

The Bumpy Road to Jerusalem

As I told you in my last letter, I made a phone call to Ethiopia recently. The purpose of that phone call was to assure the community that we will be there for them in Israel when they arrive. And it turned out to be even more important to reassure the thousands of Jews still in Ethiopia that we will remain with them until the Jewish Agency takes over in Gondar. That's because we have encountered many bumps on the road from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, leading up to this final aliyah.

Let me say at once that the Jewish Agency is certainly working hard to smooth the path. The Ministry of the Interior is cooperating fully. The Israeli consuls in Gondar have already interviewed about 3,000 people, and the equally important interviews in Israel with the relatives of the Jews in Gondar, people from the same villages, local religious leaders, etc. are proceeding at the same time, if not quite at the same pace. Already, 1,000 people have been approved and we expect the great majority of the rest to be approved too.

But – the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa – along with Israeli embassies all over the world – was on strike until a few days ago! (I'm told that even the ambassadors were striking, though I find that hard to believe.)



Family members in Israel are notified of family members arriving from Ethiopia, and are at the airport to greet them with the many, many hugs and kisses Ethiopians bestow at such tearful reunions. In some cases, the families had been separated for years. Photo: Yossi Zamir

The strike meant a huge delay in starting the clearance process the Jewish Agency needs in order to officially take over NACOEJ programs and responsibilities in Ethiopia. And that process may be lengthy.

Negotiations with Ethiopian Airlines for transporting the full stream of Jewish immigrants to Israel seemed stymied for some time. As I write, an agreement has been reached for charter flights in February and March, but not yet for the continuing aliyah.

And, according to a report just issued by the Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Committee of the Knesset, all Israeli government departments involved in the aliyah and absorption of the Ethiopian olim are too short of

money to fulfill their responsibilities.

Finally, there is a troublesome issue about the required applications that are supposed to be filed by the Israeli relatives of the Jews still in Ethiopia, explaining the relationships and asking that their relatives be admitted.

Some of these applications have been received. But many are still missing, probably because many Ethiopian Israelis haven't heard that the applications are

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The Bumpy Road

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necessary – or because they had filled out just such applications for an earlier aliyah that didn't take place, and assume that those will still be valid.

As I write, the deadline for the applications has been extended (that's good!) and there is an ongoing effort to get the previous applications validated. (We're told they will be, but...)

So it's been bumpy.

Of course, we never expected a smooth way home for these long-delayed Jews.

And it is my earnest hope that by the time you read this, all the details of air transportation will have been resolved, signed and sealed; all the applications from relatives in Israel will be registered; and the Israeli government agencies will be sure of getting enough budget to implement what is, after all, an official Israeli government policy to bring the remaining Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

But with one bump cropping up after another, it's no wonder the community in Gondar is nervous, and needs to hear repeatedly that NACOEJ will stay with them until the Jewish Agency definitely takes our place.

In my phone call, I gave them that reassurance, because I believe with all my heart that you, our NACOEJ family – our extraordinary, wonderful NACOEJ family – will make it possible for us to

go on in Ethiopia as long as it takes, feeding the hungry women and children, teaching adults and children, and praying with them for the moment Isaiah prophesied so wonderfully:

"I will yet bring home all that remains to be brought in...

*Build up a highway, build it and clear the track,
Sweep away all that blocks my people's path."*

Together with you, our NACOEJ family, we'll do our best to build, clear, and sweep until the track is clear.

Barbara

P.S. As we go to press, we have good news. One planeload of 200 immigrants from our community in Gondar has reached Israel. Another is expected by the time you read this. And additional Jewish families have been moved from Gondar to Addis Ababa, ready to follow.

But as of this writing, the bumps in the road have not all been smoothed. We're still hoping and praying, clearing and building – and of course, feeding and educating as many Ethiopian Jews as we possibly can, on both sides of the Red Sea.

Thank you for making all this possible. Please stay with us.

Condolences to...

- NACOEJ former President **Rabbi Joel Soffin** and wife Sandra on the loss of Sandy's beloved mother, Celia Stern, and to the entire family. Our thoughts are with them.
- NACOEJ Advisory Board member **Glenn Richter** and wife Lenore on the loss of Glenn's beloved father, Harold Richter, of Queens, New York. Our hearts go out to Glenn, Lenore and Glenn's brother Dov Nardi and his family in Israel.
- NACOEJ Advisory Board member **Pesia Derin Paolucci** on the death of her beloved husband, Rick. Pesia was a member of the original Steering Committee that met every Tuesday night in Barbara's apartment to run NACOEJ in its earliest days. Our hearts go out to Pesia and the children, Elana, Rebecca and Joshua.
- NACOEJ staff member **Caroline Barg** and husband Hershel on the loss of Hershel's beloved sister, Claire Ben-Alexander, of Kfar Bialik, Israel.

