth-floor walk-up apartment where she's cared for by two older siblings, their mother having died a few months ago. She must painfully negotiate those stairs to get to therapy at the famous Beit Levinson Rehab Center in Ra'anana – but she can't use public transportation so the trips are costly.

She can't go to school either, so she has had a tutor for a while, but if she's to graduate with her class, she needs more advanced tutoring, not funded by the school. If she's to run again – and she's determined that she will get to the Olympics – she also needs special shoes and specialized nourishment to restore her strength.

In the first crucial days after the assault, money from our small NACOEJ high school contingency fund helped out – but the fund can't possibly cover these next crucial months.

But neither can we let Tigist down when she says: "I was afraid I would never walk again. Now all I want to do is run again." Though she still needs months of therapy, her trainers agree that if she gets the care she needs, she will run again.

Our NACOEJ representative in Nes Ziona, who has been at Tigist's side from the first, estimates that \$2,000 is needed to cover the next few months. Any help will be greatly appreciated by NACOEJ and by Tigist. Let's get her to the Olympics! ■

*P.S. In case you were wondering, an arrest has been made. We hear the family of the suspect has hired a famous criminal lawyer to defend him.*

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When this photo was published in the Israeli newspaper Yediot Aharonot, Tigist was barely out of the hospital and couldn't put weight on her wounded leg. But she was pretending to run and smiling bravely.  
Photo: Yariv Katz and Yuval Hen: Yediot Aharonot

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### NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

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## ALIYAH | CONT. FROM PAGE 1

Every immigrant wants that – but it isn't always easy to achieve.

The newcomers in Ibim are a long way from ready to leave. But the dream of a job, a home, and an independent life, is a spur for new arrivals to learn Hebrew, complete the required special conversion, and train for available jobs.

Amazingly (or not, depending on how well you know Ethiopian Jews), the fact that Ibim is in southern Israel in the path of the rockets that stormed into Israel during (and before) the Gaza crisis of 2012, didn't discourage these Jews from coming to Israel as fast as they could. And once there, even though they were immediately instructed on the meaning of "red alerts" and "safe rooms", they remained calm.

According to Rabbi Menachem Waldman\*, director of Ethiopian spiritual absorption for the Jewish Agency, "They're not afraid of anything. They're just glad to be here."

How do we feel at NACOEJ?

We're grateful for the numbers coming in. We're hoping for peace. We've pledged to do everything possible for this growing community of Ethiopian-Israelis, especially for the children, the teens, and the young adults, who need the educational assistance we can offer.

We're working hard to make life better for these new Israelis from a vastly different society.

We're thankful above all for you, our NACOEJ family, who have always been with us and are with us now.

We're proud to be fulfilling our founding promise to help Ethiopian Jews not only to survive in Ethiopia and reach Israel, but to make good lives there.

In this Lifeline you will find stories and photos about all of these aspects of the work we are doing together.

Thank you and bless you for making it possible.

*Barbara*

*\*Rabbi Waldman is the creator of the superb new Ethiopian Hagaddah we are offering (see reply card).*



Photos: Win Robbins

## CELEBRATING SIGD

**S**igd, a unique Ethiopian-Jewish holiday, commemorates the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile, the re-giving of the Torah by Ezra the Scribe, and the renewal of the covenant. It was recently named an Israeli national holiday.

Last year, after the Sigd, we told Shoshana Ben-Dor, our Israel director, that she needed more chairs for the overflow of her students in the NACOEJ tent at the site. She replied, "What I need is another teacher!"

This year, one of her best students, Ziva Mekonnen Degu, director of the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, volunteered. She and Shoshana divided the crowd, and were even able to do some one-on-one teaching.

Shoshana and Ziva explained the beautiful traditional liturgy of the holiday. It is chanted in the ancient Semitic language called Geez, which Shoshana knows but very few younger Ethiopians understand, and which few of the Ethiopian-Jewish religious leaders (Kesotch) can explain in Hebrew. Shoshana – and now with Ziva helping – can bridge the gap. ■

# SPONSOR A STUDENT IN ISRAEL

## COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO NEED YOU

Over the years, thousands of Ethiopian-Israeli young men and women have been able to graduate from college and go on to solid careers in medicine, law, government, education, social work, the arts, science, diplomacy, you name it! – thanks to the NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student College Sponsorship Program.

