



# NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY LIFELINE

SPRING  
2015

## Dear Friends,

This issue of the Lifeline is almost a story book – it contains so many true stories about Ethiopian Jews in Israel, stories about bad times and good ones, relationships and independence, happy endings and unknown futures.

We think this is a good time to tell these stories.

In Israel (as elsewhere) the announcement of an up-coming election often means that a great many issues, initiatives, and even current programs can be put on hold, and then often be forgotten even after a new government is formed.

But, we can't let NACOEJ programs in Israel be put aside even for a few months. They are too crucial to a community struggling to succeed, having every ability to do so, but needing help from friends in America to get a good start.

And they do need it. At least 800,000 children in Israel go to bed without any supper. This number includes a high proportion of children in Ethiopian households.

And the proportion would be even higher if it weren't for hundreds of Ethiopian children eating nourishing lunches in NACOEJ Limudiah programs

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## A Loving Tribute to the Giesberg Family

When Shakespeare wrote his play about King Henry the 5th, he started it with an apology to his audience for trying to squeeze so many important people and major events onto a tiny stage at the Globe Theatre.

I feel the same way about trying to squeeze this tribute to the Giesberg family of Los Angeles into a NACOEJ Lifeline. The Giesbergs are – and have been – such extraordinary people, and have done so many extraordinary acts of tikkun olam (repairing the world), changing so many lives – that I know I can't possibly tell the whole story here.



*Dick & Middie Giesberg*

But I'll start with Richard (Dick) Giesberg, who passed away peacefully last January 7, at age 90, surrounded by his family.

Dick had told them he hoped to see again his beloved wife, Middie, who died in September, 2012, and their oldest child, Jonathan, who died of a rare cancer when he was barely 40. Dick had been a NACOEJ president, Middie a NACOEJ Board chairwoman, and Jonathan had been NACOEJ's founding president back in the 1980's.



*From left: Middie Giesberg, Susan Giesberg, Barbara Ribakove Gordon, in Ethiopia, in the mid 1980's*

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## LETTER

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–thousands of teenagers having school fees covered by their NACOEJ sponsors so their family has more money for food– and every year hundreds of sponsored college students in the NACOEJ AAS program being enabled to get their degrees and establish careers, so their own children will not be raised in poverty.

All of this, of course, depends on you, our NACOEJ family.

It is your caring, your concern, your generosity that makes all this possible. We are so deeply grateful for all that you do, and hope that you will continue your essential support.

With gratitude,

*Barbara*

## TRIBUTE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

### *I knew them all best for their decades of work with Ethiopian Jews.*

Of course I knew them all best for their decades of work with Ethiopian Jews, starting in late 1981, when Dick and Middie were the lay leaders of the first North American Jewish mission to the Ethiopian Jews.

The Ethiopian Jews were struggling then to survive war, famine, and a brutal Communist government that forbade Americans to make contact with them. I was a member of the 12-person mission, and with Dick and Middie's experienced leadership (they had already made high-risk trips to Russia to meet secretly with refuseniks), we did make contact

with Ethiopian Jews, and survived to tell the tale in Israel and America.

A few months later, in early 1982, NACOEJ was formed in New York in my apartment, and then in Los Angeles in Dick and Middie's lovely home. Their super-competent son Jonathan became our founding president, and with our first administrative director, Hadassah Linfield, professionalized our fledgling organization.

Dick and Middie soon galvanized the West Coast. As NACOEJ Board member Barbara Gaffin (also a participant in that first mission to Ethiopia) says, "Dick's impact on the lives of Ethiopian Jews was extraordinary. He and Middie were a team that had no equal."

*"He and Middie were a team that had no equal."*

A team indeed!

I remember when we elected Dick president of NACOEJ. He said he was willing to serve only if Middie became Board Chair, because "We work together." We were thrilled to get the team.

Together, and with the help of the California friends they recruited, they traveled the West Coast, giving lectures, raising funds, persuading reluctant establishment figures to become advocates for the long-ignored, often terrorized, always poverty-stricken, ever-faithful Jews living and dying in mud huts in Ethiopia.

