A Few Days Ago
I Sent an E-mail to Getu...

A few days ago, I sent an e-mail to Getu Zemene, the wonderful Beta Israel man who manages our programs in Ethiopia. (I say I sent it, which really means I wrote it and someone else e-mailed it for me. I still use a typewriter because I’m very inarticulate on a computer.)

What I asked Getu was to send me an e-mail (he does e-mail very well!) about the general conditions in the community of 8700 Jews Israel has still not checked for eligibility for aliyah.

I asked a bunch of questions that were worrying me most. Getu, as usual, replied immediately. But there was something unusual about the reply.

Getu’s responses to questions are always factual. His English isn’t perfect, but way better than my Amharic, which is non-existent. The tone in which he writes is sometimes very proud (when he has good news to report), sometimes anxious (when trouble is looming or upon us) – but this was different.

This time what came across was despair.

Getu is – with no exaggeration – the bravest man I know. He has faced physical, social, and legal attacks because of his work for the Beta Israel. He has been arrested (always released because the charges were never true), he has had a gun put to his head. His home has been assaulted, his reputation attacked, his life threatened more times than I can count.

And Getu has always courageously faced down these threats. But this is the first time I have heard him sound desperate.

Not for himself. Not even for his family. But for the community he serves.

Here is what Getu Replied:

To Barbara at NACOEJ:
In answer – The BIGGEST PROBLEM in the community is HUNGER right now!!!! There are many health problems if someone doesn’t get food. We can see big difference between kids getting our school lunches and those not getting. Kids getting look healthier. There are 920 in the school but not all can come all the time. There are some children kept out of school to shine shoes and to work as a daily laborer. There are some girls working as maids in peoples’ homes in Gondar City.

About malaria: 500 families got the mosquito nets. We have given the nets for those who have got many kids. (Note from Barbara: two very special Bar Mitzvah boys donated and raised money for mosquito nets for Gondar.) Some people still get malaria but not so exaggerated. Thank you.

Some people who have got close relatives in Israel gets money from them. Most men and women who can find any jobs are working in the construction field as being daily laborer.

CONDITIONS ARE VERY BAD. PLEASE COME HERE AND BE SEEN FOR THE PEOPLE AND TALK TO THEM IN SUCH BAD CONDITIONS.

With great respecting,
Getu

From Barbara:
I have never known Getu to use exclamation marks, or to demand so strongly that we come to Ethiopia and see for ourselves. I think we must go. We must bring hope and whatever help we can, in person.

We will schedule a mission to Gondar and Israel in May. We have enclosed information. The community needs us. Please help. Please come with us.

“Let all who are hungry, come and eat!”

Enclosed with this newsletter is a wonderful description of last year’s matzah-making in Gondar. This year, will we have enough funds for grain to carry the community through Passover and the weeks that follow? In a year when the community’s most desperate problem is hunger, will the Jewish families of Gondar be able to exclaim, with a shout of joy, the great Passover invitation: “Let all who are hungry, come and eat!” It’s up to us.
Yes, Now We Have Some Bananas…

Thanks to you wonderful, wonderful, incredible people, we now have enough money to give to the children in the NACOEJ Beta Israel Community elementary school banana campus again – at least once a week.

We’re starting out slow, keeping a wary eye on inflation, which has affected everything on the school lunch menu so dreadfully for the last year. I recently saw a report on Ethiopia that said a good crop was now coming in. Could it possibly, eventually, bring food prices down? That would be a blessing indeed.

Meanwhile, how can I express how moved all of us at NACOEJ are when we open envelopes and take out checks that come with a note saying, “My wife and I have both lost our jobs, but the Ethiopian Jews are much worse off…” – “or I have had to give up other charities, but I will continue to support NACOEJ as long as I can.”

My heart breaks for all the worthy causes that are suffering this year. I too am making hard choices, and trying to base my decisions on whether some excellent charities have a broader base of support than others.

In the case of NACOEJ, you, our NACOEJ family, are our base, and have been ever since we opened our doors (actually my living room door) back in 1982.

Thank heavens, our NACOEJ family still does include some federations, some foundations, some individuals, some granting agencies, and we are always tremendously grateful, but without the loyalty of individuals, families, synagogues and schools, we could never have started, and certainly could not continue, to help the most ancient, least known, and usually most vulnerable Jews in the world.

