



# NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY LIFELINE

SUMMER  
2016

## “The Aliyah Could Not Have Taken Place Without Them”

**Editor’s Note:** This article, by Shoshana Ben-Dor, our Israel Director, is surely the longest we have ever printed in Lifeline. But we hope you’ll read every word. It tells a story whose time has come. It should have come a long time ago.

The first two members of the Ethiopian-Israeli community I ever met, back in 1977, were Zecharia Yona and Zimna Berhane. Little did I know then that they would become heroes of the Ethiopian aliyah.

By 1981, when I met Ferede Aklum, the Ethiopian Jew who opened the route to Israel via Sudan in 1979 and stayed to help thousands of fellow Jews traverse it, I knew he was a hero -- though he couldn’t share many



Israel President Reuven Rivlin addressing crowd at the Memorial for those who died in Sudan as they made aliyah from Ethiopia to Israel.

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## From Ethiopia to the Olympics! Agaza’s Story

Agaza Guade came to Israel from Ethiopia with family members as a pre-teen. He quickly recognized the importance of learning Hebrew and integrating into Israeli society as fast as possible, and he did so.

Following high school, Agaza joined the Israel Defense Forces, where he demonstrated a real talent for athletics, which the army encouraged. He now serves in the reserves.



Courtesy of Photographer:  
Liliane Bitton – Internet site:  
[www.LilianePhoto.com](http://www.LilianePhoto.com)

He also studies physical education and teaching at the Wingate Institute, where he is sponsored by Ita Markus in the NACOEJ/Barney and Rachel Landau Gottstein College Adopt-A-Student Program (AAS).

As a runner, Agaza has represented Israel abroad and was the Israeli champion for 2008 – 2009 in the long distance 1500 to 10,000 meter runs.

**We’re proud to tell you that Agaza is representing Israel in the marathon in the Rio Olympics!!!**

This is an extraordinary achievement for someone who continues his education at the same time.

Well done Agaza! And well done Ita as his enthusiastic sponsor! We all have a special interest in this year’s Olympic Games because of them. ■



## "The Aliyah Could Not Have Taken Place Without Them"

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details about what he was still doing in Sudan.

Still later, when we at NACOEJ organized a study program to teach Limudiah teachers about the Zionist heroes of Ethiopian Jews, I met another hero, Asnaku Mekkonen.

***These brave and self-sacrificing men were only a few of the many who played heroic roles in an (up-to-now) untold part of the story of the rescue of Ethiopian Jews.***

Until recently, Israelis knew the story only from their government's point of view. In it, the Israeli government went and saved the Ethiopian Jews, employing its ships, planes and brave Mossad agents (true), while the Ethiopian Jews were by and large passive (not true).

This was certainly what we heard about the aliyah through Sudan, culminating in the famous Operation Moses airlift in 1984-85.

But Operation Moses was only one chapter in the story of Sudan, where aliyah began in 1979 and continued till 1990, and involved essential initiatives by the Ethiopian Jews themselves.

As individuals, families and whole villages, the Jews organized themselves for the dangerous and secret trek out of Ethiopia, preparing food, water and money for the journey; hiring guides; saying goodbye forever to their homes and property; and setting out in the dark of night to cross mountains, jungles and deserts.

They also knew that they and their children might encounter Ethiopian police, armed bandits, and brutal Sudanese border guards.

Once in the vast Sudanese refugee

camps, the Jews tried courageously to maintain a semblance of normal life, though in daily danger from the huge non-Jewish majority of neighbors who were antagonistic to Jews. They suffered from constant thirst, hunger, and illness, and too often from deaths in their families – traumas that went unrecognized for far too long.

Into these horrendous camps came Mossad agents – and Ethiopian Israelis, whom the Israeli government had asked to go to Sudan to save the Jews. Some of these Ethiopian Israelis had been in Israel since the early 1970's or even the 50's – some were recent arrivals. All had willingly agreed to go to Sudan to identify Jews scattered in the camps, extend what aid they could, gather them into safe houses, get them onto various means of transport, and take them to sites where they could board ships or planes for the journey to Israel.

