

**NORTH  
AMERICAN  
CONFERENCE  
ON  
ETHIOPIAN  
JEWRY**

# LIFELINE

SPECIAL EDITION | SPRING 2013

## **An Urgent Message, A Secret Jewish Leader, Two Young American Jews A STORY OF EXODUS, LIFE AND DEATH**

**T**his story begins many years ago, in the 1980's, when all Ethiopia was suffering under a brutal communist government (long gone now).

Poverty and disease were everywhere then. Famines came and went. Visiting foreigners were watched closely, and no Ethiopian was allowed to be alone with a foreigner. No one was allowed to leave the country on pain of prison or even death.

Nonetheless, courageous Jews were trying to reach Israel by escaping to neighboring Sudan. It was an Arab League country, but Israeli secret agents would try to pick them up there.

During those years, American Jews were joining NACOEJ missions to bring medicine, clothes, money, and hope to Ethiopian Jews still in their mud-hut villages in Ethiopia.

Two of the Americans who joined our missions were a couple of young men, coincidentally both named Ari (for convenience, we'll call them the two "Ari's"). They were good friends who shared a strong commitment to the clandestine aliyah from Ethiopia.

I was impressed with them on their first mission, and when they signed up for a second trip, which I couldn't join myself, I felt I could trust them with a difficult assignment.

I asked them if they would be willing to separate from the NACOEJ group, make their way to a town I named, and deliver an urgent message from Israel to a man called Shifero whose Jewish identity was hidden.

### **WE ALL KNEW IT WAS A RISKY BUSINESS**

We knew it would be dangerous. But the message had to be delivered. It was a matter of life and death. And Shifero would be able to spread it to many Jews in his area.

At that time, Jews who succeeded in crossing the border into Sudan were supposed to try to reach a certain place where the Israeli secret agents could find them and move them on to Israel. We called it "the bus stop".

The message was that "the bus stop" had just been discovered by Sudanese



*Shifero and Malka with their children in Ethiopia, as the two Ari's said goodbye.*

police. Any Jews who went there now would find only hostile Sudanese waiting for them, and the horrors of prison, torture, even death in Sudan could follow. The message told them, **"The bus stop is closed. Don't go now. Wait for new directions."**

The two Ari's agreed to take the message to Shifero.

Once in Ethiopia, they had no trouble getting into the town where Shifero lived, except for the swarming mosquitoes from a local lake. They tried to follow my vague directions to his house, but in a world without named streets or addresses it was almost impossible.

Surrounded by the usual crowd of children begging for candy and ballpoint pens, they were pointed to a little square hut. Inside, they found a few children

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but nothing to indicate it was Shifero's house and certainly nothing Jewish. What struck them as odd was a poster, high up on the wall, of a foreign white girl in a skimpy bikini.

Could this be the house of a secret Jewish leader???

### THEN – REALIZATION!

They saw that the poster was actually a page of an Israeli newspaper. It was a coded sign to anyone who could recognize it, that a Jew lived here!

They had found Shifero's home. And soon, he was there.

The Ari's delivered the message, and saw his face fall. Shifero had been hoping to leave soon for Sudan himself.

But when they asked if he could arrange for them to meet other Jews who were hoping to leave, he nodded. "Come back after dark," he said.

The Ari's agreed. They paused to take a snapshot of Shifero's family, and went back to the little hotel where they had rented a room for the night.

After dark, they set off to retrace their steps to Shifero's house.

"But who would have thought it could be so dark?" they reported afterward. "We could see nothing. We soon got lost." They realized that "the locals blended in, they were invisible to us – but we were not invisible to them".

And when they heard rapid steps behind them as they blundered on, they thought they might be mugged by "a local".

Then in the dark, they heard a soft, sweet voice say "Shalom". Shifero had found them.

He took them quickly and quietly across a muddy field to a tuckle, a traditional hut with cow-skin walls, where ten Jewish men sat silently in a circle, waiting for them.

The message was delivered. It would be passed on, secretly, from village to village. "Don't go now. Wait."

#### **Jewish lives were saved.**

The Exodus of the Jews of Ethiopia paused – and then went on again.



*Shifero, Malka and family years later in Israel, with Ari Zivotofsky on a hot day in Beit Shemesh. That's Ari's son peeking out behind his father.*

Time passed. Both Ari's stayed in touch with Shifero, whose family was leaving bit by bit, joining a daughter already in Israel, waiting for them. But Shifero could not leave.

One son, 16-year-old Abebe, had been captured in Sudan, leading a group of younger children.

