



NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY LIFELINE

SUMMER
2014

Update on the Aliyah of Jews Left in Ethiopia: Stalled Again

In July we expected to see a report from the Israeli Committee of Exceptions on the aliyah of Jews overlooked or rejected in error in Ethiopia. The Ministry of the Interior is supposed to issue it this month.

As we go to press, however, we've seen no sign of the report, and very little of aliyah.

Even in troubled times, this is not right. Bringing home Jews who were left behind by accident or error when their families made aliyah is about many things. It's about doing justice. It's about reuniting broken families. It's about keeping promises in the Promised Land.

Above all, it's about life and death.

Summer in both Israel and America is winter in Ethiopia. It's a time of cold winds and hard rains. Abandoned individuals, especially the old, with no way of supporting themselves and little help except for the pittance their families in Israel scrape together for them, have a hard time just surviving.

They are also struggling against heavy odds to maintain their Jewish identity, to create a Jewish life, to have a Jewish service to attend, and to keep safe the Sefer Torahs

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Barney's Books Gets it Right!

It's front page news in America!! The American Academy of Pediatrics, representing 62,000 baby doctors across the nation, says that their doctors should tell parents to read aloud to their infants from birth!

The years from birth to age three, the Academy says, are so crucial that they may determine the child's whole future life: "If we can just get that first 1000 days of life right, we're really going to save a lot of trouble later on and have to do far less remediation," says Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. Dr. Navsaria is also Medical Director of the Wisconsin chapter of "Reach Out and Read".

Thanks to the wonderful Gottsteins, Barney and Rachel, who sponsor our Limudiah Literacy Program and our Adopt-A-Student College Program, we are now five years into the Barney's Books Program that places children's books in Ethiopian-Israeli homes to be read aloud to the children by their big sisters and brothers in the AAS program, and kept as a part of the children's own possessions forever.

This program, started by Barney because he was distressed at the thought of

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Mournful Numbers

**“Tell me not in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream...”**

That’s the opening of what was once a very famous poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and at the moment, I can’t get it out of my head.

I had a very upsetting experience the other day, reading an article about the disastrous state of Ethiopian education in Israel. The numbers were so mournful that they made me fear that the Ethiopian dream of life in Israel had already become very empty indeed.

The numbers I read in the article were in the form of statistics, painfully applying to thousands of Ethiopian children in Israel.

Since I hate statistics, and you may too, I’m going to translate them into one Ethiopian child we’ll call “Belaynesh”. I’m sorry to say she’ll be typical.

Our Belaynesh is a nice, ordinary girl from a poor immigrant family. Even though she went to a nationally known pre-school when she was four, when she started first grade, her ability to speak Hebrew was nowhere near what it should have been. When she was tested in second grade, it was even further below average for her age.

Belaynesh was a quiet, agreeable child, and she made no trouble as she got pushed along up to fifth grade. By that time she was below average not only in Hebrew, but in math and science. She was having even more trouble learning English.

After fifth grade, the gaps between Belaynesh and her classmates got wider every year, and the chance of her ever bridging them got smaller and smaller. Belaynesh daydreamed of becoming a medic in the Israeli army, and then, someday, a nurse. But her dream was empty.

Instead of a nurse, Belaynesh became a statistic. A statistic of widespread failure.

I believe that if Belaynesh had had the good fortune to go

to an elementary school with a Limudiah after-school class, it might have been very different.

Limudiah helps hundreds of kids like Belaynesh every year. It also helps geniuses, and slow learners – any Ethiopian kids who want to learn, have fun, and get a chance to become the very best they can.

In Limudiah, Belaynesh would have had a good chance to read Hebrew at class level by the end of first grade, gotten a little extra help with math in second grade, and by fifth grade she might have discovered that she liked science. With steady hard work and some support, she could be on the way to becoming a good nurse in the future. Dream fulfilled.

But since the Limudiah opportunity wasn’t there, and no other came along, for Belaynesh, as for too many thousands of Ethiopian children growing up in Israel, the dream and the life turned empty.

Is it any wonder I was so upset?

