

# OFFELINE

NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

SUMMER 2006



PHOTO: David Shuster

Morning prayers at the Beta Israel compound in Gondar.

## “We have to take them home.”

A very moving report was written by Sara Shuster, the Dayton Jewish Federation’s Foundation Director, after her return from a mission to the Beta Israel Compound in Gondar, Ethiopia. With permission from Sara and the “Dayton Jewish Observer”, we are reprinting an excerpt from her story. The photos were taken in the compound which NACOEJ supports, by her husband, David Shuster. Sara writes:

**A**ddis Ababa served as the juncture to Gondar: Africa unencumbered. Two hours on board Ethiopian Air and I was whisked back in time hundreds of years. The first stop was the compound in Gondar where men and women were preparing for the Shabbat Queen during afternoon services in the ad-hoc shul. Corrugated metal walls enclose a dirt floor strewn with

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

## What Happened to the Oxygen?

**Z**e’ev Boim has not been Minister of Absorption in the Israeli government very long. But he has already made a memorable comment. “Unfortunately,” he said, “we occasionally forget that aliyah is the oxygen of the country.”

Last June 20, the inter-ministerial committee on Ethiopian aliyah forgot.

They decided to postpone indefinitely the promised – and already long delayed – increase in the number of Jews being brought to Israel from Ethiopia every month. Instead of the pledged 600 a month, due to have started more than a year ago, the immigration will creep along at 300 a month, while the community in Ethiopia remains exposed to the famines, the illnesses,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

## TAKE THEM HOME CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

metal benches upon which more than 100 men and women, draped in white muslin shawls and head wraps, sat proudly on their respective sides of the mechitzah (divider). They stood, prayed, blew kisses to a Torah, shouted undulated joy to the Torah, and bent knees and bowed at the waist.

Then a man shyly stood when recognized to be vying for the attention of the six visitors who now stood before this ancient congregation.

With passion, urgency or both, he began his plea — it was most definitely a plea. With reverence and restraint, he was barely able to temper his urgency, and I understood nothing of his Amharic.

Spaces between words were not discernible to my virgin ears. Strands of lovely odd staccato sounds blurred, but my heart began racing and a lump quickly settled in my throat, my heart, my gut. One word I understood and its articulation served as a magnet pulling at my soul which rained out of me in tears. My hand grasped for my husband to settle my emotional stammer — this man was pleading respectfully and gesturing emphatically and I understood just one word: Yerushalayim. Five days, five syllables, one word that pleaded five: “Take me home to Israel.”

I leaned into my husband through an emotional jolt and gasped, “I want to take them home — we have to take them home.”

One man’s voice was the voice of my great-grandfathers, my great-aunts, my husband’s great-aunts, great-uncle, great-grandparents.

His voice was voices I have never been able to hear. His voice was a whisper, yet my heart began to scream. His voice was a chorus of six million shadows.

Listen. Listen. Now we can hear the voices and we must listen. One man stands and speaks for six million. I listen attentively as his voice is woven through each step I take on my journey. His voice echoes as I see, touch, and embrace, as I absorb each mother’s glance, each father’s bow, each child’s outstretched hand and shouts of shalom. Meaningless sounds strung by a stranger, who is not a stranger, into strands of meaningless words and sentences, and I understood everything conveyed.

My journey to Ethiopia was nothing heroic, nothing courageous. While I have many stories to share, a single man’s voice told me that my journey to Ethiopia was merely to absorb a message and to impart it.

His voice continues its crescendo in my mind. Scenes of families, some of which have been separated for years, reuniting at Ben-Gurion were intoned with his voice. Grown men falling into the arms of their relatives, in sobs of joy and almost primitive relief, sent me reeling — it was surreal and nearly too much to bear. One man’s voice held me steady.

We can bring Ethiopian Jewry home. We can do this, we must do this, and we honor those for whom there was no promise by doing this. We must because we can.

I spent a lifetime among Ethiopian Jews for five days last month. One man stood before me in a rustic, simple, true synagogue filled with nothing and everything and taught me how to live a meaningful life. ■

*Editor’s note: Along with your gift to NACOEJ, if you wish to make a donation to Operation Promise as a result of this article, please contact the Jewish Federation of Greater Dayton and mention that you saw the Sara Shuster article in the NACOEJ Lifeline. Phone numbers: Sara Shuster, 1-937-610-1555, ext. 127; Deva Zwelling, 1-937-610-1555, ext. 108.*



PHOTO: David Shuster

## OXYGEN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

the bad nutrition, and the dire poverty inherent in being the poorest people in one of the world's poorest countries.