I have no way to say thank you except to say it. Thank you with all my heart. Come to Ethiopia with us in May, and hear it from a thousand Jewish individuals, families, synagogues and schools, we will be tremendously grateful, but without the loyalty of our NACOEJ family.

Daily lessons were being sent over the internet to school children in Gederah, but very few of the Ethiopian children had access to the internet. They were falling further and further behind every day.

So we decided that if the children couldn’t come to Limudiah, we would find a way to make the Limudiah come to them. Our small Jerusalem staff worked it all out. In a few days, Limudiah teachers began arriving at buildings where Ethiopian families were willing to let their small apartments serve as classrooms. For security reasons, the municipality allowed only five children and a teacher to come together at a time of danger, but we always have small classes in Limudiah.

A Twelve-Year-Old Champion Needs a Pair of Shoes

You won’t believe this little girl. Her name is Tigist Bitau, and she’s in fifth grade in Niss Zion. She’s also in the NACOEJ Limudiah school education program there, where we knew her as a very nice child, polite, friendly, a bit shy, an average student who likes to exercise by running.

Running pretty fast, it turns out.

Tigist recently entered a 2500 meter race. Somebody goofed, and put her into the 16-year-old contest. Tigist is 12. She was too shy to complain, so she just ran, and came in first. The story made headlines in the local papers. Suddenly Tigist was a star. Her grades went up, and her social life blossomed. She thinks it’s because winning makes her feel “stronger and more confident”, and getting famous makes “everybody want to be my friend”.

Tigist is on a regular training schedule now, and she’s very happy with it, but she’s got a problem. Her feet hurt. She’s outgrown her shoes, and her family can’t afford to buy her a new pair of proper running shoes.

Would someone like to make a special gift so we can buy Tigist new running shoes?
**L’Dor V’Dor – From Generation to Generation**

The Hebrew phrase – l’der v’der – means from generation to generation, but it’s often used to mean “forever”. At NACOEJ, we are now seeing second generations in our own programs – with education, good jobs, self-sufficiency, made possible in our programs, being passed along from parents to children. We expect this legacy of success to go on “forever”.

We see even more rapid transfers of high expectations when older students in our programs are mindful of their younger siblings.

Here are two terrific examples:

In the photo below, NACOEJ Israel Director Shoshana Ben-Dor is delightfully bending over first-grader Lidor Getahun (at right), in our Limudiah class in the Horov School in Ramla. Lidor’s mother, Esther, and some of her siblings were in our Limudiah in the same school, in the 1990’s.

As you can guess from looking at Lidor, nicely dressed, glowing with health, the family is thriving. Esther not only holds a job at the city social service department, but is continuing her education in night school. Her husband is also gainfully employed and the family has its own home and car. L’Dor V’Dor...

We have literally hundreds of other terrific young students – in high school and college – on our waiting lists for the help that will enable them to break the cycle of poverty affecting the Ethiopian-Israeli immigrant community, and pass along to the next generation a legacy of pride, success and self-sufficiency.

**Here are two students who urgently need sponsors:**

**COLLEGE: Darbabawu Gete**

**LAW, UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA**

I was born in a village called Ambober in the province of Gondar, Ethiopia. I first came to Israel together with my parents and my seven siblings in 1991.

When we first arrived here we were given a place to stay in a Jewish Agency absorption center in Mevaseret Zion, near Jerusalem.

Getting used to life in Israel was relatively easy for me, since I was only five years old when we came. I remember being very excited with all the new things I saw here that I had never seen before.

My parents had a much harder time learning a new language and assimilating the modern Israeli culture. Indeed things here are very different from what my parents knew in Ethiopia and because my father is 82 years old and my mother 72, they never really learnt the language properly and have always had an easier time speaking Amharic.

After completing my high school studies with good grades, I joined the military where I served in armaments for three years.

This year I have begun my first year of academic studies at the University of Haifa. This year is most difficult and intensive academically and my schedule is very busy.

