



Takele Mekonen at Tel Aviv University

## Giving Back to the Ethiopian-Israeli Community: A Model for Leadership

NACOEJ AAS students have achieved their dreams despite myriad challenges. For many, a college degree and professional career are accomplishments beyond anything they could have imagined. These young adults are forging a path in Israeli society while being integral parts of their own Ethiopian community. Our students are taking proactive steps to guide other young Ethiopian-Israelis toward academic and professional success. One shining example is AAS student Takele Mekonen.

As a teenager, Takele escaped to Sudan from Ethiopia, staying to help other Ethiopian Jews make it to Israel. After a year in Sudan, he arrived in Israel. In 1997, he left a job at a computer company to serve as director of the Fidel Association for Education and Social Integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, where he remained for five years. Takele is currently a graduate student at Tel Aviv University, studying in the Executive Master's Program in Diplomacy and Security.

Although he has his hands full with studies and family responsibilities, Takele continues to provide leadership to the Ethiopian community. He coordinates a program he developed with the Ruppin Academic Center to increase the number of Ethiopian-Israelis in business and financial fields. The program guides students through the stages of preparing for entrance to good business colleges, gives them support throughout their academic careers and then helps them find suitable jobs. The program also requires that the students themselves serve as role models by tutoring Ethiopian children. Takele states the program's mission as follows:

*"I see this program as preparing a younger generation of leaders for the Ethiopian community and I am certain they will have an easier time becoming part of Israeli society.*

*As you know, the social and economic gaps in Israeli society are only growing larger. The Ethiopian community is seriously impacted by these conditions. I believe that it is only through academic education and integration that these gaps can be dealt with."*

Mekonen is very grateful to his sponsor, Jacob Apelberg, for his generous support.

**Sponsors often provide support to students through their own life stories. Takele's sponsor, JACOB APELBERG, writes about sponsoring Takele.**

**"We have a lot in common..."**

*"Takele Mekonen is already 45 years old, and most people have completed their formal studies by that age. But in my first letter, I wrote, in short, my history and that I also was an immigrant in Israel studying at that age. He wrote me a letter thanking me for my help and was excited that we have a lot in common. And he is right. I try to help Ethiopian Jews because they came to Israel with nothing and they suffer from a big cultural, social and technological gap. Therefore, the adjustment process is very difficult. All this puts them at a big economic disadvantage, and if we can help a bit, it brings me true satisfaction. By studying and acquiring knowledge, they will get the tools they need to adjust to living in a modern society."*

## JUST THE FACTS...

**DID YOU KNOW THAT in the 2007-2008 school year...**

- 388 students were sponsored in the NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student (AAS) program.
- AAS sponsorships went to AAS students in six universities, five nursing schools, and two engineering schools.
- Students' fields of study included law, social work, nursing, architecture, economics, education, computer science, optometry, engineering, psychology and medicine.
- 97 AAS students graduated in the 2007-2008 school year.

## Over One Hundred Students on AAS Waiting List

- In the 2007-2008 school year, there were approximately 120 students on our waiting list.
- Many more Ethiopian students need sponsors to enable them to attend college.

**Your contributions enable Ethiopian students to pursue their dreams by paying for groceries, rent, books, and transportation. Please pass this information on to friends who might be interested in sponsoring a student. You are the best ambassador for this wonderful program. Thank you so much!**



**THE NACOEJ/VIDAL SASSOON ADOPT-A-STUDENT COLLEGE SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM**

**SUMMER 2008**

## Breaking New Ground: A First for Ethiopian Jews

Ronnie Melkai shows how far Ethiopian immigrants can go in Israel, despite the challenges they face along the way. In the words of her sponsors, Daniel and Barbara Drench, "All we have to do is give them [AAS students] a lift and they take care of the take-off..." And Ronnie is soaring! As the new spokesperson for the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services, she is the first Ethiopian immigrant to hold such a position. Ronnie was recently featured in the newspaper "Yedioth Ahronoth", where she comments, "I hope that in other places too, people from Ethiopia will be accepted according to their abilities and not by their ethnic origins". Ronnie came to Israel from Ethiopia in the early 1980s and holds a law degree from Tel Aviv University. Her studies and experiences have been recognized by the Israeli government. Yitzhak Hertzog, the Israeli Minister of Welfare and Social Services, acknowledged to "Yedioth Ahronoth", "I am certain that the social sensitivity she displays along with her skills will help her succeed."



Ronnie Melkai, AAS graduate in 2003, at her new job as spokesperson in the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services office.



## UPDATES ON OUR AAS STUDENTS

We are happy to bring you the first issue of "Degrees of Success", written by Judy Dick, Coordinator of Educational Programs, especially for sponsors in the NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student College Sponsorship Program. While you hear about the progress of your own students, we'd like to let you know about the accomplishments of other AAS students, too. Let us know if you have news about your own students that you want to share. Please feel free to call us at 212-233-5200, ext. 226, or e-mail college@nacoj.org. Thanks!



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# Writing from the Other End of the World



Rachel Gottstein with one of her students at the annual dinner sponsored by the Gottsteins for all their AAS "adoptees".

RACHEL AND BARNEY GOTTSTEIN are great role models as sponsors. They have been sponsoring AAS students for many years. Rachel Gottstein corresponds with her "adoptees" regularly. This means writing back to the hundred plus AAS students the Gottsteins sponsored this past year. She describes below how much this correspondence has meant to her, as well as to the students.