The oxygen disappeared, and left us all gasping for breath.

Not everyone in the ministerial committee was happy about turning their backs on destitute Jews. Some argued against it. But in the end, the Minister of the Interior, Ze'ev Bar-On, prevailed, on the grounds that Israel could not afford and wasn't equipped to take 600 a month. He later said that even if he had the money, the Jews coming in from Ethiopia spent their time in Israel in ghettos that they never left, and weren't absorbed into Israeli society, so aliyah was just transferring "a problem from there to here".

We strongly disagree. Yes, there are great problems, but this is still a very new immigration. New immigrants – like our own grandparents or great grandparents – always seek out people from the "old country" who speak their language, eat their food and grew up with their customs. It's also inevitable that, among bewildered people who have lost their bearings in a radically different world, there is a chance of family dysfunction, of violence, of crime and vice. It happened to Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side of New York a century ago.

But does that mean that the children can not break out of poverty, find a place in the new world, make good lives for themselves? Of course it doesn't, and the prosperous, educated, generous Jews of America are proof.

In fact, the Ethiopian community in Israel, coming from an extraordinarily remote world, has actually made amazing strides in a short time. The success stories don't make the headlines, and those who oppose the aliyah of the remaining Jews – for whatever reasons – would much rather talk about the failures, and say that's all there is.

At NACOEJ, we know that's not true. We're a small organization, but every year we help thousands of young Ethiopians – from first grade through college – succeed in Israeli schools. Children who started in our elementary school *Limudiot* (after-school programs) are now going

to good high schools, enrolling in universities, graduating with degrees in law, science, medicine, education, social work, the arts and more. They needed a helping hand their parents could not give them, and we've been proud and privileged to extend it. The Settlement House movement played a similar role for impoverished Jewish immigrants at the turn of the last century.

Of course, we at NACOEJ are not the only ones shocked and disappointed – desperately disappointed – at the ministerial committee's decision. In Israel, even the lawyer who will now have to speak for the government at an upcoming Supreme Court hearing on this issue says the decision will be very hard to defend. The Jewish Agency leadership, which hoped to be in Ethiopia soon, is distressed. Ethiopian leaders in Israel are shocked. American Jewish leaders from the federations and the United Jewish Communities, who have been raising millions of dollars for this aliyah, are stunned – and protesting strongly.

Meantime, the ministerial decision means that NACOEJ must remain the sole source of support for thousands of Jews waiting in Gondar for a redemption that never seems

to come. The school must stay open. The school children must have a lunch, which may be their only meal of the day. The little children and the pregnant and nursing women must have good nutrition to prevent life-long consequences. The Jews must have a place to pray, and celebrate holidays, and teachers who can introduce adults as well as children to Israeli customs, history and daily life. We wish we could afford vocational training that would prepare them for jobs in Israel, but that is not possible on our budget.

We are very pleased to tell you that the UJC has assured us it will continue to help us fund programs in Gondar. We believe the federations that have been paying for one of the two daily meals in the feeding center will continue. The rest is up to us, and we feel sure we can depend, as we always have, on our wonderful NACOEJ family to make it possible.

But I can't say we are not grievously hurt by this turn of events. By "we" I mean all of us, the Jews in Ethiopia, the American leaders who have been working so hard to fulfill their pledges of

**"Unfortunately,  
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that aliyah is the oxygen  
of the country."**

Ze'ev Boim  
Minister of Absorption  
in Israel

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

LIFELINE  
JULY 2006  
Lifeline is published  
three times annually.  
NACOEJ  
132 Nassau Street  
New York, NY 10038  
Issue No: 56



## OXYGEN CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

support to an aliyah now in doubt, the Ethiopian-Israeli community, Israelis who love and respect these Jews – and the State of Israel itself, which needs them more than some of their current leaders will acknowledge. We are all deprived of the oxygen of increased aliyah.

The best I can do now is to say – thank heavens for our NACOEJ family. We've lived through disappointments before and we will live through this one too. We'll go on enabling our brothers and sisters in Gondar to survive until they reach Israel, as they inevitably will.

The oxygen will return, if not through the door that closed, then through the window that opens. And we will all breathe again.