**All these Ethiopian-Jewish heroes risked their own lives daily – the aliyah could not have taken place without them.**

Yet even on Jerusalem Day, at an official Israeli event honoring the approximately 4000 Ethiopian Jews who died trying to reach Israel via Sudan, the courage, the sacrifice, the daily heroism of ordinary Ethiopian Jews and their great leaders, has not been featured.

But today, new voices are emerging in Israel, those of proud, young Ethiopian Israelis, including those older Ethiopians who themselves survived Sudan.

Along with the official Jerusalem Day ceremony, Ethiopian Israelis are now organizing their own memorials and study events (I was invited to six). At them, we heard from living witnesses about the terrible suffering and sacrifice of those who spent months

or even years in the camps, and of their exodus by sea, or by commercial flights, or by Israeli airlifts. And we learned of the courage and devotion of Ferede Aklum, Zecharia Yona, Zimna Berhane, Asnaku Mekkonen, Ermais Meheret and others.

***Into these horrendous camps came Mossad agents...***

I attended two of these events. One was organized and hosted by Shmuel Meherat, now head of the city of Ashdod's social service department, the son of Qes Shetu (one of my teachers) and incidentally the person who, along with then-NACOEJ-staffer Michael Strum, opened the first NACOEJ compound in Addis Ababa in 1990.

Breaking silence for the first time was Zecharia Yona, who was enlisted by the Mossad to oversee Operation Moses. His description was fascinating and moving. Then we heard from Ethiopian Israelis who made aliyah through Sudan, all having buried family members along

***...these Ethiopian-Jewish heroes risked their own lives daily...***

the way. Asnaku Mekkonen, who had spent seven years in Sudan as a Mossad worker, spoke, as did Michah Feldman, a non-Ethiopian Israeli who began working with the community in 1981, directed Operation Solomon in Addis Ababa, and still works on behalf of the community in Israel.

Sitting next to me was a young woman whose sister became famous as a baby when, on board a rescue ship, she was diagnosed with meningitis and Zimna Berhane ordered a helicopter to rush her to hospital in Israel.

I next went to an event focusing on the late great Ferede Aklum, the pathfinder. After a very moving film about Ferede's life, Dani Limor, the "white" Mossad agent who worked with Ferede in Sudan spoke about Ferede and read a touching letter



about him from Efraim Halevi, former head of the Mossad.

As Israel Director of NACOEJ, I had been asked to edit part of a booklet about Ferede and Ethiopian Jews because "we trust you to know". I was honored to do so, and the booklet was distributed at the event.

And finally there was the State event on Sunday. This always takes place at Mt. Herzl cemetery, where a very moving memorial structure commemorates the 4000 who died on the way to Israel via Sudan (out of 20,000 who took that route).

During the last few years, over 2000 of their names have been carved into the memorial, replacing the hastily prepared graves left behind in Sudan. Relatives can now light candles there, and weep for their lost kin.

Both Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Reuven Rivlin spoke. But my two major memories of Sunday's event are (first) a young couple, she Ethiopian, he not, bringing candles to light for her relatives who died on the way – and (second) the words of a close friend of mine, an Ethiopian-Israeli

woman who was a child when she and her family made the trek.

She is now an educator, a college graduate, a Fellow of the prestigious Mandel Institute of Educational Leadership, and Director of the Zinuk B'Aliyah Army Preparation Program. She and I have attended these memorial services before. This time she came over to me and said, "Every year it just gets harder."

We embraced.

The time has come to tell their story.

*Shoshana Ben-Dor* ■



Mother and son looking for names of relatives who died in Sudan on the way from Ethiopia to Israel.

## A Note From Barbara:

I'm sorry that as I write there is still no aliyah from Ethiopia. Although it's now 10 months since the Israeli Cabinet voted unanimously to bring the 9000 Jews still in Addis Ababa and Gondar to Israel, not one has arrived.

Torn-apart families still suffer on both sides of the Red Sea.