To be honest, more than anything else, I was angry at myself. Devastated.

At NACOEJ, we are doing good things – but not enough. Every year we are helping about 2,000 Ethiopian-Israeli children, teens, and college students make their dreams come true – but the ugly statistics are a deadly reminder that other thousands just aren’t making it in Israel.

I did my best to cheer up. I looked on the bright side. Last school year we opened a second Limudiah in Rishon LeZion, and our first in Yavne. We were running Limudiot in Ramla, Lod, Kiryat Ekron, Rehovot, Nes Ziona and Gan Yavne.

We even opened our first-ever middle school program (below, left) – we called it Limudiah Illit (Upper Limudiah). We created it in Yavne, and it is doing great. We are so grateful to all our wonderful donors who have come through for us for Yavne, with big gifts and small gifts, in answer to our appeal.

We are also helping a lot of Ethiopian teens make it in high school, and supporting young adults who are getting their college degrees. But the statistics show that, across the country, Ethiopians in Israeli schools are up to 20% below the national averages in achievements! We’re not doing enough.

Then, last night, I read the rest of Longfellow’s poem.

It’s full of lines people still quote without knowing the origin. You might



Changing the Numbers: Barbara with girls from the new NACOEJ Limudiah Illit in Yavne.



A child in a NACOEJ Limudiah getting the early help he needs from his Limudiah teacher.

want to look it up, and I'm glad I did, because at the end, Longfellow gave some useful advice for dealing with mournful numbers and grieving hearts.

He said: "Let us then be up and doing!"

And I thought: "Okay. Right. So we'd better get up and do!"

There's another school in Yavne asking us for a Limudiah for 56 more Ethiopian children this fall. Sitting around feeling bad this summer won't do a thing for them. It certainly won't get another Limudiah going.

With the dollar low against the shekel and teachers' salaries going up in Israel, it'll cost. But what is the price of 56 dreams?

With your help, your energy, and ours – maybe we'll be able to give their dreams back to 56 more Ethiopian-Israeli children. Maybe their dreams and their lives won't be empty after all.

Together, we have a good chance to change the mournful numbers. Together we might make 56 dreams – plus many more – come true.

Let's move ahead!

Barbara

NOTE: Longfellow's poem is called "A Psalm of Life". The devastating statistics above come from a very reliable source, Shula Mola and Ziva Mekonen-Degu of the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews.

ALIYAH UPDATE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

that are infinitely precious to them, the visible heart of their religion.

All these things are now threatened by delay. Day by day their families in Israel grow more apprehensive. Grandparents may die without ever seeing the Promised Land. Babies may be born to mothers who are unable to nurse them adequately.

The JDC clinic is long gone from Gondar. So is the Jewish Agency. And NACOEJ, by agreement with the Israeli government, reluctantly consented to leave Ethiopia some years ago to get the then-stalled aliyah going again.

Time has gone by, but we have never given up our concern for this aliyah. We fought for the appeals process. We have special responsibility still for the Sefer Torahs which were given to us for the use of this ancient community, and must be protected.

We will keep pushing for action. Watch our mailings and emails, and we'll keep you informed. ■



Jews left behind in Ethiopia worshipping in the synagogue in Gondar.

BARNEY'S BOOKS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

children growing up without a book, is now a staple of our AAS program.

Barney's Books keeps a flow of new, beautiful children's books coming into our Jerusalem office (Yehudit Abramson, AAS Coordinator, is a skillful negotiator with publishers!), traveling on to college campuses, flowing into Ethiopian apartments, shelters, libraries, Limudiah classes, and more. The books are read aloud and then become a source of early literacy to toddlers (and sometimes to their parents as well).

Participating AAS students often tell us, "I never had a book when I was a child, and I look forward to them every bit as much as the children do!"

What a difference books make – now and later – and what a difference it makes when mothers, even those who might not be able to read a book – tell their children stories, or just keep a flow of language going into the ears of even the youngest babies.