*Barbara*

## Reaching for the Stars – And Catching Them!

In our last *Lifeline*, we asked for a high school sponsor for Immanuel Melaku, an exceptionally bright boy whose single mother could not afford to pay for the gifted-children programs he had been invited to take.

We were inundated with responses from American Jews eager to give this youngster his chance to do brilliantly in Israel. In fact, so many generous people offered to help Immanuel that we were not only able to find a sponsor to cover the costs of the special programs, but another to pay his daily school bills – and, best of all, we were able to match other willing donors to other Ethiopian-Israeli high school kids.

We'll keep you informed about Immanuel's progress—and we'll say again what we have said before: what wonderful people we have in our NACOEJ family!

For information about sponsoring a high school student, call 212-233-5200, ext. 232, or e-mail [highschoolprogram@nacoej.org](mailto:highschoolprogram@nacoej.org). ■

## The Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student Program Brings Nachas All Around

**E**velyn Deitchman, our wonderful volunteer and Board member who has run the Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student Program for 17 years, receives many heartwarming letters. Here's one from a sponsor Evelyn has corresponded with for many years, sharing photos and feelings.

*"My dear Evelyn...Thank you for your letter telling me officially that my student, Dabrito Alamu, has graduated from her course. I have enjoyed Dabrito so very much. Her letters have been beautiful, and I have loved them, every one.*

*"My prayers will follow Dabrito wherever she goes. Thank you for giving me the privilege of helping Dabrito as she has helped me. Keep in touch...Katherine Warren"*

Here is a letter from a student to her sponsor.

*"Hi! How are you? I'm feeling good. Two months ago I finished my final project and my studies. Successfully.*

*"In the past four years I learned a lot, not only about fashion design but also about my abilities. I learned that I can achieve things that I believe in, even if it means going against all odds.*

*"I'm happy to tell you that my final project was a*

*big success. I had a lot of good criticism from well-known designers. People that came to the exhibit were excited from the way I interpreted my mother's and grandmothers heritage to a modern cloth that every one can wear today.*

*"I could not ask for a better way to end my studies and for that I want to thank you. Your support and help have given me a lot of strength. I was really lucky to have your help because there are a lot of young Ethiopian people with lots of ambition that need help and I hope that they will have the privilege to get help like I had.*

*"During the last year I helped two Ethiopian girls who want to study fashion design. I gave them advices on how to prepare their portfolio and how to get ready for the exams. I was happy to help them because when I registered four years ago, I was on my own. So I did what I could do to make it easy for them.*

*"I would like to thank you again for everything you have done for me and for fulfilling my dreams...Hirut Ruth Yossef"*

For information on "adopting" a college student, call Evelyn at 212-233-5200, ext. 226.

## Bringing School Supplies to Israel

**M**ordechai Labaton, age 15, collected school supplies for Ethiopian children. He and his family delivered the supplies to Israel, and Mordechai's mother, Emily Labaton, wrote the following note to Gary Metzger in our New York office:

*Gary, we just returned from Israel and I wanted to let you and Barbara know that we had the most wonderful experience visiting the after-school program in the Ben Zvi school in Rechovot.*

*The teachers who met with us were enthusiastic and inspiring. They made my son feel proud that he had contributed and they helped us all understand the important need that NACOEJ is meeting through these programs.*

*And the children themselves were fabulous. They seemed to be flourishing, happy, excited about their studies, proud of themselves and adorable! We brought another family with us and they were deeply moved as well. Thank you for giving us this wonderful opportunity. We hope to continue our relationship...Emily Labaton.*

If your kids would like to collect school supplies as a mitzvah project, first, please contact



**Ethiopian children enjoying school supplies collected by wonderful friends of NACOEJ.**

Gary at 212-233-5200, ext. 228, or email him at [gmetzger@nacoj.org](mailto:gmetzger@nacoj.org) for crucial information.

SPECIAL NOTE: For many years, a very wonderful volunteer, Morris Bakst, handled our school supplies program. Morris, who is a senior citizen, was recently instructed by his doctor to stop the lifting and packing involved, so Gary is handling the program now with terrific assistance from volunteer Mel Garfinkle. But we're thrilled to say that Morris is still coming in to supervise and to write the charming thank-you letters that delight so many donors. ■

## 1300 Books, 1000 Children, 17 Schools...

**E**very year, NACOEJ runs a special campaign through synagogues and Jewish schools to provide books for Ethiopian-Israeli children.

