

# LIFELINE

NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

WINTER 2009

## Why There is Hope for Ethiopians in Israel...

Originally I planned to start this *Lifeline* with a detailed update on problems facing Ethiopian Jews once they reach Israel.

Things like the many, many Israeli children living below the poverty line (too many of them are Ethiopian); jobless immigrant families with “food insecurity” (they don’t know where the next meal is coming from); domestic violence; complaints of discrimination in schools and employment – and so on.

But then I thought, “Why?”

There are all too many news stories about these heartbreaking problems, and NACOEJ supporters, who are smart and well-informed, already know. We also know some people oppose more aliyah from Ethiopia because they say the problems of absorption will never be solved. **So, let’s talk about what we are doing about these problems, because they are not hopeless. Definitely not hopeless!**

One reason I’m sure of that is because the difficulties Ethiopian Jews face in Israel now are nothing new – our forebears had them right here in America.

The amazing poem Emma Goldman wrote for the Statue of Liberty (I always get shivers

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*Injured children like this little boy can now get help at the re-opened JDC clinic.*

## Ethiopia: First, the Good News!

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, good friends of Ethiopian Jews – rejoice!

The JDC clinic in Gondar is re-opening! Congratulations, JDC – and thanks!

By the time you read this, it should be in full swing. JDC tells us they are happy about returning, and has graciously thanked NACOEJ for helping to make it possible.

We want to pass on those thanks – and our own – to our whole NACOEJ family, for encouraging and facilitating JDC’s return. Elsewhere in this *Lifeline* we talk about the ways in which NACOEJ plays a role in making, or helping to make, good things happen for Ethiopian Jews. This was one of the most important

efforts, and we can all take pride in it.

Now we have the opportunity to decide how best to use the funds you gave us for health care when it looked as if it might be entirely up to us. There are still many critically needed services. Better nutrition (and for more of the Jews) is a no-brainer, the first line of defense against severe illness, early childhood death and life-long health problems.

Educating parents to recognize early danger signals so that children (and all family members) get medical help before it’s too late, is another absolute necessity. There are many other critical needs. If we work together with the clinic, maybe we can stretch our resources.

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## Hope for Ethiopians in Israel

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just murmuring it to myself) ends with a famous welcome to the refugees coming to America a hundred or so years ago: "I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

But we all know that the new arrivals didn't find paradise waiting for them. The light from that great welcoming lamp illuminated some pretty ugly corners in the Lower East Side, Chinatown, Little Italy, in neighborhoods where Poles and Irish and others struggled to survive. We, too, had slums and hunger, violence and joblessness, crime, dysfunctional families – the whole sad picture of immigrant life.

And we who are here now – some of us only one or two generations removed from Ellis Island – are proof that we can emerge successful. The much-discussed "cycle of poverty" can be broken in Israel, as it was in America.

**My other reason for hope is the work NACOEJ has already done – and is still doing – in Israel.** We are already seeing Ethiopian children who flourished in our after-school programs become teachers in those programs!

We know former college and high school students who got help from our sponsors, and are now not only holding good jobs, making enviable careers, but seeing to it that their little brothers and sisters are staying in school, and succeeding in school!

And even though some troubles take a lot of time to be relieved, we've seen good things happening fast. We've already found pre-school Ethiopian-Israeli children who are reading before they start first grade because their big sisters, who had been through our classes, were teaching them at home! Probably with books we supplied!

All through this *Lifeline*, you'll find photos and letters, articles and quotes, from and about Ethiopian-Israeli youngsters who are making it in Israel, thanks to their own great spirit and some timely help.



You'll meet others who are still waiting, hoping, and needing our help – and please note that these are not pitiful basket cases – they are young people bursting with life, energy, hope and promise.

Why do they need our help? We level the playing field for them. We give them the tools they need.

We stand in for parents who can't help their children with schoolwork because they themselves never went to school. Our *Limudiah* programs do the job.

We enable teens who want to go to good local high schools but can't pay the fees, to walk into those schools with heads held high, all the essential costs covered.



**Beautiful Ziva Desse got her college degree with a NACOEJ sponsor through our Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student program. Now she directs the Ethiopian Absorption Office in Rishon LeZion for the national Ministry of Absorption.**

We make it possible for college students who would otherwise have to drop out for lack of funds for food, rent, and carfare, to get their degrees.

And when I say "we" I mean all of us, sponsors and foundation directors, individual donors and Jewish federations, school children and synagogue groups – all of us together make it happen.