They have broken out of new-immigrant poverty and into the middle class in one generation!

An AAS sponsorship does not include tuition, usually covered by government grants. It provides a modest living stipend, helping students from impoverished homes to pay for rent, carfare, food, books, medical insurance and other basic necessities without which many once were forced to drop out of college and settle for low-level jobs without futures.

Our sponsors correspond with their students (we translate letters) and can develop long-term friendships. Most sponsors say they benefit at least as much as their students. The cost: \$1140 a year. To sponsor a college student, please email Karen Gens at [Education@nacoj.org](mailto:Education@nacoj.org) or call 212-233-5200, ext. 230.



### **DANIEL AYELE: Grandson of a Hero**

In the 1980's a handful of courageous Ethiopian Jews risked imprisonment, torture and death to establish a secret escape route from communist Ethiopia for

Jews determined to reach Israel.

One of the heroes, Dabkolo Ayele, guided escaping Jews across the border to places in Sudan where Israeli agents could find them. He survived prison and torture there, and has been officially recognized by Israel as a revered Prisoner of Zion, imprisoned for helping Jews reach Israel.

Today, his grandson, Daniel Ayele, born in Israel to parents who followed Dabkolo to Sudan and reached the Promised Land in the 1984/85 airlift called Operation Moses, is a worthy descendant of his grandfather.

Daniel graduated from high school with full matriculation – enough credits for college – but first served in the Israel Defense Forces. "This experience," he says, "matured me. It required responsibility and patience, and gave me a different perspective on life."

For two years after the IDF, Daniel worked to support himself until he felt ready to decide on his future. "I decided that I wanted to study," he says, "and I chose electronics. The National Technicians School at Technion is one of the best places in Israel, so I applied there."

It's very competitive but Daniel was accepted and has now entered his senior year.

He has struggled to get by until now. In this last, difficult stretch, with his all-important final project ahead of him, it would mean a lot to this hard-working, independent young man to have a little help with basic expenses. An American sponsor could provide it, not only for Daniel's sake, but also to join the Ethiopian community in Israel in honoring the memory of his grandfather, a hero of his people.



### **SALOMON MAHARI: "I want to make real changes."**

Salomon Mahari was born in Ethiopia. He reached Israel in the 1991 airlift called Operation Solomon, as part of an 11-member family. Four older siblings had already arrived via Sudan and the Operation Moses airlift.

The family settled in Kiryat Gat, where they have lived for 20 years, with siblings now scattered, living and working throughout Israel.

After high school and army service, Salomon enrolled in Ashkelon College as a student of Criminology and Sociology. Why criminology?

"We examine different theories concerning human behavior, particularly criminal behavior," he says. "When I graduate, I want to work in a position that will influence the younger generation. Since I'm a member of the Ethiopian community in Israel myself, I believe I can especially influence people from my community to choose higher education, and lessen some young people's tendency to turn to crime."

"I hope to enter my field and make real changes – even if they are small!"

Salomon is in his second year in Ashkelon now, working toward his B.A. A sponsor could give him not only a modest living stipend but encouragement in his ambition to help Ethiopian young people at risk. Many need his help. You can help Salomon help them.

**TO SPONSOR A STUDENT**  
Please email Karen Gens at  
[Education@nacoj.org](mailto:Education@nacoj.org)  
or call 212-233-5200, ext. 230.

## HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO NEED YOU

As a result of help from the Edward G. Victor/NACOEJ High School Sponsorship Program, thousands of Ethiopian teens have gotten – and are getting – an education preparing them for college and careers.

In this school year alone, NACOEJ sponsors are enabling 1,400 Ethiopian boys and girls in local high schools to get their textbooks, pay their lab fees, and participate in educational school trips, while they live at home and help their families, and as one girl told her sponsor, feel "...just like all the other kids".

But hundreds more are on our waiting list, hoping you'll care. We present two of them here. It costs only \$350 a year to turn a high school kid's life around. To sponsor a high school student, please email Karen Gens at [Education@nacoelj.org](mailto:Education@nacoelj.org), or call 212-233-5200, ext. 230.



### RACHEL MESFIN: She Won't Give Up

Rachel is a bright 15-year-old in tenth grade at the Revivim High School in Rishon LeZion. She and her brothers and sister are having a very hard time at home: their mother died recently and their father, who has poor eyesight and understands only a little Hebrew,

supports the family on welfare.

