

# OFFELINE

NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

FALL 2006



Arriving at Ben Gurion airport, the Sefer Torahs are greeted by Ethiopian-Israeli leaders, Jewish Agency staff and Israeli rabbis.  
Photo: Israel Sun, Courtesy of Jewish Agency

## In Ethiopia: Broken Families, Broken Promises

For more than a year now, I have had to start virtually every article, every letter and every talk about Ethiopia by saying, “as of now” or “as I write” or “at this moment in time”.

Because for so many, many months, nothing has been certain about the rate of the aliyah from Ethiopia, or the date when the Jewish Agency will be able to begin its own work in the Beta Israel compound in Gondar.

The current Israeli government has said they have “suspended” the previous administration’s promise to raise the rate of aliyah, and send the Jewish Agency into the Beta Israel Compound. This broken promise has been the cause of great pain to a vast number of people.

It affects the Ethiopian-Israelis longing to see their relatives arrive at last in the Promised Land.

It affects Israeli authorities who are responsible for planning and implementing assistance for newcomers.

It affects Israeli schools that can not determine how many new little pupils will arrive from Ethiopia, need-

## Rescuing the Sefer Torahs in Addis Ababa

Just before Simchat Torah, the last day of the holiday season that began with Rosh Hashanah, Israel celebrated a very special event: the safe arrival of two Sefer Torahs from the closed Beta Israel compound in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Israeli newspapers and web sites recorded the event, but many errors crept into the reports. We who urged the rescue, and know the truth, want to set the record straight.

Here’s what really happened.

About ten years ago, a beautiful Sephardic Torah, more than 100 years old, was generously lent to the Beta Israel community in Addis Ababa by the local Adenite Jewish community.

Another Torah, a splendid Ashkenazic scroll, was donated to NACOEJ for the use of an Ethiopian Jewish community by Temple Avodah in Oceanside, New York.

The Beta Israel’s gratitude knew no bounds. Both Torahs were housed in the compound synagogue and

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## BROKEN FAMILIES from page 1

ing teachers, classrooms and special programs.

It affects Operation Promise fundraisers from the United Jewish Communities and the Jewish Federations, who are providing some of the funds for Ethiopia.

It affects the whole NACOEJ family across this country, and in England, where our new affiliate, British Friends of NACOEJ, has been registered.

It affects our NACOEJ Board and staff whose hearts and souls are bound up in the community we serve.

Above all, it affects the thousands still in Ethiopia, who know poverty, hunger, and misery every day – but do not know their fate. Their hearts break because their families are shattered. But the endless suspense goes on and on.

In the meantime, we at NACOEJ struggle to keep hope alive by providing the funds that enable the Beta Israel to run programs that feed and teach and support the community. We have learned that in this time of terrible uncertainty, we must plan as if we will be the channel



**In a broken family in Ethiopia, the most precious possessions are the photos of children, parents and siblings in Israel. Here a mother in Ethiopia holds a photo of her son in the Israeli Defense Forces.**

through which aid arrives in Gondar for many months to come.

If we do not plan for an uncertain future today, there may be no future tomorrow.

Right now – as I write (!) – there are about 2500 children in the compound school in Gondar. Almost 400 of them are new to the school.

Every one of the new children is eligible to go to Israel. If we do not see that they get some food every day at the school, where most of their daily nutrition is provided, they will arrive in Israel too short for their age, too skinny for their height, with weakened immune systems, and many problems that can affect mind and body.

So we are once again asking our NACOEJ family to help us provide the funds that enable the school to give these children a lunch of an egg, a carrot, a roll, a banana, and a potato or beans.

A generous German organization, called Ebenezer Hilfsfonds Deutschland, is funding an orange a day.

The cost for all the rest is only \$72 for a meal a day, six days a week, for one whole year, for one Jewish child.

The \$72 buys food, fuel for the cook fires and water for washing the children's hands; pays the community cooks and workers who serve the lunches and clean up the simple kitchen after the children have eaten.

Many of the children get virtually nothing else to eat all day. For all of them, this meal is far and away the best nutrition they have.

On the enclosed reply card, you can check off a gift of \$72 – or any multiple you like — to feed any number of hungry children you want to help.

The children will never know you, which puts you in one of Maimonides' high levels of tzedakah, where the recipient does not know the donor.

The children you will feed will not be able to thank you in person.

But we can and we do.