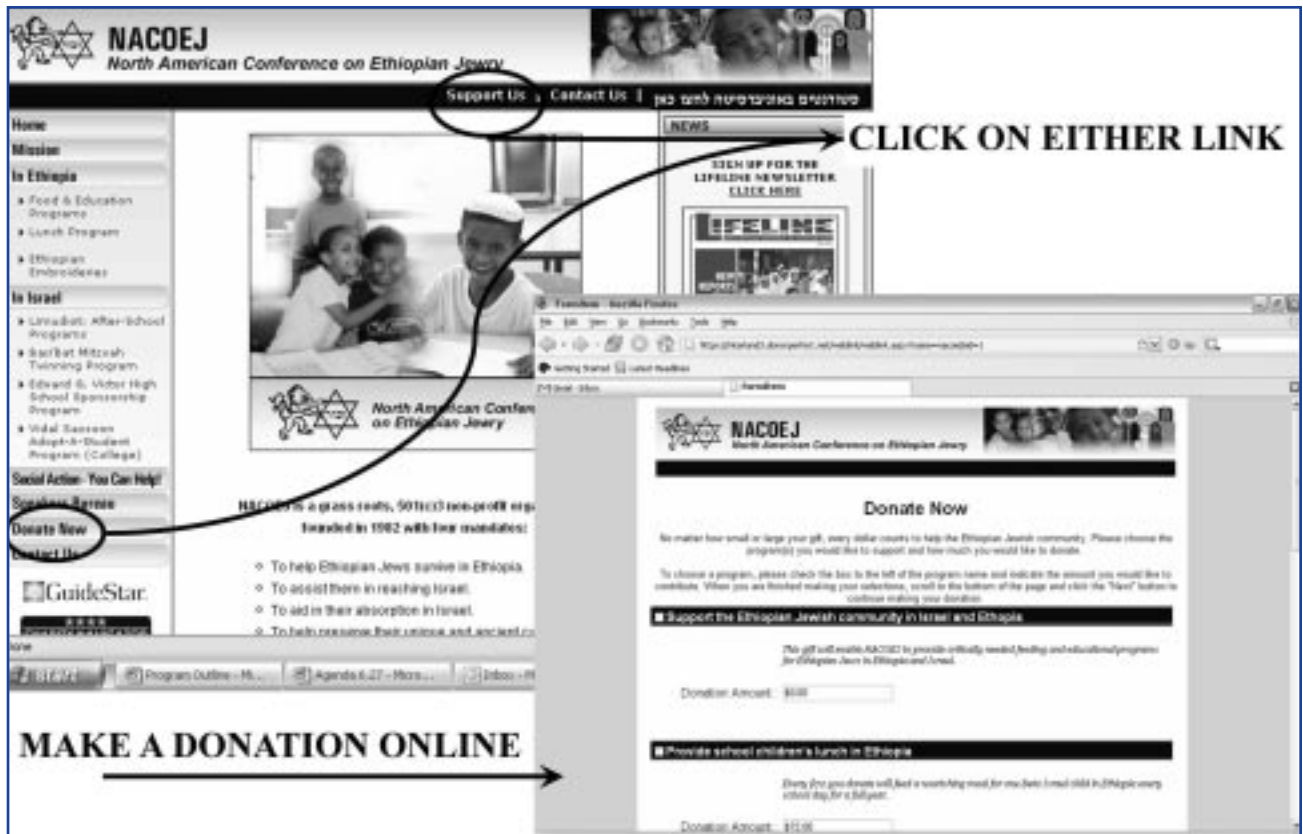
It's called "Eighth Night of Chanukah" and lets an American child receive an Eighth Night gift that simultaneously benefits Ethiopian children in Israel.

This past Chanukah, the American gifts provided school books and pleasure-reading books for Ethiopian-Israeli children in Israeli elementary schools. The American children received personalized certificates and bookmarks with photos of Ethiopian-Israeli children.

We're happy to report that, thanks to "Eighth Night of Chanukah", we provided more than 1,300 textbooks, workbooks and just-for-fun books to over 1000 children in our after-school programs in 17 Israeli schools.