At home, the Giesbergs turned their dining room into a 24/7 boutique, displaying Ethiopian Jewish crafts – the beautiful pillow covers (we still have some), the gorgeous talleisim (we're all out), the women's pottery and baskets, the men's weaving and metal work, successfully raising

funds and consciousness.

They did some other things I still can't write about that helped young Ethiopian Jews get to Israel despite the then-murderous Ethiopian government that forbade it.

And the Giesbergs didn't forget those who made it to the Promised Land. It took just one phone call from Jonathan, who found Ethiopian college students in Jerusalem without money for food, rent, and books, to get Middie to create what has become the NACOEJ/Barney and Rachel Landau Gottstein Adopt-A-Student College Sponsorship Program (AAS).



*Among the early beneficiaries of the Adopt-A-Student Program was Belaynesh Zivadiah (center), now Israel's Ambassador to Ethiopia.*

*Thousands of young Ethiopian-Israelis have passed through Giesberg hands to successful lives.*

After Jonathan's tragic death a few years later, they also created, and Dick supervised, the Jonathan Giesberg Memorial Leadership Training Program for Ethiopian Students at the Leo Baeck Campus in Haifa. Through this program and AAS, thousands of young Ethiopian Israelis have gone on to successful lives.



***Under the Giesbergs' leadership, NACOEJ became a force to be reckoned with in Ethiopia and Israel.***

During three decades under the Giesbergs' leadership, NACOEJ became a national organization in America and a force to be reckoned with in Ethiopia and Israel.

All this would be more than enough – but it is only a part of the Giesberg heritage. Dick and Middie also established more successful inter-faith, inter-racial, inter-cultural talk groups than I can even list.

Dick or Middie or both participated in, or chaired, programs for the elderly and for fair housing, served on the Urban League and the American Jewish Committee, chaired committees in their local Federation and Community Relations Council. They were founding members of the Leo Baeck Temple they attended. I think the family lost count of the number of Rabbis who visited Dick in his last days, attended his funeral, and paid shiva calls.

And, oh yes, they were active, involved, loving and beloved parents and grandparents, always available for school events, for family vacations, for days on Dick's sailboat and for Middie's home-cooked holiday dinners.

After my NACOEJ visits to California, Dick always drove me back to the airport so we could stop en route to visit Jonathan's grave. In 2012, Middie was laid to rest next to Jonathan and now Dick has joined them.

But the Giesberg story doesn't end here. Far from it.

Their daughter Susan -- after a professional career in consumer protection in the U.S., involving

public policy, legislation, advocacy, and education, plus innumerable positions on local and national task forces – is bringing her expertise to the NACOEJ Board as our newest member.

Her brother Daniel, a businessman who has always generously provided needed equipment and resources to NACOEJ, served as president of the Leo Baeck Temple that Dick and Middie had founded. With Daniel's wife, Carol, and Susan's husband, David, they have raised another generation – Sasha, Zoe, Matthew, Joshua, Michael, and adopted granddaughter, Edith – to believe in service to their communities, to humanity, to endangered Jews and to the State of Israel.

***I wasn't able to go to Dick's funeral...but my heart was there.***

I wasn't able to go to Dick's funeral as I had to Jonathan's and Middie's. But my heart was there. Because it wasn't only that the Giesbergs have done so much – it is also how they have always done it.



***Jonathan Giesberg***

I believe that Jonathan's tireless competence, Middie's tender toughness, Dick's organizational savvy, all came out of one root: love.

That love and that compassion, passed on from Dick and Middie to their children and grandchildren, has enriched all of us at NACOEJ. We have been touched and strengthened by it. It is our inheritance, too, and we will honor it always. ■

*Barbara*



If you would like to see two moving videos which feature the Giesbergs, or read a transcript of Dick's talk about his experiences as a WWII GI in Dachau and Nuremberg, please scan this QR code or go to: [nacoej.org/giesberg-memorial](http://nacoej.org/giesberg-memorial)

If you cannot access the NACOEJ webpage, please call Nelya at the NACOEJ office – 212-233-5200, ext. 0 – and we will send you a printed copy of the transcript.