You are a blessing to those in need. ■



**Lunchtime! For Jewish children in Ethiopia, school lunch ends half a day of hunger. Will there be an evening meal? Maybe – maybe not.**

## SEFER TORAHS from page 1

read reverently at services.

Two years ago, when the Beta Israel compound in Addis Ababa came under repeated violent attack by a gang of well-funded thugs (whose leader pretended to be a Jew), all the wonderful programs — food, education, employment and religious facilities — had to end, leaving the community destitute.

NACOEJ, which had funded the community for years, was forced to discontinue, and the compound, deserted by the true Jews, was occupied by the scoundrels. The terrible human tragedy was made even more painful by the fact that, left behind in the once vibrant compound synagogue, in the hands of scoundrels, were the two Sefer Torahs.

For more than a year, NACOEJ urged Israeli authorities to rescue the Torahs, fearing that they might be sold or desecrated. When the compound site was recently returned to the landlords from whom it had been rented, we became even more anxious about the fate of the Torahs. It was widely said that the scoundrels were now being funded by a “messianic”, “Jews-for-Jesus” group, which might try to rent the site from its landlords. We were horrified at the idea, and urged the Jewish Agency to take immediate action.

Finally, during the 2006 Sukkot holiday week, a Jewish Agency representative was able to enter the compound, accompanied by police, and take the Torahs out to safety in the Israeli Embassy.

Two days later, the Torahs arrived in Israel, greeted at Ben-Gurion Airport with song and dance by Ethiopian-Israeli leaders. They were immediately taken to a Sukkot service in the airport synagogue. On Simchat Torah, the Torahs were honored during Hakkafot (joyous religious processions) in Jerusalem.

What will become of the Sefer Torahs now?

The borrowed Adenite Torah was promptly returned to the Adenite community, which has its own synagogue in Addis Ababa. Their leader



**Sukkot service. On either side of the Torah, Rabbi Menachem Waldman and son Yedael. Second from right, Shlomo Molla of the Jewish Agency. Photo: Israel Sun, Courtesy of Jewish Agency**

said, “It will be a great privilege for us to use a Torah that was used in Hakkafot in Jerusalem.”

NACOEJ joins Beta Israel in commending this fine Adenite community for their kindness to the Beta Israel in many important ways over the years.

The Ashkenazic Sefer Torah is currently being examined for faded or broken letters at Oter Israel, the Jerusalem company that has helped the Ethiopian community with many religious articles.

When it is fully restored, the Torah will be carried by Rabbi Menachem Waldman to many absorption centers and schools, where it will be greeted with special joy by those Jews from Addis who once heard the parsha (portion) of each week read from that very same scroll.

At the airport service during the week of Sukkot, Rabbi Waldman, who is in charge of Ethiopian spiritual absorption in Israel, commented on a Talmudic statement that the Torah accompanies Jews wherever they go.

These Torahs have journeyed far, from Aden and America to Addis Ababa, and now from Ethiopia to Israel, accompanying our people. They are safely at home at last.

So — please don’t be disturbed by any absurdities you may read in some other report. This is what really happened when the Sefer Torahs in the Addis Ababa Beta Israel compound were rescued, just before Simchat Torah, in the Jewish cal-

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In Ethiopia, years ago, Kessim (Jewish religious leaders) lead a procession toward a mountain where Sigd will be held. Elaborate ritual symbolizes the religious authority of the Kessim. White garments and shawls symbolize purity.

## Thousands Flock to Jerusalem for Sigd

*Editor's Note: Sigd, one of the holiest days in the Ethiopian Jews' religious calendar, falls on or near Thanksgiving in the American calendar. We have saved this report, written by Debbie Berman after attending last year's Sigd in Jerusalem, to present to you in time for this year's celebration. The article, which has been lightly edited, originally appeared on-line in Arutz-Sheva.*

**T**he holiday of Sigd was a fundamental element of the Jewish experience in Ethiopia. The holiday that falls on the 29th day of the Hebrew month of Cheshvan, exactly 50 days after Yom Kippur (similar to the 50-day cycle of the days of the Omer preceding the giving of the Torah), is dedicated to fasting and prayer, evoking the connection to Jerusalem and the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people.

According to Avraham Negousi, Director of the Ethiopian-Israeli immigrant organization, South Wing to Zion, the Sigd celebration helped the Jewish community in the faraway exile of Ethiopia maintain their yearning to return to Zion.

The source of the holiday is in the book of Nehemiah when the exiled Jews prayed "toward Jerusalem." "The Ethiopian Jews prayed together, 'Next year in Jerusalem.' The holiday was about receiving the Torah and the promise that one day

we will reach Jerusalem," recalls Negousi.

