

# OFFELINE

NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

FALL 2005

## NEW REPORTS FROM ETHIOPIA



## Not Home Yet

BARBARA RIBAKOVE GORDON

Once again, I am dismayed to tell you that the number of Jews leaving Ethiopia for Israel is, as I write this, still stuck at 300 per month – although it was supposed to double to 600 per month last June 1! At this point, we do not even have a new starting date for an increase.

Nor has the Jewish Agency been able to keep its promise to take charge of the programs that we alone have kept going for so many, many years – daily feeding programs for children and women, schools, religious facilities, employment, and empowerment. NACOEJ is still the only source of all those basic necessities. And as I write, we do not even have a starting date for the Agency's promised work in Ethiopia.

To say that we are terribly disappointed is putting it mildly. To say that we had trusted in the agreement we signed back in January, and now find ourselves financially strained by the necessity to keep the community in Ethiopia going for an indefinite period while maintaining our essential programs in Israel – is certainly true

But we know that our disappointment and our struggles are nothing compared with those of the Jews still in Ethiopia. It is this community of brave and isolated Jews that bears the heaviest weight of these disappointments. Our commitment is to see them through. With your help, we will do so.

The story and photos on pages 4 and 5 came to us from Jean Haskell, who spent part of the High Holy Days with the community in Gondar. Her assurance that they are not giving way to anger or bitterness inspires us to do the same, and to believe with all our hearts that you, our compassionate NACOEJ family, will make it possible for these Jews to survive until at last, they can go home.

Let me add a word of comfort.

In these troubled times, the Jews in Gondar managed to build a sukkah big enough to allow the thousands of women, men and children who walked into it, heads held high, to pause to say a blessing, eat a little food they brought with them, and then move on to make room for more. Hungry and weary though they were, thousands took part in what our prayer books call "our season of rejoicing". May they all rejoice next year, in the Promised Land for which they yearn. ■

SEE JEAN HASKELL'S REPORT ON PAGE 4

# The Wandering Challah Cover

BY DR. STAN GOODMAN

The fabric is a rectangular shape, about 16x14 inches. The design element is superb, the colors are vibrant, and the simple story calls out to us. A family is facing us, father and young son on the left, mother and young daughter on the right. Facial and torso details are few. They are black, they are handsome, and they are sweet! We see that the eyes of three are looking at the center area of a table in front of them — the table is between the family and us, the viewers. The mother has brought her hands up to cover her eyes. On the table are two lit candles, a cup, and a braided bread. This is Shabbat, the bread is a challah, the cup is a Kiddush cup, and the mother is whispering the blessing over the candles.

Middie and Richard Giesberg brought this

charming challah cover from Ethiopia to the Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles. They have been tireless ambassadors for the Jews of Ethiopia, helping them in material and spiritual ways. The story of the Ethiopian Jews is a work in progress. The Giesbergs' unwavering support is helping to make the "work in progress" a progressive success, advancing the status of a disadvantaged people.

A number of us at the Leo Baeck Temple took home the challah covers. I've loved the challah cover. For over a year I used this as a protective drape for my computer screen! I sensed a pleasant tension between the timelessness of a family ritual, and the contemporary exciting process of exchanging ideas and plans electronically, instantly, anywhere.

## "I chose NACOEJ for a few reasons..." or the Famous Challah Baking Story

Gary Metzger, NACOEJ's Director of Special Programs and Outreach, recently heard from Miriam Krule, a young woman who found a very rewarding and different way to support Ethiopian Jews.

She started baking and selling home-made challot — and raised over \$2,000 for NACOEJ in just three weeks!

Here is what she wrote:

Dear Gary,

*I had always wanted to learn how to make challot and finally had time at the end of senior year in high school to do so.*

*I started to make them every week and my family loved them. Company told me that they liked them too and some people suggested that I sell them.*

*I had no interest in making a profit off of the challot so I decided to raise money for tzedakah. I chose NACOEJ for a few reasons. When I was in elementary school I remember that we had learned about Ethiopian Jewry and had given our tzedakah to NACOEJ.*

*I hadn't heard about the organization [NACOEJ] again till last year when I was at the CAJE Conference and saw the NACOEJ booth.*

*I was inspired to sponsor a child. I was impressed at how efficient the organization was and how immedi-*