## **The Most Timely NACOEJ News Straight to Your Inbox**

Our NACOEJ e-newsletter comes out monthly, bringing up-to-date news on Ethiopian Jews. As well, special emails are sent out when a timely issue arises.

We would love to provide everyone with this information in addition to the print Lifeline newsletter. You can sign up for NACOEJ e-communications in the space on the enclosed reply card. There's no charge. And you can rest assured that we will not share your email address with anyone or any organization.

We look forward to welcoming you to our NACOEJ "e-family".



# ADOPT A STUDENT: HI

## Keeping It In the Family...

This story began in 1997 when Karen Gens, who is now the U.S. Director of our high school and college sponsorship programs, heard Barbara Ribakove Gordon speak at a Hadassah meeting. She felt an immediate connection to the Ethiopian Jews Barbara brought to life in her talk. Since then she has been a personal NACOEJ high school and college sponsor.

Karen's second high school student, Rivka Goshu (Ricki), stayed in touch with Karen after she graduated and throughout her army service.

Later, when Ricki enrolled in the College of Management in Rishon LeTzion, Karen became her AAS sponsor. Ricki graduated in June 2014 with a degree in Behavioral Science.



*Karen and Ricki*

On a trip to Israel, Karen met Ricki's whole family, and when Tarik, one of Ricki's sisters, needed a sponsor for college, Karen decided to keep it in the family by becoming Tarik's sponsor. Thrilled, Tarik wrote the following letter to Karen:

## "I will begin with the happiest..."

Yaakov Tessema is a very special young man who is sponsored at the Technion (Israel's MIT) by Ruth Anne and Halley S. Faust. He recently wrote:

*...The last months have been very busy and filled with events. I will begin with the happiest. In the beginning of September I married Ester. The wedding was amazing...the guests were dancing, singing and being with us on this most happy and important day in our lives.*



*As you know, last summer there was a war in Israel. I, as an officer in reserve duty at the infantry unit of Givati, was*

**To My AAS Sponsor From Alemnesh Etti Tadla:** *"I always told you about the feelings of my heart, the good, the progress, and the difficulties. You always gave me good support and wisdom. There is no doubt that there is no one like you on earth...as people we all need to be like you."*

*First of all I want to say a thousand thanks. It is really not to be taken for granted that there are good people in the world. Not to mention your ability to identify and think about my sister which is truly heartwarming.*



*Ricki and Tarik*

*Ricki was very moved by your will to help me and she sends lots of thanks. She also told my parents and my family. It's funny...because we know you for a very long time from my sister's stories and she spoke about you a lot.*

*I will be happy to get to know you more...and any time you will come to Israel I will be happy to host you. In the meantime may you have a blessed week. Tarik*

Karen has kept it in the family, receiving as much happiness as she gives. You too can develop a close relationship with a young Ethiopian Israeli by sponsoring a high school or college student through NACOEJ. (See box below.) ■

**To become a sponsor, please call Karen Gens, our Director of High School and College Sponsorship Programs, at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email her at [Education@nacoelj.org](mailto:Education@nacoelj.org).**

*called up and participated in the war in the area of Beit Hanina in Gaza...During the fighting we lost a few close friends who served at different units...therefore we were all glad when the war was over and we returned home to our families safe and sound.*

*...after the war, the holidays came, in which the joy was tripled, we celebrated the holidays, the wedding, and my return from war.*

*When the holidays came to an end...I had to complete the exams I missed when I was called up for reserve duty. Despite the difficulty, Technion is doing a lot to make things easier for the reserve soldiers to return to study.*

*...a few weeks ago I began my fourth (and final!) year of biotechnology engineering and food at Technion. Hoping for the year to pass peacefully...Thank you very much for your support...Yaakov*

(See box above to find your special student.) ■

## “We were all awed by this young woman...”

Last October (2014), Arlene and Howard Schenker visited their new high school student, Racheli Adiso, at the Evelyn de Rothschild School in Jerusalem.