If you'd like your synagogue or Jewish school to take part in the 2006 "Eighth Night of Chanukah" program, please contact Lillian Baharestani at 212-233-5200, ext. 227, or by e-mail at [lbaharestani@nacoj.org](mailto:lbaharestani@nacoj.org). She'll welcome you warmly. ■





## Our New Website!

Our new website is up and running. All embroidery patterns have been updated, and donating online is easy and safe. Please check it out today at [www.nacoej.org](http://www.nacoej.org). If you need help navigating the site, please call Terri Barber, Office Manager, at 212-233-5200, ext. 223.

### CONDOLENCES TO

- NACOEJ Advisory Board member **Lucille Geller**, on the loss of her beloved sister, Elsie Weg. Our deepest sympathy to all the family.
- NACOEJ volunteer **Eve Hartheimer** on the loss of her beloved husband, Michael. Our hearts go out to sons Barry and Yehuda, and all the hospital patients who loved the musical shows Michael organized for them.

### Errors Corrected

Many of you have been baffled by seeing recent articles and photos in Jewish newspapers describing NACOEJ-funded programs in Ethiopia, but attributing them to the Jewish Agency, or the JDC, or the UJC, or even the Ethiopian National Project in Israel!

These attributions were incorrect. We are pleased to say that UJC (United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization for all the North American Federations) is correcting these errors on its website (see below). Please pass this information along to your local federation, in case they haven't gotten the word.

As of March 2006, the UJC Operation Promise campaign, which we fully support, has begun to help NACOEJ fund programs in Ethiopia, and we are honored to add their assistance to that of our many donors.

#### "Erratum"

"Recent communications issued by United Jewish Communities regarding Operation Promise should have made clear that a compound to help the Falas Mura in the Ethiopian city of Gondar is maintained by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), which is independent of UJC, and not supported by any of UJC's overseas partner agencies, UJC is issuing a clarification to federations and regrets any confusion on this matter to date."



## A Bat Mitzvah Twin Update

BY SANDY WASSERMAN

I am the mother of a NACOEJ bat mitzvah twin. In 1994 our daughter, Aliza, from Long Island, NY, was twinned with Yisraela Birha, an Ethiopian-Israeli, living in Ramla. After receiving her tallit, and writing to her pen-pal bat mitzvah twin for over a year, Aliza had her bat mitzvah.

We visited Israel that summer, and had the pleasure of meeting Aliza's twin and family at their apartment. The experience was enriching for all of us and the girls maintained a pen-pal relationship for years.

This past summer, I decided to try to reconnect with the family in Ramla.

My contact began with the NACOEJ office in Jerusalem, which arranged for me to visit the NACOEJ summer camp in Ramla, accompanied by Shoshana Ben-Dor, the NACOEJ Director in Israel. Edna Shavit at the NACOEJ office in Jerusalem tracked down Yisraela.

I contacted Yisraela and was amazed that she remembered me... and we spoke in English!

In Ramla we met with Fantu, a lovely Ethiopian woman, who heads the camp. We were shown the entire facility, both indoors and out, where students (campers) experience nature, crafts programs, cooking and have lots of fun! Every room was bursting with happy children's faces, full of enthusiasm. They were eager to share samples of the pita they had just baked, or the medicinal nature packets they had put together.

After our camp visit we visited the Birha home.

We were greeted by Yisraela's mother, Navah, who looked more confident and adjusted than in 1996. She ushered us into the living room, where she served us fruit and juice, and brought us up to date on the nine years since my last visit. Yisraela, asleep in the next room, had finished her service in the army and was working nights at a gas station, a job she chose for six months so that she could earn the most money in the shortest time.

Her sister, Rachel, whom I remembered as a very spirited girl, was still in the army. Benny, who was three in 1996, came into the room, a 12-year-old about to become a bar mitzvah. He, too, has a bar mitzvah twin and participates in the NACOEJ summer camp program.

I must say that Navah's Hebrew had improved much more than my Hebrew. However, although



she had participated in several Ulpan classes, she told us she could still not read and write in Hebrew and just "got by", happy to be able to speak Hebrew in her local community. At home, she and her Ethiopian friends still speak Amharic.

When Yisraela joined us, she told us about her job, which she accepts, but does not enjoy, as it is only temporary.

When asked about university for her children, Yisraela's mother said "Of course!" with such determination. Yisraela and her mother were eager to look at the family photos that I had brought along, and inquired about the rest of my family, noticing that I had gray hair now, and that my husband used to have hair in 1996!