In Ethiopia, Jews, while fasting, set out during the morning to march to a nearby mountaintop, led by their spiritual leaders, Kessim, and carrying their traditional Torah. Prayer and worship accompanied the ascent to the mountaintop, where selections from the Torah were read in the language of Ge'ez and translated into the vernacular Amharic. In the afternoon, participants descended to local villages where the fast was broken amidst festive dancing.

In Israel, Sigd festivities are held in Jerusalem, where thousands of Israeli Ethiopian Jews gather at the Armon Hanatziv promenade overlooking the Temple Mount. In attendance last year were government representatives, Ethiopian leaders and Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger, who commended the Ethiopian Jews' dedication to upholding their traditions. "It is amazing that after the long journey you made from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, you did not leave behind this glorious tradition," said then-Absorption Minister Tzipi Livni.

Although the celebration has changed since their arrival in Israel, Ethiopian leaders continue



shades symbolize

In Jerusalem, Kessim confer under sunshades as Ethiopian-Israelis gather for Sigd. Many still wear traditional attire. Photo: Ruth Gruber

to maintain the importance of Sigd. "Once we came here we decided to continue this holiday, praying and thanking G-d for fulfilling His promise, for realizing our dream and giving us the opportunity to be in Jerusalem and also to pray for those left behind in Ethiopia to come and join us," Negousi states.

"Our dream is to be in the state of Israel and Jerusalem. Today more than 100,000 Ethiopian Jews are proud citizens of Israel. However, the Aliyah of Ethiopian Jewry is not completed. There are still Jews in Ethiopia waiting to come to Israel to rejoin their brothers, parents and families," Negousi says.

Negousi denies claims that many of those awaiting immigration to Israel are not halachically Jewish. "Rav Shlomo Amar visited in Ethiopia and declared that they are Jews without a doubt and they must be brought to Israel. Every Jewish community has passed through a different historical process. The Ethiopian Jewish community also went through difficulties, including persecution and drought," Negousi explains.

Ethiopian leaders, including Negousi, remain optimistic about the future of their people among their Israeli peers. "Most of my community comes from remote areas so it is not easy for them to integrate into modern society and urbanization, but

our community is doing well, we are going in the right direction," states Negousi.

For Negousi, the contemporary Sigd festivities resonate with deep spiritual meaning. "Our fathers and grandfathers told us that we will go to Jerusalem. As a child I remember being told that the Prophets say that all the Jews will be returned to the Land of Israel. We love Israel and we love Jerusalem. Once a year thousands come to Jerusalem to say thank you," says Negousi. ■

## The Gift that Keeps on Giving...

When the time comes (and it should be in no less than 120 years) it is good to know that the important efforts we supported during our lifetime will be carried on into the future. Your generous support of the Ethiopian Jewish community can continue to help the next generation of Ethiopian children and their families as they complete the complicated transition to life in Israel.

Please consider naming NACOEJ in your will, or establishing an endowment. For information, please contact Orlee Guttman at 212-233-5200, ext. 224, or by email at [oguttman@nacoej.org](mailto:oguttman@nacoej.org).



In the Kiryat Yam bomb shelter, a new immigrant reads the messages in a NACOEJ Rosh Hashanah card.

Photo: Rabbi Menachem Waldman

## Apologies from Barbara

This is the second time in all my years at NACOEJ that I have had to apologize for not sending out Rosh Hashanah cards.

The first time was just after 9/11 when the NACOEJ office, only a few blocks from Ground Zero, was closed for ten days – no one was allowed to go into the area. The few Rosh Hashanah cards I had written out before (and during) 9/11 eventually got mailed, but I couldn't prepare any more.

This time, I took more than 800 NACOEJ Rosh Hashanah cards with me to Israel, and Rabbi Menachem Waldman and I gave them out to Ethiopian Jews in absorption centers under bombardment in the north during the Lebanon War.

The messages in Amharic (as well as Hebrew and English) meant a lot to the community in the bomb shelters. The cards featured photos of some of our embroideries, which touched the hearts of the individuals who had embroidered those designs in Ethiopia.

When I came home, I was too busy writing to you about the community in the shelters to prepare my own cards – and anyway, I felt I had used up my allotment.

So, please forgive me.

To all of our NACOEJ family: may the Jewish year of 5767 and the western year of 2007 prove to be happy, healthy, prosperous and, above all, peaceful.