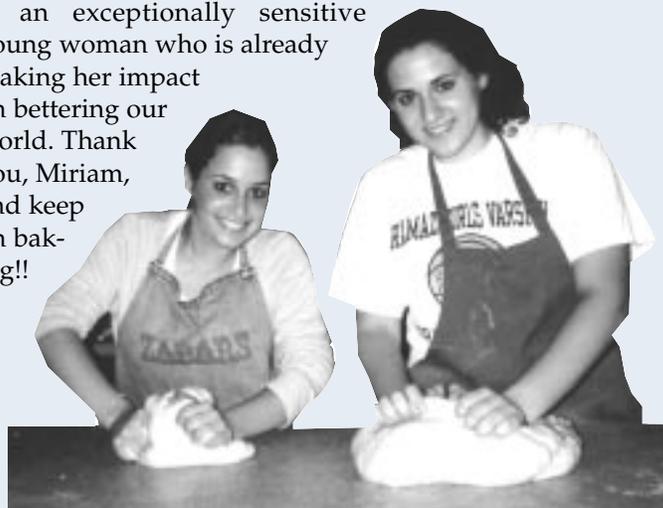
*ate the response was. For only \$72 I was able to sponsor lunch for an entire year for one girl. I even received a picture and a card from her.*

*I also found it fitting that I was baking challot to feed people and raising money to feed people.*

*That's it in a nutshell. I started baking and selling my challot and the enclosed check to NACOEJ represents the income from the sales.*

*Shabbat shalom, Miriam*

We want to tell Miriam, who is now studying in Israel, how deeply we appreciate her gift, especially because of the way she raised it. She is an exceptionally sensitive young woman who is already making her impact on bettering our world. Thank you, Miriam, and keep on baking!!



**Miriam (at right) baking challahs with her friend Laura.**



But the challah cover moved on. My 90-year-old mother-in-law lives in a small, supportive and loving assisted-living home. There are currently six clients there.

Bernice, who had **Shabbat Lights Embroidery** been one of the residents, moved to another location a few months ago. Bernice had been reciting a few Shabbat prayers, from memory, most Friday evenings. She whizzed through the Hebrew. Since her departure, the residents missed the simple ceremony.

So my wife and I made a plasticized "liturgy book," a single page of basic prayers in Hebrew, in transliteration, and translated.

On Friday nights we now read together, do candle lighting, say the HaMotzi, lift off the challah cover, and share the bread. There has been a simple beautification of the table. Dinah, my mother-in-law, is delighted to read the introductory prayer. Miriam, with impaired speech from a prior stroke, is often moved now to chant the prayers. Dorothy, quite hearing impaired and generally angry, positively glows. Hy sits next to her, amplifying the ambient *gemutlichkeit*. Sam, usually silent, tells a few jokes. Frank, not Jewish, an Asian-American, happily participates, sharing wine and bread with the group. And in the middle of the table the Ethiopian family is looking at Shabbat, theirs and ours. All over the world Jews pause to kindle warmth and love and community on Shabbat.

I'm happy for the challah cover — it belongs on a Shabbat table, generating and participating in the glow of a shared experience, of good memories, pushing away for a little while the harsher features of human-kind. The challah cover played for a while on my computer, but the light of the home-page does not make it a home, and the glow from the screen-saver can not match the glow of a smile.

Challah covers wander, as do our people! L'Chaim! ■

*Editor's note: to obtain your own "Shabbat Lights" challah cover, see the enclosed reply card. We are all out of challah covers with fringe in this pattern and cannot get any more at present. But, like Dr. Goodman, you can use the all-purpose pillow cover as a challah cover — many people do — and we have a supply of those.*

## Sonia Levitin's "The Return"

"The Return" is a charming, moving story about Desta, a young Ethiopian Jewish woman, who makes her way from

Ethiopia to Israel in the 1980's, with many trials along the way. Although written for young adults, the book is a wonderful read for any age and will leave you with a much better understanding of Ethiopian Jewish village life.



The book won the Association of Jewish Libraries' Sydney Taylor Award, the 1988 National Jewish Book Award in Children's Literature, the PEN Los Angeles Annual Award for Young

Adult Fiction, and, amazingly, the Austrian Book Award and the German Catholic Bishops Book Award!

We are very pleased to be able to offer you an autographed soft-cover copy of "The Return" with this issue of *Lifeline*. Please see the reply card for information.