All of us, together, can be very proud of what is accomplished in Israel because NACOEJ is there.

In fact, just about everything you will read about in this *Lifeline* is something to be proud of, something in which our organization – you organization -- played a part. Sometimes we were the only player, sometimes we were part of a team. Sometimes we set a precedent and others joined in. The important thing is that we were there when we were needed.



***For Jewish children in Ethiopia, going to school is a joyous privilege.***

I must add, alas, that this year is a very difficult one, and we won't always be where we are needed. There will be fewer children in our *Limudiah* programs, because money is so short. That is dreadful. We always have a waiting list for students needing high school and college sponsors – the list may be much longer this year.

I must also confess that the aliyah isn't going as well as we expected. As I write, 3,000 of the remaining Jews in Ethiopia have been processed, but no one has actually reached Israel and the agony of separated families continues. We go on urging Israel to speed up the aliyah.

And, in the meantime, we make sure that a thousand of the children still in Ethiopia get the best education we can afford in our little school in Gondar. Thanks to you, they receive a daily school lunch, and – along with a good secular education – they have Hebrew language and Jewish studies that will help them greatly when they are in Israeli schools some day.

Thanks and blessings to all of you whose prayers and contributions, letters and phone calls, good work among your families, friends and neighbors, make bad times easier, and make

good things happen for Ethiopian Jews. We can't produce an earthly paradise, but, with your help, we will go on working to bring about a better world for them.

*Barbara*

Barbara Ribakove Gordon  
Executive Director

## **Ethiopia: Good News, Bad News**

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Now for the bad news...

The Ethiopian government has had to appeal for emergency food aid for 6,000,000 people. The crisis (drought) is centered east of Gondar, but crop failure in any area usually causes inflation in food prices as well as food shortages elsewhere.

We're afraid that our school lunch budget will buy less, even though we should buy more. In November, oranges more than tripled in price, and we can now serve them only once a week. Bananas hold steady though, so they are back on the menu every day. As always, we'll do our best, and keep you informed. ■

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### New Tools Mean New Jobs

Our new shovels and picks, distributed by the Beta Israel's own community organization, give members of the community a better chance to be selected for day labor on construction sites in Gondar. The work is hard and the pay is small, but the money helps feed the family – and the self-respect that the employment provides is priceless.

## A Day of Pride!

Ethiopian-Israelis have been celebrating their unique Jewish holiday, Sigd, in Jerusalem for quite a few years. But only this year has Sigd become a national holiday, which enables children to be excused from school to attend, and workers to leave their jobs to participate.

This recognition makes it easier to bring Ethiopian Jewish history and culture into Israeli classrooms, giving Ethiopians their rightful place among the many Jewish communities that make up the State of Israel.

NACOEJ, of course, has been celebrating Sigd in our *Limudiah* classes (and often with the rest of the school) for years. At the Sigd in Jerusalem, there is a NACOEJ tent in which our Israel director, Shoshana Ben-Dor, teaches the history, traditions, and the Ge'ez\* liturgy of the Sigd, which celebrates the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile, and the re-giving of the Torah by Ezra the Scribe.

Young Ethiopian-Israelis, and non-Ethiopian Israelis, eager to learn about the holiday but unable to read Ge'ez or understand the Amharic translations offered by the Kesotch (Ethiopian-Jewish religious leaders), flock to the tent for Shoshana's scholarly presentations in Hebrew.

Aviva Nagosa, who attended this year's celebration, said: *"The Sigd is very empowering. It is the only thing left that joins us all together."* Natan Biadglin, a 25-year-old Ethiopian youth counselor from Haifa, said: *"Young people need to know where they come from. This strengthens them..."* ■

\*Ge'ez is an ancient semitic language no longer spoken, but used liturgically by Ethiopian Jews.



**Abby Laub** enjoys a close encounter on a NACOEJ Young Leadership Mission.

## A RIFT IN ETHIOPIA

In the Afar region of northeastern Ethiopia, a great, deep rift has appeared, opening a chasm in the desert 35 miles long.

Geologists speculate that the rift is just part of much larger events to come, and that eventually a new sea will flood into the rift. However, although the rift opened in only a few days, the sea isn't expected for a million years or so.

In any event, if you are thinking of joining a NACOEJ Mission to Ethiopia, we want to assure you that Afar is quite far from Gondar, and there are no Beta Israel to visit in that area. So you can put your name down for information about NACOEJ Missions with no fear of falling through the crack, and of course, no obligation.