You might think that under these circumstances, Rachel would be seriously depressed, possibly apathetic, certainly at odds with the world.

But she's not. "I'm interested in medicine," she tells us, "and I want to be a doctor. So I have to do well in school and graduate with full matriculation so I can go to college."

Rachel is one of those special kids who won't give up her dreams, her hopes, or her belief in herself, no matter what fate hands her. If NACOEJ can provide a sponsor to cover such basic necessities as books, carfare, school fees, and educational school trips while she is still in high school – it will make a lot of difference to a courageous girl.



### YONATAN YITZHAK: A Boy Who Needs Books

Yonatan just celebrated his 15th birthday as a tenth-grader in the Revivim High School in Rishon LeZion.

His parents have sad memories of their exodus from Ethiopia – two family members died in the struggle to reach Israel – but they have high

hopes for their children. They are supporting four boys and girls by working hard at low-paying jobs – Dad in a factory, Mom as a cleaning lady in a bank.

Yonatan is determined not to let them down. "I want to be a lawyer," he says. "But I need some extra help sometimes when I take exams, and having a sponsor would really be helpful."

It might mean an occasional tutor, or just having access to books his family can't afford to buy.

Yonatan is an all-round kid who loves computers, plays soccer, and plans to help his family when he grows up. Right now, he needs our help, and would love to hear from you.

## A PARTNERSHIP NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

We are so grateful to our NACOEJ family for your generosity and compassion, enabling NACOEJ to assist Ethiopian Jews so effectively.

For Ethiopian Jews who have reached Israel, and for many born in Israel to immigrant parents, your support means the chance to achieve the education that will enable them to become independent, to care for their families, to be outstanding Israeli citizens.

With your partnership, we've achieved so much for thousands of young Ethiopian Israelis. But we still have much work to do to ensure that more members of this ancient community of Jews, many of whom are still arriving in Israel, can make successful lives.

As you continue your generous support of NACOEJ's work today, please also give thought to extending our partnership into the future.

By your support today and by remembering NACOEJ in your will, you enable Ethiopian Jews on their way to Israel to find educational opportunities waiting for them when they arrive. You ensure that many in Israel – especially the young people – can achieve their great potential. Without our help, too many fail.

A gift today and a simple instruction in your will naming NACOEJ can help change the future for thousands of Ethiopian-Israeli children and families. On their behalf, thank you so much.

If you have questions about NACOEJ programs you wish to designate, or want to tell us your plans, call Danielle Ben-Jehuda at 212-233-5200, ext. 227, or email: [dbenjehuda@nacoelj.org](mailto:dbenjehuda@nacoelj.org). Legal questions? Please consult your attorney, accountant, or financial advisor. Thanks again. ■





Left and Above: Younger children getting a good head start in a NACOEJ Limudiah program in the Yeshurun School in Rishon LeZion. Photos: Win Robins

## “WHERE WOULD THE GIRLS BE?”

**O**delia Ben-David is a wonderful long-time teacher in the NACOEJ Limudiah after-school program at the Ben-Zvi School in Rehovot. Here is a note she sent us during the last school year:

“On January 12, the sixth-grade girls in the Limudiah asked me to help them study for their mid-term math exam by reviewing all the material they had covered since the start of the year. That day, we spent the entire time in the Limudiah reviewing it, but there was not enough time. The girls left Limudiah disappointed, feeling as if they hadn’t reviewed everything.

“We agreed that when they got home, they would ask their parents’ permission to continue preparing at my house. And that’s what happened. After the parents agreed, I picked the girls up and brought them to my house. We reviewed and practiced the

material until 8:00 pm. When we finished, the girls felt confident and ready for the exam.

“On January 15, 2012, their [homeroom] teacher called me and told me how happy she was. The girls had all passed, scoring between 78 and 93 on their math exam. I was overjoyed and so proud of the students. They of course felt wonderful. Their teacher praised them in their homeroom class, contributing to their self-confidence and their desire to continue to strive for success.

“I wondered to myself, where would the girls be if it weren’t for the Limudiah?”

