



NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY (NACOEJ)

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My Dear NACOEJ Friends,

Every weekday morning Jewish men in Gondar, Ethiopia leave their hovels as soon as it is light enough to see the dirt road in front of their feet.

As they walk, some of them may catch the sound of morning prayers coming from the synagogue in the Beta Israel compound. They may pause for a moment to listen, longingly. But they can't stop.

They are on their way to a place where out-of-work men gather in hope of being chosen for ten hours or so of back-breaking labor. In Ethiopia right now that means digging ditches or working on construction sites.

If they are chosen, they will bring home a small amount of money to their waiting, hungry families, enough to buy a little food, a little water, maybe even a few of the coffee beans without which life is unthinkable for Ethiopians.

Unless of course, the rent for their floorless, tin-walled shack is so overdue that the landlord is threatening eviction.

In that case, most of the money goes toward rent.

But wherever the money goes, these men are the lucky ones. They found work. They have a little money and they have the pride of earning it.

I have lately been asking Ethiopian friends what makes one man, among the many desperately seeking work, most likely to get it?

It seems that the crucial thing is to be at the gathering place early – with your own tools in your hands.

Your own tools!

The job will go to the man who has the tools of his trade – the man whom the employer does not have to equip.

But when I asked, I learned that not all the Jewish men have tools of their own. In fact, hundreds do not!

And suddenly, I could see a way in which NACOEJ -- even in a time of such financial difficulty -- can help a lot of Beta Israel families by improving their chances of getting work.

We'll get them tools!

Please turn over...

In no time Getu Zemene, our indispensable community manager in Gondar, Ethiopia, was sending answers to the additional questions I poured out.

Question: How many Jewish men who could do this kind of work don't get jobs because they don't have tools?

Answer: Many hundreds. The poorest. The ones who need them most.

Question: What tools do they need?

Answer: To begin, a pick and a shovel. These are the most important tools for a daily laborer for construction. Then some other things for skills.

In the NACOEJ office, we immediately started adding up costs.

- The basic tools.
- The hire of a truck and workers (from the community, of course) to go to the market to buy decent quality tools and bring heavy loads to the compound.
- Additional tools if we have more skilled workers.
- Inflation: A chronic serious problem that must be factored in.

In the end, we figured an average of only \$28 to enable a man to get work – to feed his family – to make a living.

Not a good living, not enough food – but vastly better than nothing at all.

And if a man's children have had to drop out of our school to shine shoes or scrub floors to keep their family from starving – then maybe those little children can come back to school again, to learn again, and to eat the nourishing school lunches they are entitled to, every school day – because now their father can work!

Think of it!

\$28.00.

And think of this, too...

Ethiopian Jews hate being on the dole. It hurts their pride. They've always hated it, even when it was absolutely necessary. They were grateful – but they wished they had work instead.

That's why, years ago in Addis Ababa, we made it possible for needleworkers – both men and women – to form a co-op and sell their beautiful embroideries to us.

Next page please...

We had almost 1000 families a year sustained by fathers' and mothers' work.

We are still sharing our remaining inventory of their exquisite embroideries with you, even though the program is long closed and the aliyah from Addis Ababa has ended.

We can't put together a needlework project for the Jews in Gondar because it is hundreds of mountainous miles away from the source of supplies and from the export route to America for the finished goods.

And we can't reopen the Feeding Center, or give out food distributions to everyone as we used to, because the money just isn't available any more.

But we can help some of the poorest Jewish families in Gondar have a much better shot at getting work locally.

We can have a shot at getting our sad little school dropouts back into the classroom, and into the lunch program.

And all of us together can fulfill the teaching of the great Jewish sage, Maimonides, who told us that the highest form of charity is to enable the recipient to become self-sufficient.

Maimonides wrote that hundreds of years ago in the Middle East.

Today in America we quote the Chinese proverb that says, "*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.*"

We hope that the Jewish families will not be in Gondar for a lifetime.

A new government has formed in Israel, and perhaps – just perhaps – there will be a decision to bring these Jews home to the Promised Land.

We are working on it.

But until – and unless – that happens, these Jews must survive where they are.

We cannot provide the "fish" (actually grain and beans) that the Jews in Ethiopia need right now.

But for a lot less money – and with more promise of self-respect – we think we can help more of them get jobs.

I believe we can help hundreds of the poorest.

And that should mean that we can help more children from these families get an education, and the decent school lunches that go with it.

Please turn over...

4.

As with absolutely everything we have ever done for this ancient and beleaguered community of Jews, it is our NACOEJ family – you -- that makes it possible.

That's why I have the courage to turn to you today, even with our difficult economy, even with all the heartache in our present world.

Because I know that cherished friends like you understand how vital it is for us to sustain these fellow Jews until they reach Israel.

Please help us enable these Jews to help themselves while they wait.

Please help us enable them to retain their dignity and feed their families.

Please make the largest special gift you can to NACOEJ at this time so we can enable them to find the work they seek so desperately.

And let me thank you especially now, because knowing that even in bad times we can do something good, gives me so much hope. Thank you, thank you...

With love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'B'.

Barbara

P.S. The most touching letters keep coming in to us at the NACOEJ office, telling us that no matter how hard times are for our wonderful supporters, *"We will never abandon the Ethiopian Jews. Here is a check. We wish it could be more."*

We treasure these letters, and I try to answer them all.

No one ever had such good friends, such incredible loyalty, such unselfish generosity, as the Ethiopian Jews have in our great, great NACOEJ family. Thank you, over and over again.