They were all thrown into an underground pit, Shifero later told the Ari's, tortured and fed nothing but bread and water for eight long months until Shifero succeeded in bribing their guards to let them out.

### FREE AT LAST!

Finally, Abebe got back home. And when the great Israeli airlift called Operation Solomon took thousands of Jews from Ethiopia to Israel in 1991, Shifero, his wife Malka, and the rest of the family came out together.

By then, one of the Ari's, Ari Greenspan, had made his own aliyah to Israel. The other Ari, Ari Zivotofsky, would follow.

**But the story was not over. It never is.**

After an Exodus, comes an arrival – and like the Jews who struggled through the desert to reach the Promised Land in Biblical days, the Ethiopian Jews, arriving at last in Israel, had to build new lives in a world that was very different from the one they had left behind.

During those sometimes difficult years, the bonds between the two Ari's and Shifero grew even stronger.

In Jerusalem, one of the Ari's, Ari Greenspan, now a dentist, ran a clinic, at which Shifero became a patient. (In northern Ethiopia, Jews had beautiful, healthy teeth. But a high-sugar diet in Israel changed that.)

"Of course, I wouldn't charge him," Ari G. said, "but Shifero still felt an obligation. He presented me with a set of hand-woven sheets." Later, other members of Shifero's family came to the clinic.

One of the highlights of Ari G.'s year was his annual Rosh Hashanah call from Shifero, full of warmth and love.

Ari Zivotofsky, now a PhD working as a neuroscientist, made aliyah and began to teach at Bar-Ilan University. He and his family moved to Beit Shemesh, where Shifero's family had settled.

### THE FAMILIES BECAME FRIENDS

As Ari Z. knew, Shifero, still a leader of his community, had acquired an old car and a driver's license, and spent much of his time driving sick, elderly, and impoverished Ethiopian neighbors to doctors' appointments, to weddings and funerals, and to see their far-flung relatives and friends.

One day, Ari Z., who had joined the NACOEJ Advisory Board, called me in New York. Shifero's old car had been stolen. He had no funds for another one. His sick and elderly neighbors were devastated by the loss of their only transportation. Could NACOEJ help?

I was on my way to California, to raise funds for our programs for Jews still in Ethiopia. Cars for Israel weren't on our tight budget.

But I told the story to Middie Giesberg (now of blessed memory), who promptly told it at our first parlor meeting, made the first pledge, and soon raised enough money to buy another old car for Shifero.

NACOEJ could help. The needy neighbors had transportation again.

## THE STORY MOVES ON TO A NEW GENERATION

One night at a wedding in Jerusalem, Ari G. recognized Shifero's son, Abebe, now all grown up and working as a chef. "I told him, 'You know I'm a mohel\* as well as a dentist. I want to do the brit milah\* of your first son,'" Ari recalls.

And when the time came, Ari G. did indeed serve at the ceremony, bringing Shifero's grandson into the covenant of Abraham. Sadly, however, not long before, Shifero had passed away.

### The story doesn't end here, either.

We could go on to tell you about another visit the two Ari's made to Gondar, where NACOEJ was helping the remaining Jews, and found Shifero's wife there for a reunion with a long-lost brother who had disappeared in Sudan 19 years before. Malka told them that, even in the land of her birth, she was homesick for Israel.

But our story-telling must end...

...perhaps with a moment the Ari's never forgot, something Shifero had said to them in Ethiopia when, for a moment, on hearing that "the bus stop" had closed, and all hope of reaching Israel, so often postponed, would have to be put off again, he began to despair.

"I feel as if heaven has abandoned me," he said to the Ari's then. "You will have to stand in heaven's place for me."

No one, of course, can really stand in place of heaven.

But Ethiopian Jews sometimes said that American Jews like the two Ari's, like the NACOEJ family, like the Israeli

\*Mohel – ritual circumciser

\*Brit Milah – circumcision



*In Israel, Ari Greenspan presides at the brit milah of Shifero's grandson, reciting traditional blessings while the newly-named Shalev, which means "tranquility" lives up to his name when it's all over.*

rescuers, had been "sent" to help them come home.

Or perhaps we should close with one more thought: at the brit of Abebe's son, Shifero's grandson, the baby was given the name of Shalev – a Hebrew word meaning "tranquility".

And Ari G. said, "Who in their right mind could have imagined all those years ago, when people were walking for weeks through the desert, being imprisoned and tortured, that one day, we would all be sitting together in Israel, in tranquility, sharing an age-old Jewish rite?"