For information about upcoming missions to Ethiopia and Israel, contact Gary Metzger at 212-233-5200, ext. 228 or email him at [gmetzger@nacoej.org](mailto:gmetzger@nacoej.org).

## Feeling Creative?

Go to the NACOEJ web site – [nacoej.org](http://nacoej.org) – and click on the Mitzvah Project page. You will find a plethora of wonderful ideas, including supplying mosquito nets for Ethiopia, providing lunches for Jewish children in Israel, naming a classroom or program to honor someone you love, and even creating your own web page on the NACOEJ web site.

And then call Judy Dick at NACOEJ at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email her at [jdick@nacoej.org](mailto:jdick@nacoej.org). She will help you get started on your Mitzvah Project!

*Mosquito nets protected this Jewish family during the most dangerous malaria season.*



## A Limudiah Story...

Even though we have only around 800 children in our *Limudiah* (after-school education) classes this year, instead of the 1,000+ we have when times are better, there are still a lot of stories to tell. This one is Yoni's story. (We always change the names.)

Yoni's family moved into a *Limudiah* school district when he was officially starting fourth grade. But Yoni read at second grade level. His math skills were somewhere around first grade. He'd been laughed at a lot in class so his self-confidence was zero. It wasn't all the fault of the previous school he'd gone to – Yoni's mother was very sick, his father absent, and all the household responsibilities fell on Yoni and his three siblings.

Yoni had to help cook, do laundry, and help care for his mother. He had no time for homework, and anyway, he had no workbooks, no pencils, no notebook. He also had no hope.

It was our job in *Limudiah* to make sure he had all the above, plus some success to bolster his ego and enable him to learn.

In his little *Limudiah* group, with no more than eight children to one teacher, Yoni's teacher got him second grade books to read for starters. She worked with him, one-on-one, at a slow pace he could adjust to. She divided his fourth grade reading assignments from homeroom class into short sections and read them with him. Pretty soon he could read them himself. For math, she brought him puzzles and games. Yoni thought they were fun, and began to learn.

**In just one semester in *Limudiah*, Yoni narrowed some of the gaps between second grade and fourth grade.** The other children (who had problems of their own) didn't laugh at him. He made one friend, and then another – and emotionally he

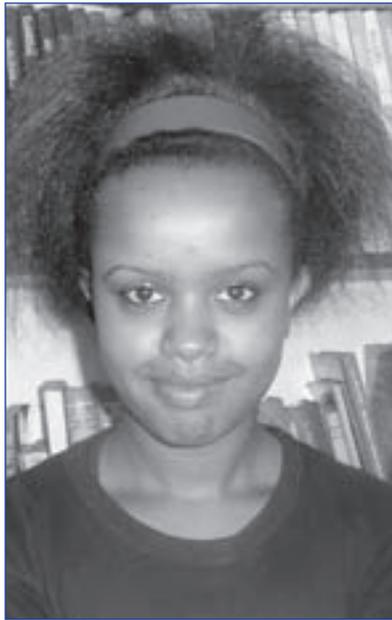
relied on his teacher as if she were the mother he wanted to have.

Now Yoni is calmer, confident and even contented – especially when he is getting praise for reading a fourth grade book out loud, or when he's eating a hot *Limudiah* lunch he didn't have to cook himself.

Yoni is pretty typical of some of the Ethiopian children who come to *Limudiah* with a history of failure in school, but who can forge ahead with help.

We have others who can leap ahead because they start with us in first grade, and never have to feel like failures.

We have brilliant kids, slow kids, plenty of just-plain-ordinary kids – and we love and help all of them. **Maybe, with your help, we can love and help more than 1,000 again. ■**



Miri Kebede



Ziva Mengistu

## Meet Miri and Ziva!

High school isn't really free in Israel. Costs for books, school supplies, lab fees, required class trips and much more add up to more than most Ethiopian families can pay.

Kids who do without these essentials don't get quite the same education as others. They feel – and are – left out. So, for a modest sum, American sponsors cover the costs, and enable Ethiopian students to learn and feel like everyone else.