In Ethiopia, months of drought and famine in the north have sent food prices skyrocketing everywhere, causing new misery in the rented huts of Jews who left their former villages, homes, and farms to register for aliyah in Addis or Gondar – and weren't accepted.

Unable to return to their former

homes, they are internally displaced refugees, without resources to feed and clothe their families.

They survive on occasional jobs, the pittances that come from their relatives in Israel – and unshakeable hope.

Does anyone care?

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## A Note From Barbara:

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The JDC, which used to run clinics for Jews in Addis and Gondar, now does humanitarian work in Ethiopia for non-Jews only. They tell us those programs are supported by a special fund, not available for Jews.

The Jewish Agency, which took over NACOEJ schools, feeding centers, synagogues and other programs in Ethiopia in 2011, closed them when they declared the aliyah over.

We understand they will not provide any help for the Jews except for Passover Seders until another aliyah is underway. They too now run programs for non-Jewish Ethiopians.

The one grace note comes from Israeli girls and boys, many in the Bnai Akiva Youth Movement, who travel to Ethiopia at their own expense.

Several times a year they run summer and holiday programs for Jewish children, age seven and up, in Addis Ababa and Gondar. And in both places the Ethiopian Jews themselves manage to hold Shabbat services each week, attended by many hundreds.

I want to offer a special thank-you to those of you who, in response to the last Lifeline, brought the plight of the left-behind Jews to the attention of your Federations and synagogues, and have written or phoned to tell me about it.

Please keep doing, or starting to do, this vital work. It keeps the issue alive in America and helps us advocate in Israel.

Elsewhere in this Lifeline, you'll read about our hopes and worries for Limudiah in the coming school year. And we will introduce you to some amazing high school and college sponsored students.

Our efforts to urge Israel to bring Jews home, and help them make good lives in Israel, must not fail. With your blessed partnership, we will succeed. ■

*Barbara*

## "This is the Right Thing to Do"

**As I finished this article, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was finishing a four-day visit to Africa, where Israel is eager to strengthen relations with a number of countries, including Ethiopia.**

**At his invitation, Knesset Member (and long-time NACOEJ friend) Avraham Neguise joined him in Addis Ababa, hoping to bring about a meeting between Netanyahu and leaders of the two left-behind Jewish communities.**

**But although Netanyahu said that he was "working" to bring the 9000 Jews still in Ethiopia to Israel, and even asked the Ethiopian Prime Minister for help to secure the release of an Ethiopian-Israeli soldier being held in Gaza, he never met with the Ethiopian Jews waiting for him with Avraham.**

**Disappointed, Avraham said, "We have a big problem, but we're not giving up. Israel will be blessed and proud of its actions if it brings these people and reunites them with their families in Israel. This is the right thing to do."**

**Amen to that.**

## It All Adds Up!

At NACOEJ we cherish each donor. Every donation is a blessing to the Ethiopian Jews we assist in Israel.

Donors who give to NACOEJ monthly provide even more value by being an especially reliable blessing we can count on month after month.

Let's say you give \$18 a month. That is \$216 a year. Ten donors like you raise that to \$180 a month, and \$2,160 a year. It all adds up!

Knowing this money is coming in – rain or shine – helps us know how many children we can afford to educate and feed. And monthly

donations are also a great way for you to keep track of your charitable giving.

Interested? Call Danielle Ben-Jehuda at 212-233-5200, ext. 227, or email her at [donors@nacoej.org](mailto:donors@nacoej.org). She'll help you plan for monthly giving and smooth out any details. ■

## TWINNING: An Exceptional Bar Mitzvah Twinning Story From the Silvers Family

The Silvers family from Illinois is very special.

Two years ago they adopted two brothers – Yabi and Biruk – from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The boys had been living in an orphanage for two years.

Katy, their adoptive mother, wrote that in the short time Yabi has been in America, he not only learned English, but he also learned to read and write Hebrew, as well as reading from the Torah.