### Who but family?

Shifero is no longer with us. But his story lives on in our memories and our voices. Please share this story from the great modern-day Exodus of Ethiopian Jews – an Exodus you helped bring about – during Passover.

It could not have happened without you.

On behalf of the Ethiopian-Israeli members of our family whose lives you have helped to save – whose futures you are helping to guarantee – all of us at NACOEJ wish you and those you love a meaningful and tranquil Passover. ■

## IMPORTANT TAX INFORMATION

Good news! The IRA Charitable Rollover is back:

Donors age 70½ or older are eligible to move up to \$100,000 from their IRAs directly to qualified charities without having to pay income tax on the money.

The rules are retroactive to Jan. 1, 2012 and run through Dec. 31, 2013.

Please ask your IRA custodian how to make a Qualified Charitable Distribution directly to NACOEJ.

## Updates and Newsbreaks

Here are some interesting snippets to bring you up to speed on issues involving Ethiopian Jews:

- Aliyah from Ethiopia continues at a rate of about 200 immigrants per month.
- Responding to accusations that Ethiopian women in Israel are coerced into getting birth control shots of controversial depo-provera, the Israeli Ministry of Health says the shots will be given only to women who ask for them, understand the potential side effects, and are aware of alternatives. Amharic translators will be available. (We ask: why weren't translators always available?)
- Tigist Bitau, our teen-age running star, is making progress toward recovery from the vicious attack that broke her leg. She has completed a round of physical therapy and is now able to do some "easy" training. WARM THANKS to all of you who have come so generously to her aid. Please continue. It will make a huge and hopeful difference.
- Ethiopian immigrants now have access to new tefillin, so NACOEJ will no longer collect old pairs for renovation. MANY THANKS to all who provided them in the years of acute need, and to the Oter Israel firm in Jerusalem that processed them. Please consult your local religious authorities for advice on disposal.
- We are pleased to announce the opening of new Limudiah classes in Bnai Ayesh and Gan Yavne, educating and feeding some 56 Ethiopian-Israeli children in grades one through six. Fund one child for a donation of

\$1400; sponsor a class in your name for \$11,200 (see enclosed reply card). SPECIAL THANKS to Bat Mitzvah Sarah Bank for raising and donating funds to sponsor the Sarah Bank Fifth Grade Class in the Rambam School in Lod.

- Join Barbara at a weekend of Ethiopian-Jewish songs, dance, crafts, food, and many exciting talks, walks, services and personal stories, co-sponsored by NACOEJ at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Connecticut, March 15-17. For information and reservations, call David at 1-800-398-2630 or go to [www.isabellafreedman.org/ethiopian](http://www.isabellafreedman.org/ethiopian). For more updates and information, watch for our mailings and/or email newsletters. To join our email list, fill out the email line on the back of the enclosed reply card. ■

## TWO YOUNG PEOPLE WHO NEED YOU!

Here are two young Ethiopian Israelis – one in high school, one in college – who really need sponsors to make sure they can continue their education. If you can sponsor one of them, or another student much like them, please call Karen Gens at NACOEJ at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email her at [Education@nacoej.org](mailto:Education@nacoej.org). Tell her you saw the students in Lifeline.



### A High School Sponsor Needed For Ilani Radi

Born in Ethiopia, Ilani arrived in Israel at the age of one and started elementary school like any other child, but by second grade she was so outstanding that the next year she was transferred to the Ofek School for the Gifted. In sixth grade, she was admitted to the famous Hebrew University Secondary School in Jerusalem.

She's a happy 11-year-old there, making progress toward a brilliant future, but this semi-private school with a great record of student achievement is much too expensive for her immigrant parents to cover.

A sponsorship from the NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Program would make a real difference in her ability to stay there. We can't let this very promising young Ethiopian Israeli get less than the best education available – so please help. You'll have a lot to be proud of.



### A College Sponsor Wanted For Kassa Yenenesh

Whoever has the good fortune to become the Adopt-A-Student sponsor of this articulate young woman has a real treat in store.

Kassa will write to you, giving moving details about her family, broken by divorce and separated by aliyah. Her story includes mysterious white strangers who came looking for her in Ethiopia and a brother in Israel who gave up his chance of college to fight to bring Kassa's side of the family to the Promised Land. It's an extraordinary story, culminating in how Kassa found her own purpose in life.

Today, Kassa is a 24-year-old undergrad in education at Oranim College in Kiryat Tivon, planning for a master's in educational counseling, and someday, a really good private daycare facility of her own.

If you help her along the way now, you'll have also helped a lot of other youngsters whose lives she'll touch.

### NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

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