A Great Leader Passes

All of us at NACOEJ mourn the loss of Baruch Tegegne, a great hero of the Ethiopian Jews, and the pioneer of the route to Israel via Sudan.

Baruch Tegegne died at 65, in Israel, where his funeral was attended by mourners from many countries, including NACOEJ leader Joseph Feit, and thousands of Ethiopian Israelis who will never cease to honor his memory.

Our condolences go to Baruch's daughter Yaffa and to the entire family, and to the Ethiopian Jews who have followed – and will follow, though on easier paths – in his footsteps.

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Coming Home at Last

In 2010, over 1,650 new immigrants from Ethiopia arrived in Israel. In 2009, in contrast, only 240 came home. These people were usually not from our community in Gondar and did not arrive under the terms of the immigration that is just beginning now.

They were the people “left behind” from previous aliyahs – people like the family members described so movingly in the Knesset meeting we wrote about in a letter in 2010 – close relatives of Ethiopian Jews already in Israel, children, parents, brothers, sisters who somehow fell through the cracks, and were left abandoned, scattered, terribly alone somewhere in Ethiopia.

Because they were scattered, NACOEJ was not able to give them direct aid in Ethiopia, but we brought their cases and told their stories repeatedly to the authorities in Israel – culminating in that heartbreaking meeting in the Knesset, after which immediate action was pledged, and the ingathering began.

Here are some of these lost – and found – Jews, caught by the camera as they arrived at last. ■



One arriving family, exhausted from the excitement and overnight travel on their first airplane flight, wait anxiously for their relatives to arrive. Soon, they will be escorted to a special waiting room in the terminal, where food and drinks are set out. They will be registered and then taken by Ethiopian Jewish Agency staff to waiting buses, for the drive to their assigned absorption centers. Life in Israel will begin.
Photo: Tsafir Abayov



The newly arrived olim are greeted at Ben-Gurion Airport with small Israeli flags. In this photo you can see both mother and child reaching eagerly, joyously for their flags.

Photo: Yossi Zamir

Congratulations to...

- NACOEJ Board member **Barak Raviv** on being honored by the American Friends of Magen David Adom Western Region.
- NACOEJ staff member **Caroline Barg** and husband Hershel on the birth of Hershel's first great-grandchild, Henya Sorah, in Jerusalem. Mazel Tov to the parents, Hershel's granddaughter Rifka Anise and husband Yekutiel.
- NACOEJ former Director of Operations **Orlee Guttman** on her new position with American Friends of Hebrew University.

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SUCCESS STORIES NOW...

A Continuing AAS Success Story...

If you read our annual “Degrees of Success” newsletter (which you get automatically if you’re a sponsor in the NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student (AAS) College Sponsorship Program, and can request if you’re not!) you may remember a recent article about an Ethiopian-Israeli college graduate named Germao Mengistu, a young man of many talents, who had just won a short story contest run by the well-known Israeli newspaper, “Haaretz”.

In the short time since then, Germao has gone on to another level of success. By the time you read this, he will be the editor-in-chief of “Yediot Negat”, a popular newspaper written in Amharic and Hebrew, published every two months by the Steering Committee of Ethiopian Israelis in the Educational System. “Yediot Negat”, which is distributed free of charge, reaches thousands of Ethiopian Israelis.

We congratulate Germao, who – like so many of our AAS graduates – is making a name for himself in Israel. And congratulations also to Jane and Alan Cornell, Germao’s AAS sponsors.

If you would like to join this rapidly growing list of proud sponsors of outstanding young Ethiopian Israelis, please contact Judy Dick at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email to college@nacoej.org. ■

Germao Mengistu with his Adopt-A-Student sponsors, Jane and Alan Cornell of Boca Raton. The Cornells are long-time sponsors of many Ethiopian-Israeli college students.



“Just Like Everyone Else?” Shachar Baruch’s Story

Shachar Baruch (whose name means “morning blessing”) is in 11th grade at the David Ben-Gurion High School in Ness Ziona, where he lives with his parents and younger siblings. Just like any other teenage boy, but not quite.