**Many more Limudiah classes are urgently needed, especially for boys and girls whose schools have been closed and who are being bussed to other schools. You can help these children succeed by a contribution of any size to the NACOEJ Limudiah program. ■**

### Condolences to...

- NACOEJ Vice-President **Barak Raviv** on the loss of his beloved grandfather Harry Mostysser, a wounded survivor of the Nazi invasion of Poland, who made aliyah in his 90's. Our deepest sympathy to Barak's grandmother Sara and her daughters, grandchildren and great granddaughter.

## WE MOURN OUR LOSSES

### Middie Giesberg: 1925-2012



*Middie's second mission to Ethiopia with daughter Susan, and Barbara.*

Middie Giesberg always answered a ringing phone with, "Hello, what can I do for you?" And she meant it. She was a woman who never met a problem she didn't want to solve, and simply would not be intimidated by anyone or anything that stood in her way.

With her husband, former NACOEJ President Dick Giesberg, Middie went

to Russia during the cold war to seek out Jewish refuseniks and provide them with everything from saleable jeans to sneaked-in funds, and she didn't give an inch even under interrogation by Soviet secret police. After learning about Ethiopian Jews, she and Dick co-led the first American Jewish mission to Ethiopia in 1981. Middie kept up the spirits of their little group on even the most difficult moments in the high Semien Mountains, where they reached a Jewish village on mule, horse, and foot in spite of government prohibitions.

Middie was a decision maker. That's why when her late son Jonathan made a trip to Israel in 1987 and found that the handful of Ethiopian students at Hebrew University had no money for food, his first thought was to call his mother in Los Angeles – and Middie's immediate response was to start the Adopt-A-Student program.

When the NACOEJ embroidery program developed in Addis Ababa in the 1990's, Middie turned her elegant dining room into a 24/7 boutique, and with Dick and other NACOEJ Board members, schlepped cartons of embroideries to parlor meetings, synagogues, fairs, and schools, selling them to help the Jewish workers survive while waiting to make aliyah.

Of course, she had other interests as well: Catholic-Jewish and Black-Jewish dialogues. Book clubs and synagogue issues. Serving as the NACOEJ Board chairwoman. Most of all, her family, her husband, her children and grandchildren, her aging parents and sister. And tragically, she and Dick had to survive the loss of their eldest child, Jonathan, founding President of NACOEJ.

Just after Rosh Hashanah 2012, at a large funeral in Los Angeles, Middie's gallant life was celebrated by her family, her friends and neighbors, by Ethiopian Jews who called her their mother, and by many members of the NACOEJ Board and family. She was buried next to her son.

Middie and Dick had been married for 65 years. Our hearts go out to Dick and the family, Daniel Giesberg and Carole Lifland, Susan Giesberg and David Lappen, and the grandchildren Sasha, Zoe, Matthew, Joshua, and Michael.

Together, we mourn the loss of a great woman and leader.

### Kenneth S. Kaiserman: 1938-2012

When Ken Kaiserman signed onto a NACOEJ mission to Ethiopia in 1988, we knew of him only as the head of a major real estate development firm, a patron of the arts, a leader in the Philadelphia Jewish Federation. So we didn't expect a slim, modest, soft-spoken man who wore a bow tie and never thrust himself forward.

Well, hardly ever. At a crowded memorial service, NACOEJ past President Joseph Feit recalled his encounter with Ken on that mission.

Waiting for a small, long-delayed plane on a remote field in Ethiopia on a Friday, Joe worried aloud that if the plane didn't arrive soon, he, as a Sabbath observer, would not be able to get on. And Ken, whom he had barely met, instantly spoke up. "If you're staying, I'm staying with you."

Joe tried to talk him out of it. There was a civil war on in Ethiopia and unfriendly-looking soldiers with sub-machine guns were all around the landing strip. Joe had no clue where they could stay that night or how – or if – they'd get a plane on Sunday. But Ken wouldn't budge.

The plane finally came in time, and Joe and Ken went on to become fast friends, repeat travelers to Ethiopia under dangerous conditions, Presidents of NACOEJ, and great leaders in the years of struggle to rescue Ethiopian Jews.

Ken spearheaded the Kaiserman Family Synagogue and Cultural Center in Netivot in southern Israel. Even in the last weeks of his life, Ken was the active chairman of the NACOEJ Ethiopia Committee and the Israel Advocacy Committee, and deeply involved with the Ethiopian-Israeli students he sponsored personally through our Adopt-A-Student program. His last words to us were on an Advocacy Committee conference call, when he reminded us that Ethiopian Jews need good jobs in Israel. He never said a word about being ill.