The years have been good for this lovely family. Their home's modifications of a wall taken down for more light, and new living room furniture, were proudly discussed. The three Ethiopian ancestor pictures remained on the wall, as I remembered. Yisraela humbly accepted the small gifts for her family that I had brought along, saying that my visit alone had been a gift.

When I got back to Jerusalem, I called home and Aliza was eager to hear about my visit. On her behalf, I had exchanged her e-mail address with Yisraela, who does not have her own e-mail, but a place where she can be reached.

The NACOEJ bar/bat mitzvah twinning program has so many benefits, some that can be experienced in the moment, and others that are serendipitous and long lasting.

To find out more about the NACOEJ Bar/Bat Mitzvah Twinning program, contact Miriam Weissman at 212-233-5200, ext. 224, or email her at [mweissman@nacoej.org](mailto:mweissman@nacoej.org). ■

**Left to right:**  
Yisraela Birha,  
Sandy  
Wasserman,  
Navah Birha  
(Yisraela's  
mother) and  
Benny Birha.



**NACOEJ staffer Mazi Melessa and Dr. Albert Pilip under the chuppah at their wedding in Israel.**

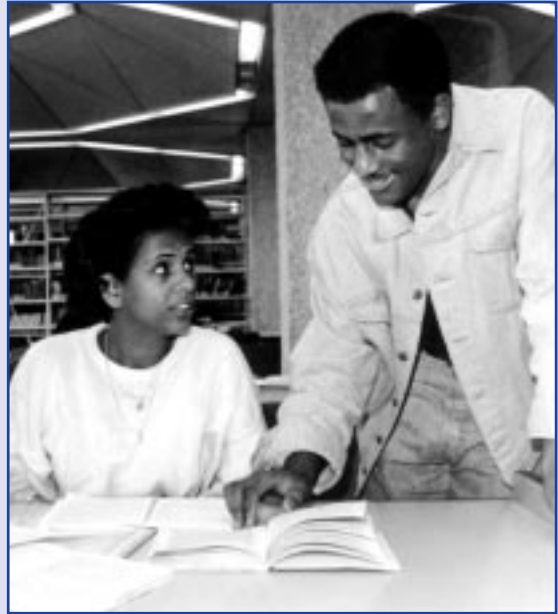


Photo: Zeev Ackerman

**Former Adopt-A-Student Belaynesh Zivadia when she was a college student in the NACOEJ Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student Program.**

## Congratulations to

- NACOEJ president **Rabbi Joel Soffin** on the tremendous success of Shalom Ethiopia, the million-quarters project to raise funds to feed Jewish school children in Ethiopia. Rabbi Soffin created and managed Shalom Ethiopia so brilliantly that more than a million quarters came in - and are still coming! His achievement was recently recognized by CBS News. Special thanks go to the Union for Reform Judaism, which promoted the program internationally, to the Conservative movement which gave support, and to Temple Shalom of Succasunna, NJ, where it all started, and where Rabbi Soffin is now Rabbi Emeritus.
- NACOEJ Advisory Board Member **Ruth Messinger**, president and executive director of American Jewish World Service, for assembling a major rally in Washington, DC, to protest genocide in Darfur.
- Former Adopt-A-Student **Shlomo Molla** of Jerusalem, on his election to the executive committee of the World Zionist Organization. Shlomo has long served as the Jewish Agency's senior consultant on Ethiopian absorption, and will hold an international portfolio in his new position.
- NACOEJ staffer **Mazi Melessa**, on her wedding to Dr. Albert Pilip. Mazi, a frequent speaker for NACOEJ and the UJC, is a former Adopt-A-Student, a graduate of Haifa University and of the Jonathan Giesberg Memorial Leadership Training Program at the Leo Baeck campus in Haifa. She was elected head of the National Ethiopian Student Association in Israel. Born in the FSU, Albert is doing his medical residency in New York.
- Former Adopt-A-Student **Belaynesh Zivadia** on her appointment as Deputy Consul General for the Southwest in the Israeli Consulate in Houston, Texas. Belaynesh, the first Ethiopian-Israeli in the Israeli diplomatic corps, is a graduate of Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Please note: Ethiopian Jews are generally referred to by their first name, as their second, or family name, is usually the first name of their father. (In Israel, many families have adopted the name of a grandfather as a family name.)

### NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

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