Shachar is also – at the same time – taking his Bachelor’s Degree at Tel Aviv University.

If he’s successfully completed even 51% of his college studies by the time he’s 18, he gets an automatic deferral from service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) – but he’d rather opt for a longer period of service as a soldier-student.

He may not need either option, though, because he’ll probably have gotten his entire Bachelor’s Degree by the time he’s 18, and can just go into the IDF in a special intelligence unit. Or maybe an elite computer group.

After that, Shachar figures on world travel, a Master’s Degree, and “...then I want to work in high tech and have a family like everyone else.”

Shachar’s brilliance was obvious by the time he was in elementary school, beginning to win prizes in everything from Bible studies to Israeli military history, and zooming ahead in class.

Throughout his high school career, Shachar has been sponsored by one or more of the wonderful people in our NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program, enabling him to enroll in enrichment projects, advanced math, English, and physics classes and other extraordinary programs for brilliant students – most of which are expensive.

Without the help of Benjamin Z. Forester, Charlotte Friend, David Michaels and other sponsors, Shachar might have lost these precious opportunities to develop his talents. Because they lent him a hand at every turn, he was able to go from one success to another, and is already on his way to his college degree.

Writing in the popular Ethiopian-Israeli publication “Yediot Negat”, journalist Masagnau Alon Damela commented about Shachar: “Maybe there are others like him, possibly in [upper class] north Tel Aviv. But he doesn’t come from there. He is one of us, a member of the Ethiopian community, and he possesses exceptional talents.” ■

...AND WAITING TO HAPPEN

College Students Who Urgently Need Sponsors



SABA YIRSAW

At Saba Yirsa's home, her family offers guests *Buna*, the fragrant, traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony. They are very proud of their Ethiopian Jewish culture and traditions, which they wish to pass on to their children. They speak Amharic in

the house but, at the same time, thoroughly embrace all that Israel offers.

Saba, who is 22 years old, came to Israel with her parents, brothers, and sister in 2001. In Ethiopia, Saba's father had taught economics at a local high school, and her mother taught science in an elementary school. They had a good life.

As Jews, however, they longed to go to Israel. After many years of waiting, when they were finally notified that they were eligible to immigrate to Israel, Saba and her family left everything behind and made the difficult journey to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. After three months, they left for Israel.

Today, one of Saba's brothers, who is 23, has just finished his tour of duty in the Israel Defense Forces; the other is 11 years old and in fifth grade. Saba's 19-year-old sister is doing National Service in the Jerusalem District Court.

Saba started school in Israel in seventh grade and graduated from Jerusalem's Ziv Wamrecks High School with full matriculation. She joined the Israel Defense Forces and served her country, working in an Air Force chemical laboratory.

She is now a second-year student in Hebrew University's prestigious nursing program at Asaf HaRofeh Hospital.

Saba wants to help heal the sick. It is her life's dream to give back to others as Israel has opened its arms to her and her family. But she needs the help of a NACOEJ sponsor to fulfill this dream.

A NACOEJ sponsor will enable Saba to get her degree without an endless, time-consuming struggle for food, books, carfare, and school fees.



ORNA ZARIHUN

Orna Zarihun and her mother came to Israel in 1990, the two of them very close and relying on each other to make the confusing transition to a new life.

They started out living in Safed and then moved to Ashkelon, where Orna graduated from the Industry and Computerized Management track at the ORT Henri Ronson High School.

She went on to serve her country for two years in the National Service, working on a municipality hotline.

And then tragedy struck. Just four months before Orna completed her National Service, her mother became seriously ill and was hospitalized. She died three months later.

In Orna's own words, "Her death was the hardest thing I've experienced in my life. I was very attached to my mother. I felt like I had been left all alone."

She used all her savings to pay for her mother's funeral and headstone, and supported herself by working as a cleaner. She is still cleaning other people's floors but now she's also a student at Ashkelon College studying economics and management – a field she chose because of the wide variety of employment options it offers.

The program requires a lot of effort and perseverance, Orna says. She managed to struggle with both work and studies in her freshman year but now, with a heavy course load, she really needs a NACOEJ sponsor to help with basic necessities so she can spend more time studying.

Orna's ambition is to graduate with distinction and find a good job. She is determined to be self-sufficient. She might want to manage a business but understands that she has to "...start small and develop professionally." She also wants to start a family of her own and "...raise my children in a stable environment while earning a good living."