We'll talk about this more in the future. But right now, three cheers for Barney's Books, and for the Gottsteins, whose influence on Ethiopian-Israelis of all ages is already changing the future of a whole generation! ■

P.S. Would you like to be a partner in Barney's Books? Contact Karen Gens at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email Education@nacoej.org. It's easy!



SUCCESS STORY: A “Butterfly” Emerges

Efrat Savahat’s parents were teenagers when they married in Ethiopia, made aliyah, and started their family in Israel.

They learned basic reading and writing at the absorption center, and got jobs – Efrat’s father in a paint factory (where he has now worked for 17 years) and her mother as a cleaner and then as a cashier, where, Efrat says perceptively, she had more opportunity to improve her Hebrew, and take part in “school matters” than her father had, working 11 hours a day in a factory.

But to both parents, “school matters” mattered.

When Efrat went to school, she worked



Efrat Savahat
(with Purim hat)

hard – especially on English – and reviewed every day’s lessons at night.

And when she started high school in Yavne, she had a NACOEJ sponsor, Robert A. Kushner, of whom she writes: “Mr. Kushner and the NACOEJ organization had a very important part in my success in high school.

I received a donation from Mr. Kushner every year to pay for important school activities.”

Among those important activities, she took college courses, studied guitar, mentored a gifted Ethiopian child – and also worked in a shoe store to save money so that later on she would be able to take a prep course that would get her into a good college.

After finishing high school, she continued to work, helped her parents, saved money toward college, took the prep course, and wrote proudly to Bob Kushner: “My accomplishments are because of your help, and my grade average in the matriculation exams is 94.”

She thanked him again for his help, and remembered his telling her that

his wife had supported him through his own studies “at a very prestigious institute well-known in Israel.”

Is it any wonder that Bob Kushner decided to sponsor Efrat through college as well?

Today, she continues to send him letters sharing her enthusiasm, and full of her thoughts, her family issues, her excitement at ending her first year in college and working toward a degree as a teacher, with a specialty in English and Bible.

In one of her recent letters, Efrat poured out her heart.

“Mr. Kushner, I am so happy you are supporting and helping me, because my parents cannot afford it. Most of the girls that are studying with me come from affluent homes, and I have you.

“Honestly, your sponsorship is what keeps me at the college. I live frugally and it’s a bit uncomfortable but even the most beautiful butterflies live in a stuffy cocoon for a long period of time. Thank you very much Mr. Kushner...”

We know Efrat’s story is different from most NACOEJ success stories, which describe a young person who has already won a prize, or is well embarked on a career, or making a name in the arts.

“I don’t have enough words to thank you for what you have done for me. You made me feel that you care... I don’t know how to repay you. May G-d reward you and make you happy.”

Rachel Amana (college student)

“Thanks to you, my parents can raise us in peace...”



Rivka Solomon attends Katzir High School in Rehovot. She’s 14 years old.

When she wrote recently to her NACOEJ sponsor, Judith Jackson, she proudly included the names of all her siblings and what they mean: “... Hodaya means thank G-d, my name Rivka is from the Bible, my sister’s name is Noam, it is a boy’s name but makes her special, and Natan which means G-d gave.”

She told Judith about her family’s life in Ethiopia before they made aliyah

during Operation Solomon – about the vegetables they used to grow, and how they built their own house by themselves.

But in Israel, she said, her parents need to pay for so many things like water, taxes, food, electricity and gas! “They need to pay for clothes and almost everything and it is not so simple.”

That’s why, Rivka said, “I am very happy for your sponsorship. It helps me very much because my mother is sick, she has asthma, and is not working.” (Her father works for Tnuva, a major food company, but his salary is low.)

And then she said: “...thanks to you, my parents can raise us in peace and make sure we won’t be deprived of anything.

“I thank you for every shekel that you are giving us, you saved our lives, so thank you for the sponsorship and thank you for being so generous.”

By sponsoring Rivka through the NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program, Judith is making all the difference in Rivka’s ability to attend a good academic high school, have all the books and essentials she needs, participate in important

"...I want to thank you very much... thanks to your help, I was able to go on school trips and received books that helped me study better and receive good grades in the matriculation exams."

