A Crisis in Israel Defused!

NACOEJ, as you know from the many times we’ve asked you to make phone calls, or send letters or postcards to Israeli consulates and Jewish federations, has always been involved in advocacy for the Ethiopian aliyah. With great success.

We’ve also advocated with the Israeli government for changes in the way Ethiopian children are educated in Israel. We’ve successfully presented a model for doing it better.

But such efforts – often involving endless phone calls, meetings, position papers, sometimes demonstrations – can take up a huge amount of time and energy and, of course, have depended on your active and generous help.

Now we’re being urged by some of you in our NACOEJ family to expand into other issues of great concern, including saving the government mortgages that enable immigrant Ethiopian families to get their first homes (now threatened by budget cuts), problems in Ethiopian families struggling to adjust to their new lives, incidents of discrimination...

And most recently, the terrifying possibility that the government/Jewish Agency grants that cover tuition for Ethiopian (and other immigrant) college students would be cut in half.

“Terrifying” is not too strong a word. If full tuition grants disappear, so does higher education for almost all Ethiopian-Israeli students.

The NACOEJ Adopt-A-Student stipends that so many of you provide to our college students help them with food, rent, carfare, and other necessities, but do not cover tuition.

So, when the Jewish Agency announced that they would no longer contribute their 50% to the grant fund, and when the government issued a draft budget with no provision to cover that loss, we had to shift into high gear.

And we needed help to do it, because we could not take our small Israel staff away from working on new Limudiah classes and increasing the number of high school students we hope to assist.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3
After arrival at Ben-Gurion Airport, new Ethiopian immigrants are sent by bus to absorption centers all over Israel, where relatives wait eagerly to greet them. But some relatives wait in vain – the bus empties out, and their longed-for family members have not arrived.

**Thank You, President Peres**

At a recent memorial service for Ethiopian Jews who died on their journey to Israel, Israel's President, Shimon Peres, summed up how the aliyah of the Ethiopian Jews benefits Israel:

“The arrival of the Ethiopian community enriched the cultural and social fabric of Israeli society. On Independence Day, I saw this first hand. Amongst the 120 outstanding soldiers at the reception in the President's Residence there was a proportionately higher number of Ethiopians than in society as a whole.

There is nothing more heartwarming than the sight of a young person, a son or daughter of Ethiopian immigrants, excelling in their military service and proudly wearing officer ranks. Or to meet doctors from the Ethiopian community. Or to see outstanding Ethiopian artists on television, or to find them excelling in the technology sector: outstanding members of the Ethiopian-Jewish community and of Israeli society.”

Thank you, Mr. President. You spoke from your heart to ours.

**CRISIS | CONT. FROM PAGE 1**

As for our college students – if we didn’t move quickly, they wouldn’t be there to help!

So our NACOEJ president, Rabbi Jerry Epstein, found temporary emergency funds, and Avraham Negusie, who had worked closely with us on aliyah, came on board during the crisis.

Everyone worked on it behind the scenes. Avraham organized and galvanized a coalition of organizations representing not only Ethiopians, but other immigrant communities that would also be affected. Shoshana Ben-Dov, our Israel Director, contacted the two new Ethiopian Knesset members, Shimon Solomon (a NACOEJ AAS graduate) and Penina Temanu-Sheta. MK Solomon promptly formed a Knesset lobby on higher education and met with the Treasury Minister. Shoshana also worked closely with our friends at the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews. NACOEJ Board members alerted important contacts.

And together, we were successful!

A short time ago, Avraham called to say that the next version of the government budget would include full funding for student tuition grants and preserve the Student Authority that administered them. And when the latest budget appeared, the full funds were indeed included. As the Israeli Cabinet had voted unanimously to provide all the money, it looked safe. We could count on it continuing.

Quiet diplomacy, cooperation among many organizations, hard work, and some NACOEJ leadership did the job.

So now we have to ask ourselves – should we say “yes” to expanding into more advocacy, as long as it doesn’t interfere with our essential educational work? It will cost something. That’s always a problem. But when you come down to it, some of the areas we might tackle – housing in decent neighborhoods, family crises, discrimination in employment, for example – all directly affect the children, teens, and college students who are all at the heart of our educational work.