To a hoped-for sponsor, Orna says, "Thank you for doing this great mitzvah. One day I will help others as you are helping me."

Can you become a sponsor for either of these two deserving young women, Saba or Orna? If so, please contact Judy Dick at 212-233-5200, ext. 230, or email to college@nacoj.org. Tell Judy you read about Saba and Orna in the *Lifeline*.

High School Students Who Urgently Need Sponsors



**ANTENACH
TOMER TRUNECH:**
"I only know my parents
from photos."

Tomer (the Israeli name he prefers) is a 15-year-old boy in ninth grade at ORT Lod High School. His parents died when he was only two.

He has been raised by his grandmother ever since, along with Grandma's own son and daughter, who would officially be Tomer's uncle and aunt, but as he says, "They are like my siblings

because I grew up with them." (Editorial note: This is not all that unusual in the complicated extended-family world of Ethiopian Jews.)

Tomer missed a lot of school when he was younger, and is having difficulty catching up. His grandmother, like many adult Ethiopian Israelis, can't help him academically, and he says he doesn't have a lot of time for his homework because he has an after-school job to help Grandma support the family.

"I always try my best," he says ruefully, "but I make spelling mistakes."

When Tomer isn't working at his job, or doing his homework, he practices soccer with a local team, and on Fridays, hangs out with friends.

Tomer is a good, hard-working youngster, and a sponsor could make a real difference in his high school career.

NOTE FROM BARBARA

In the 2009/2010 school year, our NACOEJ family sponsored 994 high school students in 53 schools in 18 cities in Israel.

That's pretty impressive, especially in a recession year – but it was down 195 from the 1,189 students we sponsored in the 2008/9 school year – and nowhere near the 1,500+ students we sponsored a few years before that.

Times are still hard for us all. But we can't help wondering how many Shachar Baruchs we may have lost in those 195 students we didn't sponsor last year – and how many we may lose this coming year.

Somewhere among those not-sponsored students may be extraordinarily brilliant or talented kids who didn't get to take those special courses for which they qualified in every way – except the ability to pay for them.

Some of them may not have the careers that could change the world because we weren't there for them when they needed us.

And of course, I think also of the many other high school girls and boys who may not be unbelievably brilliant, but are plenty smart and eager and talented – and need our help with basic educational necessities, and didn't get it last year.

And how about the ones who aren't so smart or talented, and need our help even more to achieve the education that will enable them to get a decent job, raise a family, and feel deservedly good about themselves?

Anyway, if you – or a group you can put together – can sponsor even one Ethiopian-Israeli high school kid this year, your \$350 may save a worthwhile future.

To sponsor a high school student in need like Tomer or Ester, and perhaps help to nurture another Shachar Baruch, please contact Judy Dick at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email highschool@nacoej.org. And tell her you read about Tomer and Ester in the *Lifeline*.



ESTER BITCHA:
"I want to be a court judge."

"I really like when justice is done, and it is terrible when innocent people are ganged up on. That's why I want to be a court judge."

Ester is only an 11th grade high school girl, but she's lived long enough in Lod, one of Israel's poorest and most crime-ridden cities, to know that bad things can happen to good people.

Ester comes from a family of three boys and four girls – including her single-parent mother, whom she loves very much. Her parents were divorced 11 years ago, and Ester's mother has supported the family and paid the rent on their crowded two-bedroom apartment ever since.

"I have always wanted to work to help my Mom," Ester says, "but she won't let me. I know it's hard for her, but she says I should focus on school. So my siblings and I try to help by taking care of our house and make her happy by getting good grades and respectable professions."

Ester loves to dance, and would take dance classes if she could, but has no way of paying for such luxuries. So she works hard on her classes at the ORT Lod High School, where she's in the Information Science track (with her eye on law school some day?).

A sponsor would be a big help to a deserving girl like Ester. ■

Pictures from the Limudiah

Today, in the second half of the 2010/11 school year, 849 Ethiopian children in 19 schools in nine cities in Israel are enrolled in our outstandingly successful *Limudiah* after-school classes of intensive education (and hot lunch!).

Why do we say “outstandingly successful”?

Because 20 years after Operation Solomon, nation-wide, only 35% of Ethiopian-Israeli children are at grade level in their elementary schools – whereas of those who go to those same kind of schools but have a *Limudiah* program in the afternoon, 85% are at grade level – or higher! In first grade, usually 100% of the children in *Limudiah* are reading right on schedule with their sabra classmates.