Miri Kebede is one of the girls who needs a sponsor. Rather than tell you about her, we're going to let her do it herself. Here's her bio, in which her delightful sense of humor and her yearning for learning come through clearly (as well as her penchant for exclamation marks!):

*Hi! I am Miri Kebede. I am 15 going on 16 years old (yay!!)... I really like to read (prose, poetry, books for young people, etc.). I also love to write songs. (I have tons of these in my drawer!)*

*Once a really good friend of mine put one of my songs to music. (It was really great!) And I like to dance. I just feel free when I dance.*

*In addition to school, I go to Weizmann Institute in Rehovot. The classes there are more in depth and are in subjects like biology, math, English, chemistry, physics (there are quite a few!).*

*But I love being there. I love to learn. It doesn't matter what. I just love being in the study mindset.*

*My father had an operation on his shoulder. He was run over. My mother is now left to support*

*us which is very difficult. During her summer vacation, my sister worked in all kinds of jobs to help mom pay her tuition. But it's not enough.*

*We are seven children: one in day care, two in elementary school, one in junior high, two in high school (my sister and me) and one more in the army! (But he still lives with us.) So the expenses are simply expensive. I spent most of my summer vacation working. It felt nice to feel mature and independent and earn my own money.*

*When I grow (tall, I hope) and grow up, I want to be somebody. It doesn't matter in what field. (I haven't yet decided, but I'm just 15!) What's important is*

*that I'll be someone people will remember... I also hope that I will remain true to myself.*

Wow, Miri is one energetic, focused girl! But all her energy and summer jobs can't pay the fees at her regular school and at the Weizmann classes for truly outstanding students. She really needs a sponsor.

Another girl in need of a high school sponsor is Ziva Mengistu who is also 15. She is the baby of eight children. Their family came to Israel in 1999. Neither of her parents is able to work, so the family is very poor.

Math is Ziva's favorite subject, and she dreams of becoming a lawyer when she grows up. Thinking about having a sponsor to help with her school expenses, Ziva says, "I'm curious to know where my future sponsor lives, if he or she has children and a spouse, and why they are helping me. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to succeed and get ahead in life."

As young children, both Miri and Ziva were in NACOEJ *Limudiah* classes. Both are poised to do fine things with their lives. Both come from struggling families. And both need a little help now to be able to reach their great potential.

If you would like to sponsor Miri or Ziva, or another deserving high school student, please contact Judy Dick at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email her at [highschool@nacoej.org](mailto:highschool@nacoej.org). **Please mention that you heard about Miri and Ziva in the Lifeline.**

Judy can also give you information about adopting college students on our waiting list. ■



## From a Half-Shekel to Ethiopian Jews

**C**harlotte Jacobson lives in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. She is a 12-year-old with a heart as big as the state she lives in.

In her recent Bat Mitzvah speech, Charlotte referred to the Torah portion in which Moses was told to take a census and each person to be counted was required to give a half-shekel. It didn't matter how much a person had. Each one was equal.

She talked about how in the eyes of heaven, everyone is equal and how we need to be reminded of those who have less than we do.

This important lesson, plus hearing a talk about Operation Moses (the Ethiopian aliyah in 1984/85) at her school, inspired Charlotte to twin with Iris Adene of Rehovot, Israel

for her Bat Mitzvah, through NACOEJ.

Then Charlotte went a step further. She decided to raise money and collect school supplies for Iris' *Limudiah*. "Everyone is entitled to a good education," Charlotte said.

Charlotte's Bat Mitzvah invitation read in part: "As my mitzvah project I have decided to twin with an Ethiopian Jewish girl in Israel. Her name is Iris. I have been collecting school supplies to send to Iris' *Limudiah* After-School Education Project and I would also like to support her *Limudiah*. Please consider a donation in honor of my Bat Mitzvah to the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) in lieu of a Bat Mitzvah gift."

**What Charlotte achieved is remarkable.**

She raised more than \$6,500

to help support Iris' *Limudiah* program! And she collected a huge quantity of school supplies which she and other volunteers from her school packed into backpacks on a Mitzvah Day. The school supplies went to Jerusalem with a mission arranged by the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County, which heard about Charlotte's project and wanted to help.

In her Bat Mitzvah speech, Charlotte said that she hoped the school supplies would "help them [Ethiopian-Israeli children] to learn and study and get the best education possible."

We salute Charlotte and the wonderful example she has set for other youngsters. She is demonstrating an extraordinary commitment to bettering the world. Mazel Tov, Charlotte, and thank you.