With the cooperation of the excellent Ethiopian-Israeli organizations (many led and/or staffed by NACOEJ program graduates) that would work with us, we could hope for more successes. That’s what we’re thinking about now.

We know that Vidal, of blessed memory, would be greatly pleased that his program and his students have been passed along into such good hands. Thank you, Rachel and Barney – together we may add more thousands of Ethiopian-Israeli college graduates to the State of Israel all of us love. ■

Rachel and Barney Gottstein make their home in Anchorage, Alaska, Barney’s home town. They met in Israel where Rachel, a child survivor of the Holocaust, grew up.

**New Leadership at AAS**

After the death of our beloved Vidal Sassoon, who had lovingly guided the NACOEJ Adopt-a-Student Program that bore his name through two decades, we needed another sponsor to lead our oldest educational program in Israel into the decades ahead.

The immediate choice in all our minds was not one but two sponsors: Barney and Rachel Gottstein, already the sponsors of more than 100 AAS students a year, the originators of Barney’s Books as part of the AAS program, the sponsors of the NACOEJ Limudiah Literacy Program – and two of the most caring and committed people we have ever known.

A personal answer by Rachel to every letter from a student – a phone call from Barney when a student’s world seems to be crashing – an ever-renewed supply of beautiful children’s books for students to take home to their own children or younger siblings – such things have endeared the Gottsteins to the students and to all of us at NACOEJ.

Our only question was, after all they had already done and were continuing to do, would these two gracious and loving people also agree to formal leadership of the entire AAS program now?

To our great happiness, they said yes! So it is with pride and pleasure that we announce that our AAS Program will now be known as the NACOEJ/Barney and Rachel Landau Gottstein Adopt-a-Student College Sponsorship Program.

Important Aliyah News

About 400 men, women, and children have been approved for aliyah and are still waiting in Gondar to leave for Israel. If things go smoothly, they should all be in Israel by the end of August. All praise to the staff of Gondar and to the community there to liaison with relatives left behind. The Israeli Embassy in Addis Ababa is over 300 mountainous miles away. And many families in Israel haven’t been told how or where to present a case for a relative left behind in Ethiopia. So a practical, clear appeals process is needed.

The Jewish Agency closes up the old NACOEJ Compounds and leaves Gondar, there will be nobody there to liaison with relatives left behind. The Israeli Embassy in Addis Ababa is over 300 mountainous miles away. And many families in Israel haven’t been told how or where to present a case for a relative left behind in Ethiopia. So a practical, clear appeals process is needed.

But the heartening endings came about almost by chance, because NACOEJ – or others – happened to learn about specific cases. That’s not good enough. As Meir Shamgar, the greatly respected former head of Israel’s Supreme Court, says, an appeals process is needed.

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The errors – in such a mammoth process known to the community about 400 men, women, and children have been approved for aliyah and are still waiting in Gondar to leave for Israel. If things go smoothly, they should all be in Israel by the end of August. All praise to the staff of Gondar and to the community there to liaison with relatives left behind. The Israeli Embassy in Addis Ababa is over 300 mountainous miles away. And many families in Israel haven’t been told how or where to present a case for a relative left behind in Ethiopia. So a practical, clear appeals process is needed.

And they were...
Two College Students Urgently Seeking Sponsors

Michael Elazar
Michael Elazar arrived in Israel as a child after an especially harrowing journey to Sudan — during which one of her brothers died — and then a difficult trek to the way back to Ethiopia because her father needed hospital care in Addis Ababa. In 1991, shortly before Operation Solomon, the whole family finally made it to Israel, where Michal’s father had life-saving emergency surgery.

Today, Michal is a nursing student, wanting “to give back” the gift of life her father received in Israel. One of nine siblings, Michal is truly a “NACOEJ student”. As a child, she was in our Limmudah in the Tachmoni elementary school in Rehovot. Later she had a NACOEJ sponsor to help her as her high school student.

After high school, Michal did national service at Hadassah Ein Kerem Hospital, assisting a dentist. She then studied dental hygiene at the ORT Sinklovski College. But after several years, she was ready to move on.

“I always wanted to pursue higher education,” she says, “I just wanted to be sure of my decision. As a dental assistant, I was exposed to health professionals, and I found that nursing appealed to me most…”

When she goes into the Israeli army, Amihai wants to work in high tech and intelligence. He has a great future, but today he needs a caring AAS sponsor to help him buy food, pay rent, and complete his studies.