We're very proud of these results – and we wish passionately that we had the money to enroll at least twice as many Ethiopian-Israeli children as we can afford to teach now. (It's \$1,500 per child per year, and all donations are gratefully accepted.) ■

NACOEJ *Limudiah* have become popular destinations for young visitors from the Birthright Israel groups, not only because the children are adorable, but because NACOEJ teachers make sure that Birthright visitors are not just observers, but can be active participants in the lessons.

RIGHT: Proudly displaying a good grade.



ABOVE: when third grade *Limudiah* pupils at the Yeshurun School in Rishon LeTzion were told that their Birthright visitors spoke English, they jumped at the opportunity to get on-the-spot help with their English homework. The students in this delighted Birthright group were all from the University of Texas.

LEFT: at the Ohel Shalom School in Gadera, teachers in the *Limudiah* planned a special lesson which Birthright visitors could help teach the children.

PASSOVER IS FOR CHILDREN

Everyone knows the focus of the Seder table is on the children around it. We not only talk about children, but include rituals and games to keep them awake, make them ask questions, and teach them Jewish traditions.

This Passover, we're offering a brand-new, lavishly illustrated children's book (not yet available in stores or on-line) that tells the true story of a little girl's escape from Ethiopia to Israel, a story its well-known writer, Lesley Simpson, says made her feel “as if the Hagaddah was coming alive.” The children (ages 5-9) with whom you share Passover will love “Yuvi's Candy Tree”. You can request it from us, either alone for \$36, or as an add-on to your embroidery order for just an additional \$18. We have only 50 preview copies, signed by the author, so order soon (see reply card).



This Lovely Award

I promised to tell you more about the amazing award I received from the Rabbi Samuel S. and A. Irma Cohon Memorial Foundation for service to the Jewish people.

It was presented in Tucson on Shabbat Chanukah at Temple Emanu-El, where Rabbi Samuel S. Cohon's grandson and namesake, Rabbi Samuel M. Cohon, presides over a large congregation.

I was absolutely thrilled and humbled to be the recipient of an award that had been given yearly to such worthy people in the past – including my dear friend Glenn Richter, who led the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry and is now a member of the NACOEJ Advisory Board – and of course I accepted the award on behalf of all of us at NACOEJ, because it belongs to all of us.

Astonishingly, this year's award included a grant of \$25,000!!!! I've been given plaques and certificates on occasion, but never a gift of money – and this was an unimaginable amount! I was immediately transfixed by the question of what to do with it. Obviously, I was going to give it to NACOEJ – but what exactly for? There are so many things we need money for right now, when times are tough and resources are scarce.

I'm still thinking about it.

I'm pretty sure I want to feed hungry Jewish children and educate them with this lovely Chanukah gift – but as I write, I don't yet know if it will be in Ethiopia or in Israel.

Once we leave Ethiopia, it will be the Jewish Agency's responsibility to feed and educate our children, and their budget will be far larger than ours ever was.

But we haven't left yet. And in Israel, there are many Ethiopian children in our after-school programs who go to bed hungry at night, and come to us still terribly hungry the next afternoon. Too hungry to learn – until we feed them. (And then there are the thousands who can't even come to us because we don't have enough programs.)

We must feed every child we teach, and the cost for those



Two generations of Rabbi Cohons – father Baruch and son Samuel – presented the beautiful certificate to Barbara Ribakove Gordon. The certificate bears photos of the first Rabbi Samuel Cohon and his wife, A. Irma Cohon, in whose memory the award is given.

meals – much more expensive in Israel than in Ethiopia! – is second only to salaries for our teachers.

So this \$20,000 I've given NACOEJ hasn't been allocated yet. But it will be. And as soon as I know, I'll tell you all about it.

Barbara

**I kept \$5,000 out of the \$25,000. The Cohon Award never goes to an organization, but only to individuals, so I'm told I will have to pay taxes on it and I should provide for that.*



Rabbi Baruch, Barbara, and Rabbi Sam proudly displayed Rabbi Sam's unique tallit, covered with 13 magnificent NACOEJ embroideries, including the atarah (collar piece). Rabbi Sam wore the tallit at the Shabbat Chanukah services. (If you are interested in creating a similar tallit, contact Nelya at NACOEJ at 212-233-5200, ext. 223 or email to nacoej@nacoej.org.)

Photos: Jonathan Cohon