**Arlene and Racheli**  
Photo: Leah Barkai

To say the visit was a rousing success is an understatement. The Schenkers described it so well when they wrote to Karen Gens, the U.S. Director of our high school program:

*Hi Karen, the visit to Racheli's school was amazing. We were all awed by this young woman. She was in a room with about 7 or 8 adults, put in the spotlight, and answered all our questions in perfect and descriptive English – and she was poised and charming to boot.*

*She is obviously extremely bright. We all agreed that she has unlimited potential to do anything she wants. The school was likewise impressive. The principal spent quite a bit of time with us.*

*Thank you very much for setting this up and matching us with Racheli. We'd like to support her through NACOEJ through high school... Arlene and Howard Schenker.*

This kind of nachas is available to you too. (See box on page 4.) ■

## Our Unsinkable Tigist Bitau



Remember "The Unsinkable Molly Brown" -- the all-American heroine who pulled herself up from poverty and illiteracy, broke into "high society" and even survived the Titanic?

Well, think of Tigist Bitau, who became a champion runner while a child in our Limudiah and was considered a sure bet for the Israeli Olympics team while in high school -- till a young man in a dune buggy ran her over while she was training.

Tigist's leg was severely injured and she had to be hospitalized, losing a year of high school, as well as putting her career in jeopardy.

But Tigist has never given up. With tremendous determination, despite constant pain, anxiety over the fate of her brother Arye who fought in Gaza, and exhausting physical therapy, Tigist passed her first Bagrut (matriculation) exams in 10th grade and is now in 11th grade at the Eliezer Ben Yehuda High School in Ness Ziona.

Helping her through this long ordeal were four sponsors in our NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program. Tigist needed multiple sponsors because of heavy expenses for physical and academic assistance after her injury.

We asked for sponsors to help -- and, bless them, they came through!

As a result, Tigist is now able to face yet another challenge with courage. Last September, she underwent another of many surgical procedures on her leg, this time to remove the necessary but painful platinum bars that were implanted soon after the injury. The surgery kept her out of school again, so once more she has to struggle to catch up.

**Helping her were four NACOEJ sponsors.**

### To My AAS Sponsor From Itzik Yaacov:

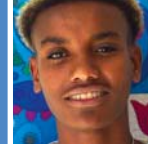
*"...this semester is busier and more difficult than the previous one, however, thanks to your sponsorship I can continue to study...I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart...not only for the great financial help, but also...because it is a recognition of my efforts and success."*

Obviously, Tigist could find plenty of reasons to feel sorry for herself. Instead, she says she has many things to be grateful for. Her brother came home safe from the war. She has hopes of improving her grades in this school year. Since the last

operation, her leg gives her less pain, and she hopes that after a month of physical therapy she will be able to start training again! She wants to run!

Whatever happens next, Tigist says, she's going to keep working at her studies, and get on with her life. Like Molly Brown, she is unsinkable! We are so proud that NACOEJ is of help to this brave and determined girl. ■





## How The War Felt to Our Students

The final cease fire of the Gaza War began months ago. But the memories and the effects of that traumatic summer have not vanished.

Over the months, teenagers in our High School Sponsorship Program wrote to their sponsors in America about what they experienced, what they felt, and how it changed their lives. Here are a few lines from some of their letters:

*"...it was scary and dangerous...I was home most of the time because my mother was afraid that we will be outside and that the "alarm" will catch us with no protection... you found yourself afraid to do regular things like going to sleep or going out because you were afraid*

*that you will be unprepared for the alarm."*

*"You probably heard about the "Tzuk Eitan" operation [Operation Protective Edge], and all the alarms that were heard all across Israel... Among those killed was my father's cousin...it affected the whole family."*

*"I couldn't even do small things because of the war; they [her parents] wanted me to stay nearby the house and not to go far in case a rocket will fall. The mood was heavy and sad because of the soldiers who were killed and injured...I hope the new school year will be good and with no wars."*