From Mazal Avig to her sponsor: “I want to thank you for your sponsorship. It helped me continue without worrying about money. I think anyone who helps another is a kind person. When my mom found out that I was being sponsored [in high school], she was really appreciative and came to thank the principal and other staff.”

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Generations without a Gap

Tsega Melaku was sponsored as an undergraduate college student by Devorah and Bob Brooks in the NACOEJ AAS Program. Tsega went on to get her master’s degree, and is planning on a doctorate as well. In the meantime, she heads a TV channel and hosts a call-in radio show in Amhara.

Equally important, Tsega is the single (divorced) mother of two brilliant sons, Immanuel and Yonatan, who have both had NACOEJ sponsors – Immanuel in both high school and college, and Yonatan now in high school. No generation gaps here as this family progresses!

The photo below was taken when Tsega was in the U.S. recently, as part of an Israeli women’s leadership delegation. When the diverse Israeli women, with Tsega representing the Ethiopian community, reached Baltimore during their travels, Tsega met with the Brooks family. And in New York, she had Shabbat dinner with Barbara Ribakove Gordon.

Tsega is as concerned about women’s positions in Israel as she is about the Ethiopian community there. “When people look at me now, they see an Ethiopian,” she says. “I want them to see a woman first.”

A Huge Surprise!

When we opened a batch of mail a short time ago, we were astonished to learn that the will of a late donor, Dorothy Isaacsohn, made NACOEJ the beneficiary of a large IRA. This modest lady had made small gifts to NACOEJ over the years. Now she was helping to secure the future for many Israeli-Ethiopian through her caring and generosity.

Securing ongoing education as long as necessary for this special community of Jews, some of whom are still arriving in Israel, is vital to their future. As you continue your very important ongoing support, please also consider a bequest to NACOEJ in your will. It will carry your dedication and concern past your lifetime and help ensure that the educational programs you support today will be there for tomorrow’s immigrant Ethiopian-Israeli children.

If you have questions, or special arrangements you wish to make, please contact your lawyer, accountant or financial advisor. For questions about NACOEJ programs, please contact Danielle Ben-Jehuda at Donors@nacoej.org or phone 212-233-5200, ext. 227.

Update on Tigist

We want to thank our compassionate NACOEJ family for your support of Tigist Bitau, our young Israeli running star, whose leg was so badly injured when a man drove into her.

Special thanks to Paul Grayson of Maryland and Rochelle Henner of New Jersey for their especially generous gifts toward professional tutors in math and English to help Tigist make up the many months she missed in high school. The tutors have already started working with Tigist in her home in Nes Ziona.

Tigist is also continuing her arduous schedule of physical therapy, four sessions a week, all out of town, necessitating costly transportation which her struggling family can’t afford. Thanks to all of you, so far we’ve been able to help with that, too. If we at NACOEJ can keep helping and hoping, Tigist’s dream of running for Israel in the Olympics may yet come true.

BREAKING NEWS: What’s Happened to the Little Kids Who Got Bussed?

We’ve been following the progress of Ethiopian-Israeli kids who were bussed from the recently closed, “too Ethiopian” Rashbi elementary school in Be’er Ya’akov, to the better-integrated, better-achieving, better-supplied Yeshurun School in Rishon LeZion. Yeshurun has a NACOEJ Limudiah, but we still worried about how the new kids would integrate with kids in their classes who had much better skills.

There’s good news. After a school year with a warm welcome from the school, good teachers in homerooms, and Limudiah afterschool classes to help them catch up, here are two end-of-school comments from the children:

Fifth-grader Tigist Fanta: “At the beginning of the year I wasn’t good at all in what the teacher taught. The teacher helped and supported me the whole way and invested in me. Then I improved my grades. I was really happy and my parents were proud of me. I got a Certificate of Excellence!”

Sixth-grader Yaffa Ashbir, writing in the form of a poem: “It was sad to leave Rashbi School. But when I got here I knew it was the school for me. With friends and teachers who like me And a principal who appreciates and values me the whole way and invested in me. The teacher helped and supported me, and if they don’t get help, then humiliation, failure and disaster may lie ahead.