As Yabi approached 13, the family starting researching Bar Mitzvah projects to support. They knew they wanted to honor the boys' homeland in some way. The family is connected to both Ethiopia and Israel and decided that twinning with an Ethiopian boy in Israel would be just the right fit.

They turned to NACOEJ for help. Miriam Weissman, who coordinates

the NACOEJ Bar/Bat Mitzvah Twinning Program, quickly matched Yabi with Tesheger, an Ethiopian Bar Mitzvah boy in Israel.

Yabi wrote the following in a letter to his Israeli twin:

*I go to a Jewish school in America called Solomon Schechter. That is where I learn Hebrew and some other stuff like Math, Science, Language, Art, and Mishna. Like what you learn in Israel.*

*I am so happy to share my Bar Mitzvah with you. It means a lot to me because I'm helping one of my people from my country.*

*I will be glad to meet you in real life, Tesheger.*

*Thank you for your letter and take care my friend.*



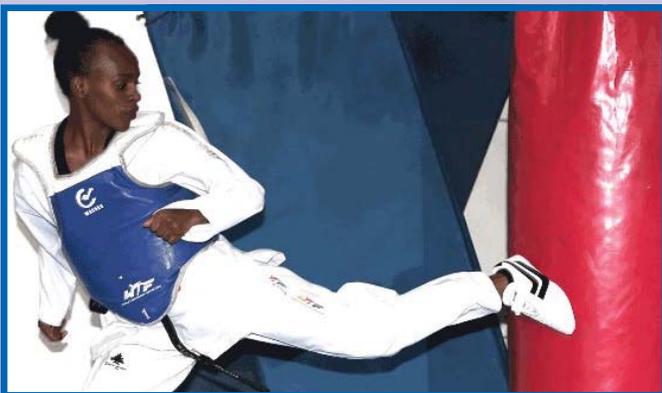
From left, the Silvers family: Biruk 9, Josh, Jake 14, Joey 9, Carly 19, Jonathan 17, Yabi 13, Katy.

The Silvers family, consisting of parents Katy and Josh, and children Carly, Jonathan, Jacob, Joey, Yabi, and Biruk, are all thrilled with the outcome.

As Katy put it, "...it is so amazing for him [Yabi] to have this wonderful correspondence and new friendship with someone similar to him." ■

## HIGH SCHOOL SPONSORSHIPS: Another Olympic Dream: Tokyo in 2020!

Rivka Bayech is in the 11th grade at the Religious High School in Rishon LeZion, sponsored by Jacob and Rebecca Cohen in the NACOEJ/



Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program.

Rivka's father passed away and her mother struggles to support her and her three sisters.

So the Cohens' sponsorship is so important.

After school, Rivka spends many hours training in her field – taekwondo, a Korean martial art.

Recently she won a top honor

in the European taekwondo championships.

Rivka's great dream is to represent Israel in the Olympic Games in Tokyo that will take place in 2020!

When she enters the army, she plans to continue her athletic training and is looking forward to becoming a psychologist in the future.

All of us are very proud of Rivka's accomplishment, and grateful to the Cohens for sponsoring her.

We look forward to the opportunity to watch her in Tokyo in 2020! ■



## Next Year in the Limudiah: Triumph and Concerns



**A**s the new 2016/2017 school year draws near, there's a lot of news to tell you.

First, our Limudiah classes won't open until early November this year, because schools will be closed for the Jewish holidays in much of October.

Second, we'll be cutting back on some programs. In the city of Ness Ziona, there just aren't enough Ethiopian children enrolling in the Re'ut school to make the Limudiah practical, and we don't have the funds to open in another school there with a large Ethiopian-Israeli population. So, we must leave.



Third, we will be cutting back in some schools in Ramle (where we opened our first Limudiah) for a wonderful reason: we and they have worked together so well that many Ethiopian pupils there don't need our help anymore!

They can go ahead on their own, and get help when they need it from their parents, some of whom were in our Limudiah classes years ago!

That's the kind of success we've always worked for, and we're very proud of it. Of course, we will be there for those children who do still need us, but they will be far fewer.