Tali Wassia (high school student)

But in this case, we think the "butterfly" is already spreading her wings – and that the relationship between Efrat and her long-term sponsor and his family is in itself an important success.

For one thing, we love it when a high school sponsor becomes a college sponsor, continuing this very meaningful relationship.

And here at NACOEJ, we are sure we will see Efrat fulfill her dream of being "a good teacher in Israel". When she says, "I hope I will be able to make the children see that education is fun and important; and that there are values that need to be rooted deep inside them," we trust her to do just that, perhaps in some of our own classes.

And finally, she says, "I would like education in this country to change for the better. This change can only start with us." To this, we can only respond: Fly high, butterfly!!!! ■

extracurricular activities, and have the tools she needs to go on to college and a career. This is what our High School Sponsorship Program does – and does so well.

If you would like to know more, and perhaps have the nachas of helping a teenager like Rivka to succeed, email Education@nacoej.org or call Karen Gens at 212-233-5200, ext. 230.

Education, as we all know, is the key to a successful future. For less money than you can imagine, you can make sure an Ethiopian-Israeli youngster has that key. ■



Paula and Jerry Gottesman with their AAS students (Leul at left, Iyov second from right) in the NACOEJ Jerusalem office.

A Bris, A Bar Mitzvah, and the Bank of Israel Two Special Stories

Paula and Jerry Gottesman were in Israel last February and arranged to meet two of their former AAS students at the NACOEJ office in Jerusalem, where they had the pleasure of learning first-hand the outcomes of their generous support.

During the years when **Leul Mogas** was studying to become a certified nurse at Hadassah Hospital, an intifada began in Jerusalem. Leul's house was in the direct line of fire 24 hours a day. His wife and children were under attack at home while he was treating wounded terror victims at the hospital.

Since that awful time, the family has moved to what was then a safer location. Just in the eventful week before the Gottesmans visited, Leul and his wife welcomed their fifth child, a little boy, and held the Bar Mitzvah of their second son!

And on the very day the Gottesmans arrived, Leul passed a rigorous exam to qualify as a prestigious Special Surgery Room Nurse at Hadassah.

Iyov Gebayahu, also supported by the Gottesmans, graduated as a computer engineer in 2005. He now holds a very responsible position in the main Bank of Israel, which inspects all the commercial banks in the country. Iyov is responsible for receiving information from all the banks, storing it in the main bank's library, and ensuring that none of this vital information flows into outside hands.

He was able to obtain this important job because of the education that was made possible by the Gottesmans' support. This successful and serious young man has now also taken on the responsibility of financially supporting his parents.

If you would like to make it possible for another Ethiopian-Israeli to achieve a successful career and life, please contact Karen Gens, the New York Coordinator of the AAS program, at Education@nacoej.org or phone her at 212-233-5200, ext. 230. She and Yehudit Abramson, our AAS Coordinator in Jerusalem, will make it happen for you! ■



A Story of Beautiful Continuity

Simcha Asrasai Engeda and her husband Mekonen Engeda both graduated from Ben-Gurion University in 2003, helped by NACOEJ AAS sponsors, Mekonen by I. Klein, and Simcha by the late, beloved Evelyn Deitchman, who for over 20 years, was the volunteer AAS coordinator in New York.

They now have two children. Recently they wrote to NACOEJ to express yet again how important their sponsorships had been then and continue to be today.

"We were supported by your organization," they wrote, "...during our time of study at the University for a BA and the aid helped us a lot in the beginning of our way of life."

Both Simcha and Mekonen went on to advanced degrees. Mekonen, who holds an MSW, is a Deputy CEO in a national



Mekonen and Simcha with their children and Mayor Ruvik Danilovich of Beersheva. Their son wants to be a mayor when he grows up. He wrote a letter to Mayor Danilovich who then invited him to visit his "future dream world".

organization that provides sheltered housing for people who cannot live completely independently. Simcha is a vice president in the internationally known Bank Hapoalim. She is also actively involved in volunteer work for the Ethiopian community.