*"The war created stressful situations and made me feel closer to my family and friends. We felt stronger together and we needed each other.*

*Going down to the shelter or to the sheltered staircase at odd hours also created a bonding experience."*

*"The mood was sad and heavy. In the first two weeks of the war I was really scared but slowly I realized that I don't have to be afraid because we have the Israeli army that protects us."*

For many of these teenagers, being able to share their feelings with their sponsors meant as much as the financial aid they received. For many sponsors, being a source of comfort and strength to their young students has been even more heartwarming than the thanks they receive.

To have a sponsorship experience of your own with one of the hundreds of girls and boys on our High School waiting list, please contact Karen Gens. (See box on page 4.) ■

## "I would never be able to learn on an empty stomach!"



**D**anielle Symonds grew up knowing about NACOEJ and Ethiopian Jews through her parents' long-time involvement. She decided to ask her family and friends to donate to NACOEJ in place of giving her Bat Mitzvah gifts. She chose to support the Limudiah

Program as her Mitzvah Project. She wrote:

*I have chosen the Limudiah Program for my Mitzvah Project because this program gives Ethiopian schoolchildren in Israel extra help with their studies. This helps them a lot as Limudiah students often come from poor, illiterate, non-Hebrew speaking families, and live in very poor neighborhoods.*

*The Limudiah Program serves hot lunches (I would*

*never be able to learn on an empty stomach!) and the teaching takes place after school in the same schools that the children attend so that the children don't have to travel to get help. The Limudiah teachers work with the kids' regular teachers to make sure each child gets the exact help he or she needs. Reading, writing, arithmetic and other subjects are taught. The Limudiah Program improves the performance of Ethiopian children so much: 80% reach grade level or above!*

*This reminds me of the after-school homework club I used to attend – it was great for me to be able to do my homework in school with a teacher there to help if I needed it. I would like to help Ethiopian kids get extra help too.*

Danielle set an ambitious goal of \$18,000, worked very hard, and when she neared her goal, raised it to \$20,000, an extraordinary commitment for one so young. She also "twinned" through NACOEJ with Aviva Kesete of Lod for her Bat Mitzvah.

NACOEJ Mitzvah Projects enable people of all ages to help Ethiopian Jews in Israel in a variety of ways that are fun and creative. Go to [nacoej.org](http://nacoej.org) and click on Get Involved to find out more. ■

## A Different Kind of Limudiah Story...

Every year we invite local officials to visit our Limudiah After-School Programs in their town to see how the children are doing.

Last January, we brought three important Rehovot officials to visit our Limudiah at the Maalot Meshulam School. Here's what happened:

In one first grade Limudiah group, the children had just started learning, in their homeroom, how to add the vowel "o" to different consonants in Hebrew.



All the children had memorized the combinations taught in their homeroom class. But to make sure they really internalized the lesson, our Limudiah teacher reviewed the lesson, then got out a big, soft ball, pointed to a consonant on a chart, and then threw the ball to a child, who had to respond with a word starting with that letter and "o".

Every child did it willingly and some came up with words that were quite advanced, all with a big smile on their faces! Poor Hebrew vocabulary is a big problem for most



Ethiopian-Israeli children, but these children are developing one that is very advanced for their age.

In another first grade Limudiah class, the children, who had mastered addition and subtraction up to 20, were just beginning to learn the concept of whole "tens", up to 100.

This Limudiah teacher had brought a bag of beans from home and asked each student to lay out ten groups of ten beans each, then match them to the right numbers: 20, 30, 40 etc. (A very positive way of being "bean counters"!)

All the children were working with great concentration when we arrived. For some, it was very easy. For others, it was hard and confusing, so we will work more intensely with them, one-on-one if needed.

Finally we visited a special Limudiah third grade class, held once a week, to help the children learn English in a fun way, with lots of

drawing, making models of new words, etc. English, which is required in Israel, has also been a problem for Ethiopian children (it's their third language!), but these children were very engrossed and were actually having a lot of fun.