## Today and Tomorrow...

Please consider a bequest to NACOEJ that will carry your love and concern for the Ethiopian Jewish community well beyond your lifetime (which should be until 120!). The wonderful support you have shown this unique family of Jews will, in the future, ensure that the children of the present aliyah will have the schooling and education they need to become successful members of Israeli society. Please discuss your thoughts with your lawyer, accountant or financial planner or call the NACOEJ office, 212-233-5200 and ask for Orlee. ■

## Tefillin Urgently Needed!

As more and more Ethiopian Jews begin to make their way to Israel, the community is in great need of tefillin. (In Ethiopia, many people would share one set.)

Please send any tefillin you may have that are not currently in use to the NACOEJ office. We will have them checked in Israel to be certain they are kosher and have repairs made if they are not. (If they are not repairable, we will see to it that they get properly buried.) They will then go to the waiting arms of Ethiopian Jews.

They thank you, and we thank you, for enabling them to perform this important and beautiful mitzvah. ■

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# My Visit to the Ethiopian Jews in Gondar

BY JEAN HASKELL



Hovels on this dirt road are considered good housing – the road is flat, not hilly, and the houses are near the compounds.



Classrooms in the compound and the children are sitting very close together in a nourishing lunch.

In October, 2005 I had the privilege of visiting the Jewish compound in Gondar, Ethiopia. Andy Goldman, of NACOEJ, had referred me to Getu Zemene, the elected leader of the Jews in Gondar.

Getu met me at my hotel. He is a strong-looking, handsome man who exudes a quiet confidence. ("But he does not look Jewish," I heard old voices in my head saying.) Together, with my guide and driver, we drove to the compound, which is actually two sites. First and largest is the synagogue and a feeding center for children under age six and for pregnant women and nursing mothers. Second is a series of buildings comprising the school.

The synagogue is a very large area, with metal dividing walls and a curtain. At the front is a platform that functions as a bimah, and a huge trunk full of talleisim. For seating there are many long benches, with separate sections for men and women. At the back of the synagogue a group of about ten youngsters were practicing gymnastics.

The feeding area for nursing mothers is fairly small compared to the large space for the children. Everyone has to show their ID to enter; when there are many of them they must stand in line in a very well organized "maze" to get in.

The school is in a fairly

large area and we saw several classrooms in which the children all sit very close to each other, crowded in on benches. They go to school in shifts and there are three shifts a day, so each child gets to go to school for about three hours a day. They learn English, Hebrew, and other academic subjects, depending on their age.

As is typical in Ethiopia, where 85% of the people live in poverty, the people in the Jewish community live in poverty. While the nursing mothers and pregnant women do get food, and there is food cooked for the school and pre-school children, most of the other people have very little resources for food other than the monthly distribution of grain or beans funded by NACOEJ.

They live in huts, about eight feet square. I went into one living space where a man was weaving at a loom on one side, and there was a double-size bed on the other side. "Five people sleep in that bed", I was told.

The vision that keeps Getu and his people going is the hope that they will someday be able to re-locate to Israel.

When I knew I would be back in Gondar on Yom Kippur evening, I called Getu and asked if it would be ok for me to attend services. I indicated that I would not want to come if my presence would be unsettling to the



This is a bed that holds five people. The rest of the family sleep on mats on the earthen floor.



the Gondar compound are walled and roofed with tin, and people sit on benches without desks. But they learn – and eat lunch.



Cooks and servers in the school lunch program and the feeding center for pre-schoolers and women wear aprons and hair coverings while they work, and their wages support their families.

congregation. (Having been the only white person in a small community for one week, I knew that my presence generates much attention.)

He assured me I would be welcome. I arrived at 5:30, the appointed time. We waited outside for 20 minutes or so, then went into the synagogue (which is entered through a narrow mud passage-way by stepping on rocks in the mud).

As I entered, I saw a sea of women huddled together on the benches, all wearing white shawls pulled tightly over their heads and bodies. Many had children with them. The men did not sit as closely together, all wore a tallis and kippah over the traditional white shawl and their clothing. All seemed somewhat dressed up for the holiday.

The service was conducted by a man who chanted very quickly in what sounded like it could have been Hebrew, but was Amharic; when he finished a section the congregation all said “Amen” and bowed forward. There were six or eight men up on the bimah who prayed with the congregation.