"Today looking back," Simcha wrote, "I thank you in my name and in the name of my husband and also in the name of all the students of different generations, for helping us in the beginning of our way which turned into leverage for our future."

She went on to thank Yehudit Abramson, Israel Coordinator for AAS, for her "...support and accompaniment, always with a smile and patience..." And Shoshana Ben-Dor, NACOEJ Israel Director who is "...always involved with anything that has to do with the students and gives personal treatment". Then she thanked "...all the sponsors from abroad" as well as Evelyn, of whom she has warm and fond memories.

This story of continuity demonstrates how important NACOEJ educational programs can be for students and sponsors alike – from the past to the present to the future. ■



Children Helping Children

Nothing is as heartwarming as children helping children. Barbara Ribakove Gordon, our Executive Director (who, by the way, loves to speak to children!), spoke to the Kitah Vav (6th grade) class at Shaarei Tikvah in Scarsdale, New York, (above) through our NACOEJ Speakers Bureau. A few weeks later, she received the following note:

"Thank you for visiting Shaarei Tikvah and teaching us about Ethiopian Jews...we learned a lot from your visit... We couldn't believe how difficult the journey was for Ethiopian Jews. It is amazing to learn how they arrived in Israel. Our class studied the life of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. We learned that because the children were hungry and couldn't

get help with their homework, they didn't get the best grades. We want to help Ethiopian Jewish children get a better education, so we held a bake sale at Shaarei Tikvah. We are sending you a check for \$126 for Limudiah with the money we raised at our bake sale."

The letter was signed by each child in the class.

And here is another letter, passed on to us by the Jewish Community Board of Akron, Ohio. Enclosed was a check from the children in third and fourth grade at the Lippman School in Akron, specified for our Limudiah in Kiryat Ekron, Akron's sister city in Israel. They wrote:

"This envelope contains \$200.00. We hope this money helps the Ethiopian children in Israel. This money is all from other kids buying school supplies at our school store. Our goal is for the Ethiopian children to have more money, eat more food, and to be more happy. The third and fourth grade classes worked hard to earn this money. We hope this money helps A LOT, and we are happy to give this money. We hope this money will make the Ethiopian children healthy and happy."

The letter was signed by class representatives.

Thanks, all you kids. Your gifts will certainly help. We are so proud of, and grateful to, the generous children who have learned not just the value, but the joy, of giving tzedakah so very well. ■

A Riveting Tale

So many NACOEJ supporters have interesting stories to tell. Here is a riveting one:

Escape from Germany in 1939

This wartime story comes from the late Ruth Teutch Schwager as told to us by her son Peter.

Ruth Teutch Schwager, a NACOEJ supporter since 1987, was born in Augsburg, Germany in 1912, and with her husband Joseph and young son Peter, escaped to England in 1939. (Her parents were not so fortunate and perished in the Holocaust, which haunted Ruth all her life.)

From England, Ruth and her little family sailed the perilous U-boat-infested Atlantic to America, eventually settling in Salt Lake City, where Ruth began a long career as a weaver and weaving instructor.

After many years, widowed, Ruth decided to get a college degree and took a BA in art. A dedicated volunteer with Jewish Family Service and other non-profit agencies, she also traveled tirelessly. Her son Peter (who graciously sent us the beautiful obituary he wrote about his mother), remembers her as one of the world's "truly gentle souls". Our hearts go out to him.

Ruth passed away recently at age 101, leaving a generous bequest to NACOEJ. May her memory, like her life, be a blessing. ■



Condolences to...