With love,  
Barbara

## Orde Wingate: A British Officer who Touched the Lives of Ethiopians and Israelis

In 1896, a great battle was fought at Adwa, Ethiopia, between Italian troops attempting to establish an Italian colony there, and Ethiopian forces defending their homeland. The Italians, armed with guns, were roundly defeated by Ethiopians armed only with spears.

In 1938, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, Benito Mussolini, the fascist dictator of Italy, determined to avenge "the disgrace" of Adwa. Ethiopian Emperor Haile Sellasie appealed to the League of Nations for aid against the Italian invaders, but to no avail. We are told that, hoping for another miracle, the Emperor sent out the following orders to his nation:

*"Everyone will now be mobilized and all boys old enough to carry a spear will be sent to Addis Ababa. Married men will take their wives to carry food and cook. Those without wives will take any woman without a husband. Women with small babies need not go. The blind, those who can not walk, or for any reason can not carry a spear, are exempted. Anyone found at home after the receipt of this order will be hanged."*

Despite this alarming Ethiopian call to arms, the Italians won this time. Italy occupied Ethiopia until, during WWII, they were driven out with the aid of a British force under the command of Major General Orde Wingate.

Wingate was the heroic British officer who, in defiance of British policy, trained Hagganah fighters in pre-Israel Palestine. Many institutions in Israel bear his name.

Though Wingate was British, his hero's grave is in Arlington Cemetery in Virginia, where he was buried after dying in a military plane crash in Burma during World War II.

Allied policy dictated that after such a crash, all the remains would be buried in the country whose citizens made up the majority of those killed – in this case, America.

NACOEJ had the honor of being a sponsor of a Jewish War Veterans' salute to Orde Wingate at Arlington, where he was eulogized by dignitaries from Israel, Great Britain, Burma and Ethiopia, and by the highest ranking Jewish officer in the U.S. Armed Forces. ■

## Markers, Pens, Protractors, Oh My!!!!

Ethiopian children in Israel are in need of basic school supplies that their families cannot afford. Pens, markers, protractors, etc., all the things that we buy each fall for our children or grandchildren, are impossible dreams for many of these children.

When you are shopping, please consider buying extras of all the school supplies to donate to Ethiopian children in Israel. Or plan a Bar or Bat Mitzvah and make your centerpieces baskets of school supplies instead of flowers. For more information on these and other ideas, as well as a list of the needed supplies (and those not needed), please contact Mel Garfinkel at the NACOEJ office, 212-233-5200, ext. 225, or Gary Metzger at ext. 228. Or email to [supplies@nacoej.org](mailto:supplies@nacoej.org).

## “How come you look so good?”

**M**rs. Irene Goldman is 89 years old and proud of it. She is often asked, “How come you look so good?”

Her response is simple. “It’s due to hard work and a lot of loving.”

But Carmela Nagash, one of her Adopt-A-Student students in Israel, feels there is more to it. She said recently, “I think it’s all the mitzvahs that she does!”

They are both right.

Irene Goldman is an extraordinary woman. She and her late husband owned a pharmaceutical company, and they began their involvement with the Ethiopian Jewish community many years ago by sending desperately needed pharmaceuticals to Ethiopia for the Jews there.

For many years now, Irene has sponsored Ethiopian college students in Israel through NACOEJ’s Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student program. She frequently goes to Israel to meet with both her present and former students. Her motivation? “Education is very important to all of us; it was our ticket out of the ghetto when we were young.”

She encourages friends and family to donate to NACOEJ as well, “My late husband and I have always told people, for any occasion, if you want to give us a present, give it to NACOEJ. It gives me so much pleasure to know that my family has responded.”

Irene is surely proof that when it comes to doing mitzvahs, there is no age limit.

To sponsor a college student, please contact Evelyn Deitchman at NACOEJ, 212-233-5200, ext. 226. ■



Left to right, AAS graduate Yaffa Lakaw, Irene Goldman, current AAS student Yehudit Daniel, graduate Carmela Nagash — all sponsored by Irene.

## Israela Needs a Sponsor

**I**sraela Sisai’s parents arrived in Israel a month before she was born in 1991. “My name is a symbol of their aliyah,” she says proudly.

Israela’s parents can’t afford to pay for everything Israela will need at the excellent Ramla-Lod High School where she is starting 10th grade. Her father works odd jobs when he can get them, and her mother is too ill to work. There are four more siblings still in school. So Israela, who wants to become a psychologist, needs help to get her education.