Our guests had huge smiles on their faces, seeing how much the Limudiah students were learning, how much they knew, and how much fun they were having in the process.

Afterward, we sat down with the visitors, reviewing our history in the city and what we had achieved. We also talked about the future.

Our visitors were very appreciative of all that we have done. One noted: "Other programs come and go; others are reducing their involvement. But next year, you will still be here."

They want us to return. We want to. But funds are tight. Will we be able to? That depends on you, our wonderful, generous NACOEJ family of donors. ■



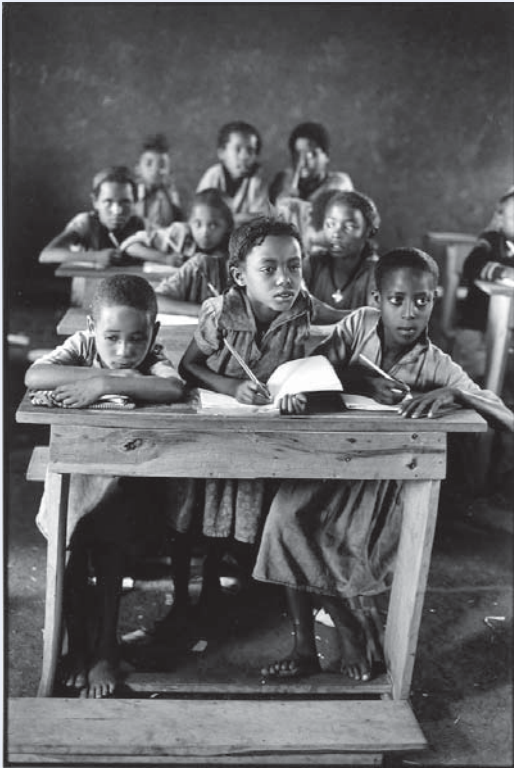
Please scan this QR code for a delightful video of a Limudiah or go to [nacoelj.org/llol-2](http://nacoelj.org/llol-2)





## Congratulations to...

- NACOEJ Board member and past president **Joseph Feit** and wife Surella on the Bar Mitzvah of grandson Meyer David in Jerusalem. Mazel Tov to the proud parents Alison Feit and Jordan Mann, and to brothers Jacob, Micah, and Elisha.
- NACOEJ NY Office Manager **Nelya Danielova** and husband Yuriy on the birth of adorable grandson Jonathan to daughter Rita Rivka and son-in-law Yan Yakov.



"Hebrew Class, Benker, Ethiopia, 1979"

Copyright: © Estate of Arthur Leipzig, courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York.

## Condolences to...

...long-time NACOEJ Board member and past Board Secretary, **Lisa Schachner**, at the passing of her dearly loved mother, Helen Schachner. Like Lisa, Helen was an AAS sponsor, and our hearts go out to her student, Elimelech Birhanu, who called Helen "my American grandmother". May Lisa and Elimelech be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

...the family of **Ruth Popkin**, honored past president of Hadassah and the Jewish National Fund. Ruth played a crucial role in resettling the first wave of Ethiopian Jewish youngsters to arrive in Israel. We at NACOEJ join thousands of members of Hadassah and JNF in mourning a great lady.

...the family, friends, and congregants of **Rabbi Hailu Paris**, long-time spiritual leader of Mt. Horeb Synagogue, Bronx, NY. Born in Ethiopia, as a child he and his family fled invading Axis forces during WWII. Hailu was educated in America and Israel, and held two degrees from Yeshiva University. We mourn the passing of a leading representative of Ethiopian Jewry.

...the family of world-renowned photographer **Arthur Leipzig**, whose extraordinary pictures of "ordinary" people included this iconic portrait of Ethiopian Jewish children, shown here at left.

## Thank You!

We are always touched and grateful when our supporters remember Ethiopian Jews by naming NACOEJ 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@nacoelj.org](mailto:donors@nacoelj.org).

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### NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

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