I hope that you will be able to assist me so I can focus all my efforts on my studies instead of worrying about financial difficulties.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

**Editor’s Note: Once the chief Jewish village in Gondar Province, Ambober has always produced leaders, both in Ethiopia and in Israel. Darbabawu wants to be a lawyer – a profession in which young Ethiopians-Israelis can make a real difference, ably representing their community in the courts and in dealing with authorities. Will someone give Darbabawu from Ambober a chance to help his people?**

**HIGH SCHOOL: Avraham Rada**

**11TH GRADE, BEN-GURION HIGH SCHOOL, NESS ZIONA**

Shalom! My name is Avraham, and I have lived most of my life in Ness Ziona with my loving family. I want to devote myself to my studies and to graduate with honors, so that I can help my parents and my family that love me so much and sacrificed themselves so that I could have a better education and a better life.

We are seven in our family (including me) – my father is unemployed, my mother works as a cleaner in a company that organizes conferences, my siblings all work – Xenon in a fruit factory, Simcha in the “Hot” TV Cable Company, Mengistu in a kiosk, and I don’t remember what Moshe does.

My family came to Israel in 1992. They used to live in Ethiopia with all their uncles and cousins around them. They all decided to leave Ethiopia and to come to Jerusalem, which was their dream.

This was very hard – because so many families wanted to come to Jerusalem, there was not enough room in the airplane, and when there was finally room, they had to walk 12 days in difficult conditions: heat, lack of food, mountain climbing, having to care of many children, and the fact that I was born on the way!

My hobbies are playing soccer with my friends and watching television. My favorite school subjects are – Bible, language, physics and mathematics.

When I grow up I wish to be an important and respected person. I hope to be able to give my parents and my family the best that I can, so that they will have a better life. To achieve these goals I have to work hard in school.

**Editor’s Note: Wow! Would someone like to write to this great kid and help him become the “important and respected person” he wants to become?**

For more information on adopting a high school or college student, please contact Judy Dick at 212-233-5220, ext. 230 or at college@nacoej.org.

**Thanks for the Tefillin**

Many NACOEJ supporters have responded to our recent plea for used tefillin to be made kosher again in Israel and passed along to Ethiopian Jews there and in Gondar.

Some people have collected numerous pairs from synagogues and neighbors. Others have sent a family heirloom, with touching notes about the father or grandfather who once treasured this important religious article.

Please keep the tefillin coming. It is a great mitzvah to enable those who cannot afford to buy tefillin to receive a pair they can use, and treasure in their turn.

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**Condonences to…**

- British Friends of NACOEJ founder and trustee Myer Daniels on the loss of his beloved mother, Rebecca Daniels of Dublin. Our deepest sympathies also go to Myer’s wife Mavis, and sons, Mark and Michael, and daughters-in-law, Sonia and Tamar.
- NACOEJ Treasurer Tzvi Bar-Shai on the loss of his beloved mother, Henia Schieber. Our deepest sympathies also go to Tzvi’s wife, Ely, and to their children, daughter Inbal and sons Assaf and Elad.
Alemenew’s Engagement Party

BY NACOJ BOARD MEMBER AND PAST PRESIDENT KEN KAISERMAN

Thanks to NACOJ and the NACOJ Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student (AAS) Program, I’ve been able to sponsor and nurture a connection with Alemenew Tesema, an Ethiopian-Israeli.

Alemenew is an extraordinary young man who has seized the opportunities that Israel has to offer and made the most of them. As a computer science student at Bar-Ilan University, as an officer in an elite IDF division, as a warm and caring individual, he always excels.

Last year when I visited Israel, he called me to take me out to dinner. Naturally I wanted to treat, but he wouldn’t hear of it. He wanted me to meet his girlfriend. And so he took me to an Ethiopian restaurant near my hotel in Tel Aviv, where I made the acquaintance of Bosse, a charming young woman who is a law student, also at Bar-Ilan University.

So in 2008 it came as no surprise to receive an invitation to Bosse and Alemenew’s wedding. There was just one problem for me. The wedding was to take place on Sigd, the special Ethiopian Jewish holiday, and by chance then Sigd fell on Thanksgiving.

Since I couldn’t desert my own family for Alemenew’s, I appealed to the NACOJ office for help. I asked them to aid me in assembling an engagement party in Netivot, Alemenew’s home town, during the week I was in Israel. Yehudit Abramson, who is the Israel administrator of the AAS program, eagerly sprang into action, putting together a delightful catered dinner party complete with a disc jockey.