At this writing, there are still over 700 Ethiopian-Israeli teenagers waiting for sponsors so that they can attend good academic high schools. Some, like Israela, have started school but can’t afford books, gym clothes, lab fees and other necessities.

The cost to sponsor an Ethiopian-Israeli high school student is \$350 a year. The value to a young person is priceless.

To sponsor Israela, or another Ethiopian-Israeli teen, please contact Lisa Kovitch at NACOEJ, 212-233-5200, ext. 232, or email to [highschool@nacoej.org](mailto:highschool@nacoej.org). ■



Israela Sisai

## An Enriching Experience

If you have a child, a grandchild, niece, nephew, or friend who is going to be celebrating a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, consider Twinning with an Ethiopian-Israeli youngster.

Many of our Twins meet their Ethiopian-Israeli counterparts, and often their whole family, in Israel.

It’s an enriching experience for both Twins and their families.

For more information about Twinning, please call Miriam Weissman at NACOEJ, 212-233-5200, ext. 222, or email her at [mweissman@nacoej.org](mailto:mweissman@nacoej.org).

You can also visit the NACOEJ website — [www.nacoej.org](http://www.nacoej.org) — for more info on this and other exciting NACOEJ programs.



## Very Much Better Late than Never

For more than a year we've been waiting for a last shipment of embroideries, made by the Ethiopian Jews before the needlework program closed.



The embroideries were all fully paid for and ready to go – but somehow were always delayed. Finally, they have arrived, replenishing our rapidly dwindling supply.



As a result, we can once again offer you the stunning design showing King David playing the harp, as either a pillow cover or tallit bag.



If you want two embroideries, see the enclosed reply card for a special offer. If you want a second embroidery in a different pattern, we'll pick one for you with great pleasure, knowing we have most of the beautiful designs again, for a while.

Enjoy!



**Embroideries from top to bottom:**  
**King David Playing the Harp**  
**Joseph and Coat of Many Colors**  
**Moses and Aaron Before Pharaoh**  
**Tree of Life**  
**Making Matzah**

### NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

132 NASSAU STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10038

**Rabbi Joel E. Soffin**  
President

**Barbara Ribakove Gordon**  
Founder and Director

## Congratulations to...

- NACOEJ Board member and past president, **Joseph Feit** and wife Surella, on the birth of a grandson to their daughter Rebecca Feit and husband Rami Sasson. And Mazel Tov to sister Gabrielle Betty.
- NACOEJ Advisory Board member **Cyrus Abbe**, and wife Judy, on the upcoming marriage of their daughter Chava to Dovid Preil, and to Chava's siblings, Elihu, Moshe, and Rivka. Cyrus, Chava and Moshe have done volunteer work with Ethiopian Jews in Addis Ababa and the whole family are strong supporters of NACOEJ.
- NACOEJ Advisory Board member **Rabbi Lynn Goldstein**, on the Bat Mitzvah of daughter Jenny Koshner in St. Louis. Rabbi Goldstein has visited Ethiopia and met with Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Jenny and sister Becky have raised funds and helped sponsor Ethiopian students in Israel.
- **Sallai Meridor**, former head of the Jewish Agency, a man of exceptional courage and integrity, and a very strong friend of Ethiopian Jews, on becoming Israel's Ambassador to the U.S.
- NACOEJ Director of Communications **Caroline Barg** and husband Hershel on the birth of two new grandchildren: Noam Aryeh, born to Caroline's son David Sheffey and wife Debby, and Chasya Eta, born to Hershel's daughter Ahuva Wittenstein and husband Avraham. Mazel Tov to all the collective siblings in the U.S. and Israel.

## We're Here to Talk to You!

NACOEJ has a very active Speakers Bureau ready to address your school, synagogue, organization, friends, etc. There is no charge except for transportation. Our speakers happily accept home hospitality.

We do encourage your group to sponsor three Ethiopian-Israeli elementary school children in our Limudiot (after-school classes) for one month (\$300). You will change these youngsters' lives as well as enjoy a great program.

For information, or to arrange for a speaker, please contact Gary Metzger at NACOEJ, 212-233-5200, ext. 228 or by e-mail at [gmetzger@nacoj.org](mailto:gmetzger@nacoj.org). ■

## New Tax Break for Charitable Gifts

If you are at least 70½ years old, new legislation just passed in Congress may make it possible for you to avoid taxes on the IRA's you are required to withdraw, by donating the money directly to a charity.

Please ask your financial advisor for more information about this – and thanks for thinking of us. ■