Fourth, we will continue our two Limudiah programs in Yavne that are doing so well that Shani Barzilai, the Principal of the Yechidani School there, has said:

"I made it clear to the municipality that no group other than NACOEJ will come into the school to work with our Ethiopian first-graders [from now on]. All of them became proficient in reading by the end of the year. That has never happened in my experience before."

**Finally, despite some cutbacks, in 2016-2017 we expect to have more pupils in Limudiah than ever!**

How?

Well, the Ministry of Education, which wants us to expand greatly, but has limited funding to offer, has persuaded us to open a third Limudiah in Rishon LeZion, where we already have flourishing classes in two schools, as well as asking us to start programs in Ashdod in the south and Kiryat Ata and Kiryat Yam in the north.

The municipality of Lod wants us to take on all the elementary grades (not just 1-5 but 1-6) in all three schools where we already work, and add at least one more Limudiah.

These increased numbers of children, plus our continuing classes in Rehovot and Kiryat Ekron, more than make up for the

cutbacks, especially when you add the integrated non-Ethiopian kids who will certainly exceed last year's numbers.

All this adds up to a banner year – but also a big problem.

**Meeting the costs of all this expansion is impossible on our current budget.**

So, although the Ministry wants



us to expand even further, our big concern is just making sure we can maintain the successful programs with which we will start the new school year.

**Obviously, a lot is being asked of us precisely because, thanks to your extraordinary partnership, we've done so much so well for Ethiopian-Israeli children.**

And no matter what happens, we know that as long as we go on doing our best, you, our grassroots best friends, will do your best to help us help the children.

We are forever grateful.

With love, *Barbara*

P.S. I'm glad to tell you that my previous fears that the Ministry would close some of our programs if it was just impossible to integrate some classes, have proved to be unwarranted. ■

## AAS: "People Who See the Goodness in Mankind..."



**E**tti Tadla (at left with two of her children) has a very warm relationship with her AAS sponsors, Analee and Mark Reutlinger. Etti came to Israel in 1988 when her older brother, who'd come to Israel in 1984 on Operation Moses, courageously returned to Ethiopia to help the rest of his family make aliyah.

But the family had a very difficult time. Some members were given permission to leave, but others were not included. Not wanting to split their family, they waited together in Addis Ababa till they almost gave up. They were ready to go back to their village in Gondar when suddenly they were told to be at the airport at 1:00 am. But, for unknown reasons,

they were not allowed to board that flight. Finally, a week later, they flew out, not believing they were actually going until they were in their seats on the plane.

**Etti said that when they landed in Israel, it was the happiest moment of their lives.**

Now a sponsored AAS college student, Etti recently wrote to her sponsors expressing her feelings for them in a poem. Her words capture the powerful connections that can exist between sponsors in America and their Ethiopian-Israeli students in Israel.

*To the Sponsors Shalom,  
How are you?*

*Every time that I write you a  
letter I get to think*

*That there are such good people  
who only want to give and help,*

*While all I do is write a thank  
you letter.*

*At such a time I think how  
grateful I am to you.*

*The least I can do is thank you  
For helping me advance, study  
and succeed in society*

*For being there with me, pushing  
me toward success*

*For giving me the strength to  
fulfill my dream.*

*Thank you for each and every  
month*

*For proving that there is such a  
thing*

*As people who help, sponsor and  
see the goodness in mankind.*

*Thank you for finding the time to  
be part of my life.*

*Thank you for allowing me to get  
to know you, and seeing you as  
people*

*Who I can trust, also at a time of  
need.*

*I simply want to thank you!*

*From me, Etti Tadla ■*

*You, too, can have the nachas of sponsoring a student like Etti. Just contact Karen Gens at 212-233-5200, ext. 230, or email her at: [education@nacoej.org](mailto:education@nacoej.org).*

## Remembering an Activist, a Proud Jew, and an AAS Sponsor



Yolanda Clark, a supporter of NACOEJ since 2002, sadly passed away in January this year at far too young an age. She left a most generous bequest to NACOEJ for which we are deeply grateful.