So we certainly want to start a special program in seventh grade for them – the first we’ve ever done at a middle school – to help them catch up. Editor’s note: As we went to press, Manion Seidemann, one of our wonderful volunteers, told us that her husband, Hans, had come into some extra money, and wanted to give it to us for our most urgent need. ‘What is it?’ she asked.

“If I were to name it at all, it would be ‘saving the seventh-graders,’” we said – and just like that, we had our first funds for our first-ever NACOEJ seventh-grade program. The grant will cover several months. But funding the program for the whole school year will require more help. We hope you will tell us that we can go ahead.”

Update on Tigist

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"Cry of the Giraffe": A Riveting Tale

With your donation to this Lifeline, we can send you not only a choice of great embroideries, but a most remarkable book.

"Cry of the Giraffe" starts with a child, but it is not a children’s book. It is a beautifully written tale, closely based on the true story of a girl growing up in a vividly depicted Jewish village in Ethiopia, separated from her family on the dangerous trek to Sudan, and then cruelly enslaved for years in Ethiopia – until she was rescued by a non-Ethiopian Israeli. She is now in Israel, where she gave the author, her rescuer, permission to tell her story.

We can send you this unforgettable paperback book alone or with an embroidery. Please see the enclosed reply card for details.

A Special Email Opportunity

Do you enjoy our Lifeline newsletters but wish you could also get more news, more often? If you’d like more frequent news and updates, with vividly colored photographs, please check the box on the enclosed reply card and provide your Email address.

You’ll still receive your print version, of course.

Congratulations to...

- **Dr. Steve Kutner** on his return to the NACOEJ Board. An early mission to Ethiopia and Israel with NACOEJ changed Steve’s life, and he eventually gave up his practice as an ophthalmologist in Atlanta, and his place on the NACOEJ Board, to found and direct Project Vision (eye care for Ethiopians and others in Israel) and Jewish Health Care International (medical care all over the world). Now Steve has rejoined NACOEJ and is exploring the possibility of screening Limudiah children for eye and ear problems that affect their education.

- **NACOEJ volunteer Marion Seidemann** and husband Hans on the highly competitive scholarship awarded to grandson Matthew Hochberg by the Hearing Loss Association of America. Born with profound bilateral hearing loss, Matthew is an outstanding student at NYC’s high-level Stuyvesant High School, where he wrote his winning essay on meeting the challenges of hearing loss. He will attend college at the University of Rochester.

- **Eric Garcetti**, on his election as Mayor of Los Angeles. As a teenager, Eric went on a NACOEJ mission to Ethiopia and was memorable for his sensitivity and effectiveness. We wish him equal success as Mayor of one of America’s most important cities.

- **The Reut Elementary School in Nes Ziona**, a small Israeli town, on winning the Ministry of Education’s prestigious Regional Prize for Excellence. Principal Yehudit Dell attributes a good part of the school’s success to the NACOEJ Limudiah after-school classes that help the Ethiopian pupils from immigrant homes catch up to – and often surpass – their sabra classmates. We’re delighted to help.

Condolences to...

- **NACOEJ past president Dr. Judy Wolf** on the loss of her beloved husband, Bob. Our deepest apologies for the belated announcement of this sad passing, mourned by all of us at NACOEJ. Our thoughts are with Judy and her family and we pray that they are comforted by the wonderful memories they have of Bob.

- **NACOEJ Board member Barbara Gaffin** on the passing of her beloved father, Stan "Mickey" Gaffin, an outstanding member and volunteer in the Boston Jewish community. Our hearts go out to Barbara and the family, as well as to the many young people "Mickey" mentored as part of the Big Brother/Big Sister Association for a record 37 years.

- **NACOEJ Advisory Board member Rabbi Alan Schwartz** on the passing of his beloved mother, Rose Schwartz. Our thoughts are with Rabbi Schwartz, his wife Miriam, their children, grandchildren and the entire family. May they be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

- **NACOEJ Advisory Board member Beth Wohlgelernter** on the passing of her beloved father, Rabbi Maurice Wohlgelernter ("The Reb"). Our hearts go out to Beth, one of the earliest members of the NACOEJ Board, her mother Esther, and their family and friends.