The chanting was followed by a talk by Getu, a Hebrew blessing by a man from Israel, and a talk by another man. Women did not go up onto the bimah, there were no books, there was no music. Getu told me that all programs would be closed on Yom Kippur and the congregation would be in the synagogue all day, fasting (though I imagine most of their days are fast days, not of their own choosing). And Getu told me he would be walking home because he did not ride on the holiday.

The people in the congregation paid very little attention to me, which pleased me. Some of them

smiled and nodded, particularly those sitting with me in the front row. One woman allowed her little son to sit with me.

“So you are an Orthodox community?” I asked Getu. “No”, he replied, “Orthodox is Christian, we are Jewish.” I explained to him that in the United States, we have three levels of Judaism, one of which is Orthodox. He found that very interesting.

The Ethiopian Jews in Gondar live in great poverty and have many needs. However, they do not appear to be angry or bitter. They hold high the hope that they will one day be able to go to Israel.

Growing up in a middle-class, white Jewish American family, I often heard family and friends describing another person, say , “He doesn’t look Jewish,” or “She doesn’t look Jewish”. And never was there a Jew with dark brown skin.

Thus, as I looked around at the Ethiopian Jews during the High Holiday service, I couldn’t help hearing those old voices telling me that these people do not look Jewish. It was a mind-expanding experience to absorb the fact that, yes, in spite of the voice, here was a large community of my people observing the same holidays, praying to the same G’d, and living their lives according to Jewish traditions and practices in much more stringent ways than do I. Do they look at me, I wondered, and think, “She doesn’t look Jewish”?

I’m much appreciative that Andy Goldman and NACOEJ enabled me to visit my people on the other side of the world. ■

Photos:  
Jean Haskell

# The Englishman was Worried

A few months ago I was in England to give talks about Ethiopian Jews. It was a very good trip – people were interested and moved, bought embroidery and tallitot, and took our brochures on funding kids' lunches in Ethiopia and sponsoring high school and college students in Israel. I also had the pleasure of spending time with dear friends who had arranged the meetings.

After my return, I got a phone call from a man who had heard me speak at a Jewish bookstore in London, and wanted to sponsor one or two Ethiopian college students in Israel.

But he had a complaint.

"Even though the Israeli government pays their tuition, the money you are asking is not enough! How can any college student live a whole year on only one thousand and eighty American dollars? It's impossible!"

## "This made me feel wonderful..."

Evelyn Deitchman, our volunteer New York administrator for the NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student Program in Israel, recently received a note from one of the sponsors that made her feel wonderful! We want to share her nachas with you.

*Dear Evelyn,*

*My son and my grandson were in Israel in December.*

*They met with my NACOEJ student.*

*She impressed them that someone who came to Israel at age 4 was now an attractive woman who is educated and entering into an acting career.*

*She told my son and grandson how thankful she was for my support to allow her to finish her education.*

*That gratitude makes me want to sponsor another student.*

*Check enclosed.*

Like this sponsor and our English friend in the accompanying story, you too can sponsor an Ethiopian college student in Israel. You can even form a group of friends to share the cost. The rewards – for you and your student – will be plentiful!! Call Evelyn at the NACOEJ office for more information, and to make her feel wonderful!

We don't get many complaints like that, so we settled in for a nice long talk. First of all, I told him, the American dollar is in better shape in Israel than it is (or was then) in England, where it was worth very little indeed.

Second, every penny of that one thousand and eighty dollars goes directly into the students' hands – nothing is taken out for administrative costs, thanks to the generosity of Vidal Sassoon, for whom the program is named.

Finally, I said, I have gone to college campuses with our Israeli administrator when she hands out the monthly checks to students – and the students in our program looked good. They were dressed simply, but much like the other students I saw; they were slender, but not skinny; they were well-groomed – and in short, they looked the way their letters tell us they feel: "so thankful not to have to worry about money any more."

Many of them club together, cook their own food together, often share books and other necessities to make ends meet.

We know the stipend isn't lavish, but we also know that our sponsored college students do not drop out of school because they have no food as too many other Ethiopian-Israeli students have done. They go on to get their degrees in science, law, medicine, the arts and more.

I'm glad my compassionate English friend is now a sponsor. I hope many of you reading this will decide to become sponsors too. At \$1080 a year, it's clearly a bargain to enable a bright young man or woman to get a college degree!

And we do have a long waiting list!