**"We look forward to every evening when I start typing those letters..."**

*"Not only do I sympathize with the students, I admire them. They are the cream of the crop. We look forward to every evening when I start typing those letters because... it's not just a matter of giving them money. We're also giving them our love which encourages them to succeed. We get letters saying that you can't imagine how important it is for them to get a letter. That someone cares about them from the other end of the world."*

**"For me, there will always be somebody..."**

NACOEJ AAS students gain so much from your support. Your sponsorship helps them through their studies both practically and emotionally. They appreciate not only the funds but the relationship created by their "adoption". They love to write to, and hear back from, you. The quotes from the letter below express the gratitude felt by many AAS students.

## Heartfelt Thanks from a Student

Excerpts from a letter from graduating AAS student Kasaya Agaza to AAS sponsor Carole Pittleman:

*...I would like to take this chance to thank you for accompanying me during all these years, sharing my experiences, whether good or bad. ... For me, there will always be somebody, a certain Carole Pittleman, sitting there far away, supporting those with difficulties, who struggle all their lives... I will never forget what you have done for me and others like me!*

*I am trying to examine these past three years; where was I when all this began and where am I today?! I have experienced so many things, I have learnt so much and have adapted to so many changes.*

*I began everything three years ago. I began building a future and making professional choice, which I felt would suit me. I chose work places at first for the money and later for the interest they awakened in me to learn and develop personally. Today I am satisfied with some of my professional choices- I am happy for having studied Hebrew literature... I feel good about my decision to work in a shelter for battered women.*

*As you can see, this period is a time of conclusions for me. I am completing my degree, my job, and my five year stay in Jerusalem... and everything that accompanied all this. As they say, "each ending is the beginning of other things".*

# Former AAS Student Appointed as Parliamentary Advisor for Ethiopian Issues

Aliza (Liz) Melesa is a natural community advocate. Born in Addis Ababa, Liz came to Israel during Operation Solomon as a child, and settled with her family in Netanya. She has made it a point to work on behalf of the Ethiopian Jewish community, even while juggling her intensive student schedule.

While pursuing a law degree at Kiryat Ono College, she acted as the student coordinator of the Tabeka organization which provides legal support and advocacy for Ethiopian immigrants. Always interested in political issues, she also was a member of Ken, a group that promotes female leadership in Israel. Liz's talent as an effective leader was also recognized in her army service, where she received a prestigious award for her excellence as a sergeant overseeing the overall performance of soldiers under her command.

It was no surprise that Liz was chosen for her current position as the Personal Parliamentary Advisor of the Absorption Minister for Ethiopian Issues. Liz stresses the impact of the NACOEJ AAS Program in helping Ethiopian students realize their dreams, including her own personal



Aliza Melesa, who graduated in August 2006, is the new Personal Parliamentary Advisor of the Absorption Minister.

achievements thus far. In Liz's words: "One of the most important programs that has been established in Israel for Ethiopian Jews is the Adopt-A-Student Program run by NACOEJ... Their scholarship was extremely significant for me as a student."

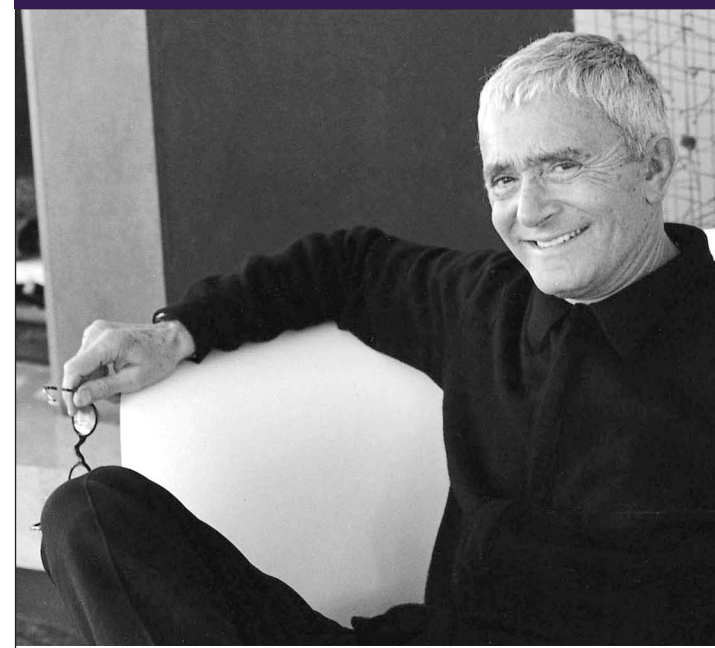
What are her goals for the future? Liz hopes to be a member of the Knesset one day. NACOEJ wishes Liz the best of luck as she pursues her goals. We're sure that she will be an asset to Israel in whatever role she takes on.

Liz's AAS sponsors, RICHARD AND MIDDIE GIESBERG of Los Angeles (who helped found the AAS program) couldn't be prouder. In their words:

**"We sponsors get back much more than we give!"**

*"We are thrilled to learn of the wonderful success of our Vidal Sassoon Adopt-a-Student Aliza Melesa. It comes as no surprise. We followed her progress as a university student through her graduate degree in law. When visiting the NACOEJ office in New York, we were fortunate to be able to meet this beautiful young lady who was there to see her sister. Now Aliza has this wonderful new professional appointment with the Israel Minister of Absorption. This is but a first step for her. This young lady is going places! Aliza Melesa is an example of how rewarding it is to be a sponsor. We sponsors get back much more than we give!"*

## Vidal Sassoon, Longtime Sponsor of the AAS Program



Vidal Sassoon often visits Israel and has met many of his AAS students, arranged by our Israel office. He has a long history of involvement with Jewish causes. Vidal fought in the Israel War of Independence serving with the Palmach. He also helped found the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism and Related Bigotries. His feelings about the success of the AAS program, which proudly bears his name, are clear:

**"Apart from the humanitarian aspects involved, the development of a multicultural society gives Israel's democracy an awareness of all possibilities, as we have proved with the Adopt-a-Student program."**