***If you would like to arrange for a child dear to you to twin with an Ethiopian-Israeli youngster and have a powerful and moving experience, please contact Miriam Weissman at 212-233-5200, ext. 222 or email her at [mweissman@nacoelj.org](mailto:mweissman@nacoelj.org).***

***To find out more about Mitzvah Projects, go to the NACOEJ web site, [www.nacoelj.org](http://www.nacoelj.org), and click on the Mitzvah Project page, or call Judy Dick at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email her at [mitzvah@nacoelj.org](mailto:mitzvah@nacoelj.org)***

### Condolences To...

- **Lenore Richter**, long-time NACOEJ supporter and wife of NACOEJ Advisory Board member Glenn Richter, on the passing of Lenore's beloved mother, Mrs. Sara Thornton.

### A Mitzvah for the Future...

**W**e may hope to live to the proverbial 120 but, realistically, we need to plan for a future beyond our own years.

We want to thank you for all you do for the Ethiopian Jewish community, and to suggest that you might want to extend this deeply appreciated support into the future by including NACOEJ in your will.

**Your future help can enable Ethiopian Jews to have successful**

**and productive futures of their own.**

And, by leaving a legacy of caring, you can demonstrate to your children and grandchildren the commitment you have both to the Jewish present and to the future.

If you have any questions about leaving a gift to NACOEJ in your will, please contact your attorney, and then let us know as well. Thank you so much! ■

## Sponsor One of Our Newsletters in Honor of a Loved One!

We keep you informed about the challenges and successes of our programs through our three yearly *Lifeline* newsletters. Many NACOEJ supporters tell us *Lifeline* is their favorite NACOEJ communication. Would you like to sponsor an issue – or a year – of *Lifeline*?

In addition, we have three once-a-year, single-issue newsletters. They are *Limudiah: Antidote to Failure*; and *Degrees of Success: The NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student College Sponsorship Program*; and *Bridges: The NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program*. These newsletters keep sponsors and other specially interested donors updated about the progress of the amazing Ethiopian students in our educational programs in Israel.

You can help us spread the news by sponsoring one of these excellent publications in honor or memory of a family member or friend. We will feature your story in the newsletter and send you plenty of additional copies.

For more information on sponsoring *Lifeline* or the single-issue newsletters, or to get on the mailing list of one or more of the single-issue newsletters, please call Orlee Guttman at 212-233-5200, ext. 224 or e-mail her at [oguttman@nacoelj.org](mailto:oguttman@nacoelj.org). ■

## A Cost-Saving Idea...

If you are a NACOEJ donor whose gifts are usually less than \$100, you have received our thank-you postcards which don't print the amount of your donation (postcards aren't very private), but do express our very real gratitude.

Now, in our unrelenting search for ways to save money in hard times, we added up the cost of mailing the postcards, and found it comes to over \$5,000 a year.

That's close to the cost of four children a year in our Israel after-school classes, or 10,000 school lunches in Ethiopia.

We'd like to save all or some of that money, but we don't want anyone to feel that these very important gifts are going unreceived, unnoticed, or unappreciated.

So, here's our suggestion: from now on, look for a box on the reply card that you can check if you **do** want a postcard for your under-\$100 donation -- in which case, we'll be glad to send you one.

If you'd just as soon do without, **don't** check the box, and you won't get a card, though our gratitude will still be yours!

Thanks for your attention to this. When better times come, maybe we can change back!

P.S. As usual, donations of \$100 or more will continue to automatically get IRS-required thank-you letters. ■

### Congratulations To...

- NACOEJ Board member **Sanford Goldhaber** and wife Miriam on the birth of a granddaughter, Mira Yaffa Goldhaber, and to her parents, Michael and Shoshana.
- NACOEJ Board member, acclaimed author and journalist **Ruth Gruber**, on the opening of a new documentary film about her – "Life from Both Sides, Now" – at the 25<sup>th</sup> Haifa International Film Festival. Please consider contacting your local Jewish Community Center or Jewish federation, or check on line, to see if the film is scheduled in your community.
- British Friends of NACOEJ member **Rabbi Mark Daniels** and wife Sonia, on Mark's receiving rabbinic ordination from the Judith Lady Montefiore College at the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue in London.
- NACOEJ staffer **Lauren Yoked** and husband Tzach, on the birth of a daughter, Nina Ehden.
- Former NACOEJ staffer **Mazi Melesa** and husband Dr. Albert Pilip, and big brother Liad, on the birth of a son and brother, Liam.