BRG

## Far-Away Places

We've received welcome donations from lots of far-away places: South America, England, Australia and Israel. We've received many gifts from closer-to-home Canada, and of course from all over the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii.

But a generous gift from Tokyo was a first for us!

We want to thank the donor (we would have included his name but could not get a phone number to call for his permission) in four languages – English, Hebrew, Amharic and Japanese.

Thank you...Todah Rabbah... Amsegnalehu... Arigato Gozaimas! ■

## Condolences to...

- The family, friends, colleagues and students of **Edna D. Gordon**, founder of TOVS (Teachers on Voluntary Service), a remarkable organization that recruited thousands of American teachers to spend months helping Israelis youngsters learn English (essential for college in Israel). Many Ethiopian Israelis benefited from this program, and Edna's work will be a far-reaching blessing, not only to them, but to the State of Israel.
- Canadian Minister of Justice, the Honorable **Irwin Cotler**, on the loss of his beloved mother. Internationally revered as a champion of human rights, Irwin has long been a strong supporter of NACOEJ and of the aliyah of the remaining Ethiopian Jews. Our deepest sympathy to him and his family.
- The family and friends of **Harry Riback**, a very special NACOEJ supporter, who created and carried out many projects (including a great sewing machine distribution) to aid Ethiopian Jews in their absorption in Israel. Our hearts go out to Harry's wife Sarah, and to their children and grandchildren. We all miss Harry.

## School Supplies in Need of Transport

**E**thiopian school children in Israel still need basic supplies that their schools don't offer and their parents can't afford. Pens, pencils, rulers and many more items that our American kids take for granted are unobtainable treasures for thousands of little Israelis from Ethiopia.

Thankfully, many people are sending wonderful contributions of school supplies for which we are so very grateful.

But now we need to get them to the children in Israel!

If you are going to Israel, alone or in a group, please consider taking duffel bags of school supplies along with you. We will send you already packed bags, ready to go. And our staff in Jerusalem will pick up the bags from you.

Please contact NACOEJ Staffer Gary Metzger or volunteer Morris Bakst in the New York office for further information. ■

## A Most Unusual Tallit

**T**his is one of those truly unusual stories. Middie and Dick Giesberg of Los Angeles are founders of NACOEJ. They always attend a local Reform Biennial, at which they run a NACOEJ booth. The booth gorgeously displays our embroideries and tallitot, thanks to Middie's talent for arranging and displaying them.

For a number of years a young rabbi, Rabbi Samuel Cohon of Tucson, would stop at the booth and talk about buying a "wrap-around tallit and covering it with pillow cover designs".

The Giesbergs have known the Cohon family for over 60 years. Rabbi Cohon's father, Rabbi Baruch Cohon was a friend, and Rabbi Cohon's uncle, Rabbi Beryl Cohon, married Dick and Middie 58 years ago.

Finally, after several years of this discussion, Middie decided to take matters into her own hands. At the next Biennial, when Rabbi Cohon walked over, a wistful look in his eyes, she said, "Let's do it!"

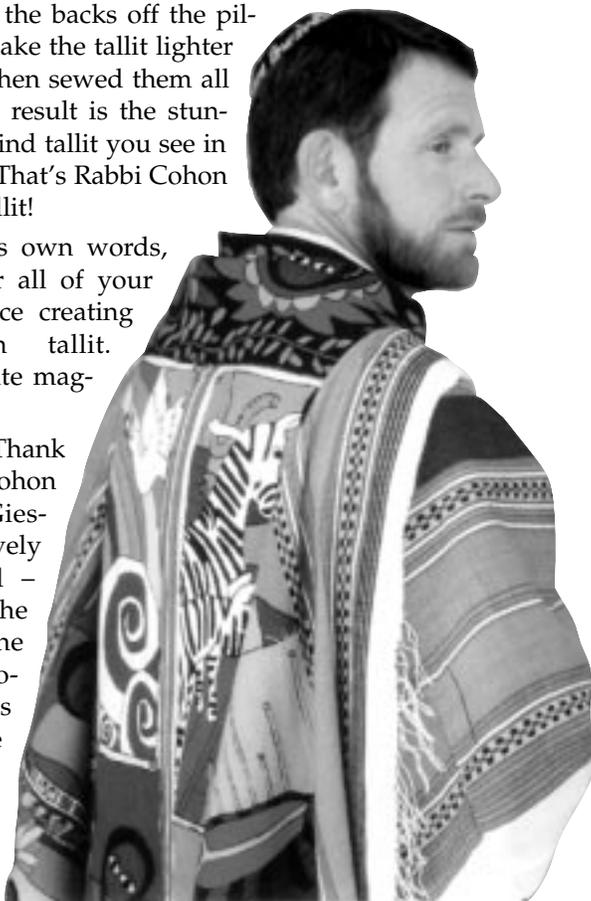
She immediately took out an extra-large tallit, spread it out, and they arranged pillow cover designs that the Rabbi chose. He decided to set them out in the order in which the Biblical events took place.