Ken had many interests, of course. The memorial service was held in the auditorium of the beautiful Philadelphia Theatre Company he and his beloved wife Susan had helped to create. He was eulogized by representatives of Brandeis University, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and other charities as well as NACOEJ – but his heart belonged most of all to Susan, his daughters Amanda Kaiserman and husband Nicolas Tosi, Laura Kaiserman Dupouy and husband Philip Berent, and grandson Quentin Dupouy.

Everyone remembered him for his kindness, his sweetness, his humility. But at NACOEJ we also remember him for his fighting spirit and his unflinching adherence to doing the right thing, no matter the danger.

"Grace under pressure," Joe Feit said, "thy name was Kenneth Kaiserman."



*Ken Kaiserman*

# A Bonanza of Happy News!

## Congratulations to...

- NACOEJ Board member and Holocaust survivor **Rachel Gottstein** on being honored by the annual Jewish Cultural Gala in Anchorage, Alaska as a “spark of light in the darkest chapter of human history”.
- NACOEJ Board Secretary **Harlan Jacobs** for organizing a successful celebration of Minnesota Jews’ role in the rescue of Ethiopian Jews. The prestigious panel included former U.S. Senator Rudy Boschwitz, who led negotiations for the Operation Solomon truce, Dr. Jerry Kobrin of Jewish Health Care International, who’s been monitoring the health of Ethiopian Jews leaving for Israel, and NACOEJ President Jerry Epstein, who discussed the critical needs of Ethiopian Israelis today. Our thanks to Temple Israel for hosting the event and for its long history of service to Ethiopian Jews.
- NACOEJ Board member **Dr. Ruth Gruber** on celebrating her 101<sup>st</sup> birthday with a few hundred friends at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City, and on the opening of a traveling exhibit of her award-winning photojournalism, starting in Anchorage, Alaska, and moving on.
- NACOEJ Board member **Jeremy Feit** and wife Dr. Lenore Feit on the arrival of their first child, Zachary Judah. And congratulations to the grandparents, past NACOEJ President Joseph Feit and wife Surella, and Joseph and Rachel Ribalt, and all the aunts, uncles, and a host of young cousins!
- NACOEJ Advisory Board member **Rabbi Lynn Goldstein** on her marriage to Jack Dougherty at Temple Moses Montefiore in Bloomington, Illinois. Congratulations also to Lynn’s daughters Jenny and Becky, Jack’s daughter Andrea, and family, friends, and congregants who rejoice with them.
- NACOEJ colleague **Dr. Avraham Neguise** and wife Leah on the birth of a granddaughter, Hila, and to the parents, Ariel and Ruta Gerschman, and to the Gerschman grandparents and family. Avraham heads Israel’s South Wing to Zion organization.
- NACOEJ staff member **Caroline Barg** and husband Hershel on the birth of Hadassah Chava to Hershel’s daughter Ahuva and son-in-law Avraham Wittenstein of Jerusalem. Mazel Tov to all Hadassah’s siblings.
- NACOEJ staffer **Karen Gens**, our new U.S. Coordinator of Sponsorship Programs, replacing Judy Dick who served for four years as our U.S. Coordinator of Educational Programs, and has moved on to Scholastic as a senior editor. We will miss Judy, but we are happy for her. Karen has been with us for many years as a sponsor and a volunteer in our New York office, often assisting Judy. We are thrilled that Karen has now joined our staff.
- NACOEJ life-long friend, 16-year-old **Rivka Abbe**, on being honored at Yeshiva University’s Annual Dinner for creating, producing and starring in “Teen Spirit”, a new weekly interview program about Israel, on the Nachum Segal Network. Rivka has been donating, volunteering and setting up school programs for NACOEJ for years, so, naturally, an early “Teen Spirit” program featured the aliyah and absorption of Ethiopian Jews. The program is aimed at teenagers, but we’ve had fan mail from adult listeners! Congratulations also to Rivka’s parents, NACOEJ Advisory Board member Cyrus Abbe and Dr. Judy Abbe, as well as to her siblings Hava, Elihu and Moshe. To listen to Rivka’s programs, go to [Nachumsegal.com](http://Nachumsegal.com), click on Archives, then scroll down the list on the right side to “Teen Spirit”.