



NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY



LIFELINE



SUMMER
2020



From Ethiopia...

What you see here is one picture of bags of tef grain, another of boxes of soap. In Ethiopia they mean life or death to poverty-stricken Jews still waiting anxiously to make Aliyah in the days of Covid-19.

Before anyone knew how badly the pandemic would hit Ethiopia, (cases are multiplying rapidly) schools were shut down all over the country.

Construction projects, where displaced Jewish men sometimes found work, were abandoned, leaving their families without income.

At the same time, virus conditions in Israel meant their Jewish relatives there were unable to send their families in Ethiopia the small amounts of money they need to pay rent for their mud huts.

So, the tef grain is part of a huge distribution Jewish families have welcomed with tears of relief, because they are starving.

The other photo shows boxes of soap. Soap is "an unaffordable luxury" in this country. But washing with soap is vital to prevent catching the virus.

Soap has now been distributed to most Jewish families in Gondar. Since washing requires clean water, also not readily available there, tanks of clean water have been placed where parents and children can wash.

With our partner SSEJ, we have provided food, soap, and water - but they are now running out.

Will we be able to supply them again? Only you can give us the answer. ■

News from NACOEJ

Like everyone, we've been deeply affected by Covid-19. We pray that you and your loved ones are safe and healthy and that we will soon see an end to the pandemic.

As New York went into lockdown, we moved to our homes.

We are working hard using conference and personal calls, emails, and Zoom meetings. To reach us, email: nacoej@nacoej.org and we will get back to you. ■

The World as We Know It Changed...

For all of us, the world as we know it has changed with the coronavirus. Our lives have been turned upside down and everyone has suffered in some way. We want to share with you how one Ethiopian-Israeli student in our NACOEJ college sponsorship program has been affected.

Excerpts from this letter, sent from Geula Mekonon to her sponsor, Vicki Trachten Schwartz, capture the feelings and, also, tell us how especially important sponsorships are now to our students, financially and emotionally. Geula's letter was received at the height of the Covid-19 outbreak in Israel.

Dear Vicki...The semester began with numerous assignments and a deep exposure to the profession [of early childhood education]...In March, we began a rather unexpected and bizarre schedule of remote study, due to the worldwide Coronavirus outbreak that reached Israel.

At first, there was a sense that it couldn't really affect us, and everything continued as normal. We quickly discovered, however, that we were very wrong!

We began a very confused period during which the entire educational system was halted, as was the entire economy... we were forced to begin remote study. This really upset me because it meant I would have no way to earn an income.

Therefore, I feel I can again thank you for your contribution - particularly during these days, when it is even more significant - it allows me to continue studying and focusing on education.

There can be no doubt that your personal contribution eases my financial burden and allows me to invest in my studies and seek out a better future.

I want to thank you for the support, generosity, and warm embrace you've provided - it gives me strength to continue, never to give up. None of the above can be taken for granted! G-d willing, this year will continue toward success and productivity. May we all know better days, and return to our normal routines. Geula ■



Vicki (left) with some of her other students

Congratulations to long-term NACOEJ Board member Gayle Carp on making Aliyah to Israel, a long-held dream. We wish her many healthy and productive years in her wonderful new home. ■

Ethiopian Jews in the News in Israel

Pnina Tamano-Shata came to Israel at age three; became a lawyer, a journalist, an outspoken activist for Ethiopian Israelis, was elected to the Knesset, and now appointed to a Cabinet position as the first Ethiopian-born Minister of Aliyah and Absorption.

We have high hopes she will open the way home for thousands of suffering Jews still in Ethiopia, and play a leading role in bringing dignity and full equality for those already in Israel.

Gadi Yvarkan was born in Ethiopia in 1991 and arrived in Israel with his family in Operation Solomon.

As a young man, he served in the prestigious Givati Brigade of the IDF, rising to become a lieutenant. After his military service, he went into politics.

Today, he's a Deputy Minister of Public Security. And we hope he can bring about better relations between the Israeli police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community. They have had a long, sad history of conflict, too often ending in the death or imprisonment of young Ethiopian men.

Aweke "Kobi" Zena is sometimes called the "Czar" of Israel's National Anti-Racism Unit. The unit was

established a few years ago in response to a wave of protests after an Ethiopian-Israeli soldier in uniform was beaten up by police while biking home for a furlough.

According to "Czar" Kobi, there have been some improvements but the police still don't collaborate well with his unit and tensions remain high.

Eden Alene was raised by her single mother in Israel. She showed exceptional talent and received an excellent education at the Hebrew University High School in Jerusalem through NACOEJ sponsors, Herbert and Ellen Levitt.