Her story is very interesting. Yolanda was born in 1965. She grew up in Oak Cliff, Texas where she attended

neighborhood public schools. She graduated from Booker T. Washington High School, where her mother was a much-loved English teacher, and then went on to Texas Tech University in Lubbock. She loved learning and was always seeking new experiences and pathways to explore.

Although not born Jewish, Yolanda searched for a spiritual home where her passion for doing good deeds and her devotion to prayer could be fulfilled. She found that home in Judaism.

In October 1999, she formally converted, and was warmly embraced by her congregation at

Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, Texas.

She traveled to Israel many times and became deeply devoted to helping Ethiopian Jews who resettled there. She collected Ethiopian Jewish art, and beginning in 2005, helped numerous Ethiopian-Israeli students through the NACOEJ/Barney and Rachel Landau Gottstein College Adopt-A-Student Program. She also gave generously to other NACOEJ programs, beginning in 2002.

Yolanda considered herself an ardent feminist, liberal activist, and proud Jew. To her many AAS sponsored students and to the NACOEJ staff, she was even more, a caring, loving presence in their lives. ■



## Condolences to...

...long-time NACOEJ Board member **Gail Karp**, on the loss of her beloved husband Sid. He was a kind, sweet, endlessly funny guy, a former high school principal with a PhD and a diverse circle of friends. Sid and Gail enjoyed a life full of travel and concerts, but always made time to staff NACOEJ booths in Southern California. Our hearts go out to Gail and children Lisa and Mitchell, and their families.

...**all humanity** on the loss of Elie Wiesel, the “voice of the Holocaust”. Among Elie’s world-famous achievements is one that is less-known but dear to us: the establishment of an educational program for Ethiopian children in Ashkelon, Israel, funded by the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity. Even when the Madoff debacle hit the family and foundation hard, Elie and his wife Marion kept this program alive. Our prayers are with Marion, son Shlomo Elisha, and the bereaved world.

...**the Kutner family** on the passing of Dr. Steve Kutner, a NACOEJ Board member and long-time activist on behalf of Ethiopian Jews. Steve made his first trip to Ethiopia on a NACOEJ mission in 1987. An ophthalmologist, he examined and treated eyes in the Jewish villages we visited, and soon after, he began working with Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, performing the first-ever outpatient cataract surgery on a new Ethiopian immigrant.

As a result of these experiences, Steve eventually gave up his practice in Atlanta to devote himself to aiding not only Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, but other immigrants and poor people there.

He founded Project Vision to expand his work in Israel, and later created Jewish Healthcare International to bring medical aid to many countries. He provided eye care for children in Israel’s Youth Aliyah schools, and, as a NACOEJ Board member, was hoping to begin checking children’s eyes in our Limudiah classes.

The central focus of his concerns was always Ethiopian Jews. During a previous aliyah he treated and screened Jews waiting in Ethiopia so that when they stepped off the plane onto Israeli soil, medical care could begin at once.

Shortly before his death, he was actively planning to do the same for the 9000 Jews currently waiting in Ethiopia.

Steve was not only a brilliant doctor, but a passionate advocate and an indefatigable fighter for the people he served. He was a generous donor to NACOEJ, whose work he believed in so much. We will miss him terribly.

Our hearts go out to Steve’s family – his wife Jeanney, sons Rob and David and their families, brother Lee, and Steve’s grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

May they be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

## Great News! IRA Charitable Rollover Provision Now Permanent

If you’re age 70.5 or over, you’re required by law to withdraw annual minimum distributions from your individual retirement accounts.

The good news is: if you want to support a charity such as NACOEJ, you can transfer up to \$100,000 directly from an IRA to that charity without the amount counting as income.

The distribution must be sent directly from the IRA company to the charity, and if the distribution check is mailed to the charity by December 31st, it will be counted as an IRA distribution for that year.

Questions? Call Danielle at 212-233-5200, ext. 227 or email: [donors@nacoj.org](mailto:donors@nacoj.org).

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### NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

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(We will not share your email address with any organization or individual.)