- NACOEJ Board member **Caryn Huberman Yacowitz** and partner Mike Morganstern on the passing of Mike's beloved sister, Jaqui Morgan.
- NACOEJ Board member **Shelley Segal** and family on the passing of Mayer Krupp, Shelley's beloved partner.
- NACOEJ retired Board member **Peachy Levy** and family on the loss of beloved husband, father, and grandfather Mark Levy, a most generous, caring and wise Jewish leader. Mark, who served as Chairman of MAZON, was also a deeply respected advisor to NACOEJ.
- The family and friends of **Danny Mars**, a co-founder of NACOEJ and of New York's famed Lincoln Square Synagogue.
- **Frieda Birnbaum** on the loss of her beloved husband, NACOEJ Advisory Board member Jacob (Yaakov) Birnbaum, known to millions as the founder of the American movement to free Soviet Jews.
- NACOEJ Israel Director **Shoshana Ben-Dor** on the loss of her beloved adoptive Ethiopian-Israeli father, Firdu Pinchas Solomon Iyasu, patriarch of a prominent family in Israel.
- NACOEJ Israel Adopt-A-Student Coordinator **Yehudit Abramson**, on the loss of her beloved mother, Rivka Oren.
- NACOEJ Israel accountant/advisor **Amnon Bahar** and brother Sam, on the loss of their beloved mother, Margalit Bahar.
- The family of NACOEJ long-time supporter **Carol Bretstein**, who devoted two years of her life to successfully securing a Sefer Torah for an Ethiopian-Israeli congregation. Carol's husband Harold recalls the Torah dedication in Israel as one of the greatest days in their lives.

Our hearts go out to all the bereaved families and friends. May they be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

From the entire NACOEJ family, we wish to express the heartbreak and pain we feel at the murders of Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar, and Naftali Frenkel. We pray that their parents and families and all of Israel will be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

We are always touched...

We are always touched and grateful when supporters like Ruth remember Ethiopian Jews by naming NACOEJ as a beneficiary in their wills or trusts or IRAs.

Often we don't know about the bequest in advance, so we can't express our gratitude to the giver, but we try to locate family members so we can say thank you to them.

For more information on leaving a bequest to NACOEJ, please contact Danielle Ben-Jehuda, Director of Development and Donor Relations at NACOEJ, at 212-233-5200, ext. 227 or email her at donors@nacoej.org. ■



Dick Giesberg being honored by OPICA.



Barbara being handed the Hazon award by Solomon Ezra.

Congratulations to...

- NACOEJ Board Member and Past President **Dick Giesberg** on being honored with the Founders' Award from OPICA, the Los Angeles Adult Day Program and Counseling Center.

Since OPICA's founding 35 years ago, Dick has worked on their Board to help the frail elderly cope with the isolation and loneliness associated with Alzheimer's disease. He has reached out to so many in need, and found joy and inspiration in helping others, whether in his own community or, as with NACOEJ, in Ethiopia and Israel.

- **Barbara Ribakove Gordon**, NACOEJ Executive Director, on being honored by the newly merged Hazon organization and Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center at the "If Not Now Society" benefit. She received the award for her work in Social Justice on behalf of Ethiopian Jews.

Barbara was introduced at the event by a surprise visitor, NACOEJ Board member Solomon Ezra, an Ethiopian Jew who flew in, with his family, from Oregon where they now live. Solomon was a pioneer in the early rescue of Ethiopian Jews.

David Weisberg, CEO of Hazon, previously filmed an interview with Barbara, which was shown at the event and can be seen on the NACOEJ website: nacoej.org. or you can scan the QR code at right.



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LIFELINE • JULY 2014 • ISSUE NO: 80

LIFELINE IS PUBLISHED THREE TIMES ANNUALLY.

NACOEJ • 255 WEST 36TH ST. • SUITE 701 • NEW YORK, NY 10018

NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

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And Congratulations to...

- **Judy Dick**, formerly Director of Educational Programs at NACOEJ, on becoming Senior Editor at Scholastic Corporation.
- **Lauren Yoked**, formerly Donor and Foundation Relations and Marketing Manager at NACOEJ, on becoming Executive Director at American Friends of Leket Israel.
- **Orlee Guttman**, formerly Director of Operations at NACOEJ, and currently Senior Development Executive at American Friends of The Hebrew University, on receiving her MBA from Yeshiva University.

We're very proud of these talented young women who served Ethiopian Jewry so devotedly at NACOEJ. We were sorry to lose them, but immensely gratified that they took their NACOEJ experience to new positions that continue to benefit education, Israel, the Jewish people, and the world.