This year, she won first prize in Israel's popular X-Factor contest. She hopes to represent Israel at the International Eurovision song competition which has

been postponed to 2021 because of Covid-19.

Meanwhile, she serves in the IDF Education and Youth Corps Band. Recently, she sang at the yearly state ceremony honoring Ethiopian Jews who died during the hard trek to Israel. She broke down in tears, as did many in the audience, remembering the tragic journey described in the words of the song, "The Journey to the Land of Israel".

Kessim: After decades of rejected appeals to Israeli courts and religious councils, 16 revered Kessim (Ethiopian rabbis and spiritual leaders) have finally won in the National Labor Court, their right to be paid and treated as other religious leaders are. They will now receive salaries and offices in their communities, and compensation for funds denied to them for years. ■



A Great Success...

A few months ago, during Chanukah in Israel, our AAS college sponsorship program had an event that felt somewhat like a party, starting with Ethiopian food and ending with traditional Israeli doughnuts.

Over 200 guests attended. They included NACOEJ-sponsored current and past college students, Knesset Member Gadi Yvarkan, the Ethiopian Ambassador to Israel, the Israel Board, and members of the NACOEJ-Israel staff headed by David Mihret.

There was a performance by a young Ethiopian-Israeli artist, a scene from a one-man play, and a stand-up Ethiopian comedian. There was also a speech by Dr. Carmel Blank on how vital advanced education is for upward socio-economic mobility.

Honoring the Gottsteins

There was a moving letter from Barbara Ribakove read by Oreet Schreider-Shattah, NACOEJ Israel

Director of Sponsorship Programs, about the late Barney Gottstein who, with his wife Rachel, sponsored hundreds of students.

Rachel Alemayehu, a student getting a master's degree, then spoke about what Barney and Rachel have meant to her, and to many others: "I shared my plans and dreams with them and my daily struggles and challenges."

Rachel Gottstein's daughter Michelle spoke, and a video was shown in which Rachel spoke to her students past and present in both English and Hebrew.

The event was in honor and memory of Barney Gottstein. As they left, each student took home a bag of children's books – Barney's Books – the program he began so every student's children or little siblings would have books of their own to start them off to a good life. Barney would have been so pleased. ■

Condolences...

A Tribute to his Mother from David Mihret, Israel Director/NACOEJ

My mother, Shashayinet Tekalyie Mihret, was born in 1930 and lived in the region of Ethiopia called Welkait. My mother was very unique, smart and industrious and kept house alongside my father on a high level. She was truly a woman of valor.

As a mother she gave her six children a lot of warmth and endless love. In 1981 my mother and the extended family left on a journey to Sudan with the end goal of reaching Jerusalem. Over the course of this journey three of her children were arrested by the Sudanese army, and the fact that their fate is unknown even today, turned my mother's life into 39 years of pain, longing and troubles.

Sadly, my mother passed away without knowing what happened to her lost children. For us, her children, my mother was a source of inspiration. She instilled in us a love of humanity, dedication to family and great emotional strength.

Despite all the difficulties in her life she succeeded in living until the age of 90 and did so with dignity and great grace. She kept the family together.

For us, our mother symbolizes the generation of the elders of the Ethiopian community who dreamed to reach Zion and Jerusalem. Despite the heavy price she paid she was happy that she was counted among the generation that brought that dream to fruition.

Our hearts go out to David and all the family. May they be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. ■

Our warmest sympathy to long-time NACOEJ Board member Roen Salem on the loss of her beloved brother, Howard Sagget, who died at age 72 of the coronavirus. His death is mourned by his family and friends. May they be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. ■

A Tribute to Alan Cornell From Barbara



I never knew Alan Cornell was a great philanthropist. I knew him and Jane as warm, thoughtful sponsors of many Ethiopian-Israeli college students in our AAS program. I admired them both through catching glimpses of them in letters their students wrote to them.

The letters were warm and sincere, telling the Cornells about their lives, studies, worries, and successes, as if speaking to their own families. And when Alan passed away at 74, their letters to "Dear Jane" were full of a sense of personal loss.

But when I received a bio of Alan, I learned it wasn't just NACOEJ, his students, and family who mourned. Alan had not only provided assistance to organizations that supported Ethiopian Jews, but also to Birthright Israel and AIPAC, and he and Jane were founders of Yad Vashem and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

He also was a leader of the South Palm Beach Jewish Federation, honored by Israel Bonds, supported the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Yemin Orde in Israel – and so much more.

Alan was a child of Holocaust survivors, as is Jane. Together they have made our world so much better by the beauty and kindness with which they have lived their lives.

We send our warmest sympathy to Jane, their children, and grandchildren who were blessed to be part of Alan's family and life. May they be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. ■

Barbara



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