With Alemenew’s parents and twelve siblings, and Bosse’s parents and nine siblings, plus a few friends, their Rabbi, and a couple of Kesotch (traditional Ethiopian Jewish religious leaders), we soon numbered 45 guests, which made for a very jolly gathering. In addition to a delicious mix of Israeli and Ethiopian fare, there were dancing and speeches. With a Rabbi and two Kesotch, how could you not have speeches? But of course the most impressive speeches came from the family. Although I had previously met Alemenew’s father and his eldest sister, this was my first opportunity to meet the rest of his family.

On my ride back to Tel Aviv, I had the opportunity to share a taxi with Gadi Yavarkang, Alemenew’s best man. Gadi, also an Ethiopian, besides being a law student, is also a published poet, is a candidate for the Knesset. (By the time you read this, we will know if he was elected.) In every way, the evening proved to be a most exciting and moving experience that I will long remember.

One amusing side note: Chas, who is exceptionally tall, had to get down on her knees to be on level with the kids in the third grade so photos could be taken. She was most gracious about it and everyone got a good chuckle watching the photo session.

A Very Special Visitor from Minnesota

Shoshana Ben-Dor, NACOJ Director in Israel, took Chas Anderson, Deputy Commissioner of Education of the State of Minnesota, to visit some of our NACOJ Limudiah after-school programs of intensive education. Chas had come to Israel accompanying the governor of Minnesota.

Thanks to NACOJ Board member Harlan Jacobs of Minneapolis, who made the arrangements, Shoshana was able to take Chas to see the Limudiah in the Ben Zvi School in Rehovot, where NACOJ works with students in grades 1-6.

Chas’ main interest is preventing children from dropping out of school. As Shoshana explained to Chas, the Limudiah program provides very successful early prevention, enabling Ethiopian-Israeli students to do well in school from the beginning.

The children are able to compete as equals with their peers, and learn both the study skills and self-confidence needed to move on to good academic high schools and higher education. Although the Ethiopian drop-out rate is twice the national average in Israel, very few of our Limudiah students drop out.

In the sixth-grade group that Shoshana and Chas visited, most of the boys said they want to be professional soccer players when they grow up, but all of them also want to go to university.

The visit was stimulating, educational and beneficial for both Shoshana and Chas, who shared educational theories and experiences and inspired each other.

One amusing side note: Chas, who is exceptionally tall, had to get down on her knees to be on level with the kids in the third grade so photos could be taken. She was most gracious about it and everyone got a good chuckle watching the photo session.
Did you ever hear of synagogues that hold daily services except on Monday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings – the days when the Torah is traditionally read?

Well, that is the schedule for many Ethiopian synagogues in Israel. Whenever the Torah is read, the congregants must go to another synagogue because their own doesn’t have Torah scrolls. They also have little hope of acquiring them anytime soon because the $10,000 cost of even second-hand Torahs is beyond their means.

When Barbara Ribakove Gordon, NACOEJ’s Executive Director, told me about this situation, I saw the possibility of my own synagogue in Brooklyn, New York donating a Torah. However, I could not in good conscience propose this until I was sure that we would be giving our Torah to people who would value it as much as we did.

Seven years ago, when I participated in a NACOEJ mission to Ethiopia, I saw a community in Gondar that diligently observed a Torah-based Judaism, but in the 2,000 years during which Ethiopian Jews were cut off from the rest of the Jewish people, Judaism had evolved. Were Ethiopian Jews in Israel coping well with the changes?

When I went to Israel to visit Congregation Be’er Avraham in Beit Shemesh, I was very happily surprised. I met Ethiopian-Israelis who would not only be at home in any synagogue, but also could capably lead the services.

My synagogue decided not only to donate a Sefer Torah but to also organize our first congregational trip to Israel in 20 years.

The joint celebration in Beit Shemesh, with Ethiopian singing, dancing and food, was the highlight of the trip for everyone.

After my return to America, I spoke by phone to Rabbi Amir Avraham, the spiritual leader of Be’er Avraham in Beit Shemesh. Normally the rabbi is a very reserved man but I could hear the joy in his voice as he told me that he no longer leads a second-class synagogue because now they have their own Sefer Torah.

Perhaps your synagogue is like mine, a product of mergers, and possessing a surfeit of Sefer Torahs. Please contact Lauren Yoked at the NACOEJ office – 212-233-5200, ext. 227, or lyoked@nacoej.org – and you’ll be put in touch with a deserving Ethiopian-Israeli congregation in need of a Sefer Torah.

And what joy you will experience!