Middie persuaded her tailor to have his seamstress take the backs off the pillow covers to make the tallit lighter in weight. She then sewed them all on and the end result is the stunning, one-of-a-kind tallit you see in the photo here. That's Rabbi Cohon modeling the tallit!

In the Rabbi's own words, "Thank you for all of your patient assistance creating the Ethiopian tallit. Simply, it is quite magnificent!"

Indeed it is! Thank you to Rabbi Cohon and to the Giesbergs for this lovely – and unusual – story. With the closing of the embroidery program in Addis Abba, this unique tallit is truly a rare treasure. ■

Photo: Jon Wolf



# Fond Memories from the Limudiah!!

**W**hat is the Limudiah? It is the Hebrew name of NACOEJ's after-school program in Israel. One of our students, Rivka, wrote us a beautiful letter with her remembrances of being in this elementary school program that enables Ethiopian children to go on to good academic high schools and take the Bagrut, the Israeli exam needed to get into college. And from there, the sky is the limit.

In a high tech society like Israel, higher education is not a luxury, it is a necessity which makes NACOEJ's programs for the children critically important. Let's listen to Rivka:

*I started going to the Limudiah when I was in second grade. At first I did not know what it was, so some children explained to me that this program is run after our regular study hours — and that we receive lunch and prepare homework.*

*So, as a young child, I was happy to know that I was going to have activities for after regular school hours too.*

*With time I understood that the Limudiah is much beyond that and that the program has great meaning too. Every time I participated I acquired something new, and with time and years, it helped me a lot.*

*I found that there are wonderful people in the world that are prepared to give up their own time to help children with their difficult studies.*

*The teachers did and still perform beyond any expectation. They knew how to give attention to*

*kids when they most needed it, they knew how to listen to children, and surely they act always very patiently with the pupils.*

*Last year my friends and I were very sad because we could not continue to participate in the Limudiah\*, but we loved to help the teachers when they needed help.*

*I hope they will continue their work for years to come because what they do is for our best. On behalf of all the children in the Limudiah I thank everyone from the bottom of my heart.*

*Rivka, grade 7, Maimon School, Lod*

*P.S. Pupils who stayed on to help in the Limudiah also received lunch, which was very important for them.*

Thank you, Rivka, for expressing so beautifully what the NACOEJ after-school programs in Israel mean to our Ethiopian children. They are surely the first step on the road toward academic success, a step that means everything to the future of the Ethiopian-Israeli community.

If you would like to support this exceptional program, please see the appropriate check-off box on the enclosed reply card or call the NACOEJ office for more information. ■

*\* Unfortunately, NACOEJ funds aren't usually sufficient for Limudiah classes beyond fourth grade. But many of the children like Rivka volunteer to assist the Limudiah teachers with the younger pupils – and they are great!*

## IMPORTANT REMINDER!!!

To see all of the embroideries still available from NACOEJ, please visit our web site – [www.nacoej.org](http://www.nacoej.org). There are full-color photos so you can really see what they look like. You can order on-line or call our office.

Remember, now that the program in Ethiopia is closed, once we run out of our stock, there will be no more available. If you want to have a permanent, tangible and beautiful reminder of this unique period in Ethiopian Jewish history, make sure to place your order soon.

## Congratulations to...

- NACOEJ Board member **Deborah Goldstein** on joining the law firm of Winston and Strawn, LLP as a partner in the tax practice.
- NACOEJ staffer **Gary Metzger** on his marriage to Miriam Goldberg, and to the family and friends of both bride and groom.

### NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

132 NASSAU STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10038

**Rabbi Joel Soffin**  
President

**Eleanor Selling**  
Vice-President

**Barbara Ribakove Gordon**  
Founder and Director