



# NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY LIFELINE

WINTER  
2014



## A Torah Goes to Addis Ababa for Rosh Hashanah

**(But No One is Leaving Addis Ababa for Israel!)**

The touching photographs included here depict an extraordinary event, accompanied by great joy.

In September 2014, after a complicated journey, a Torah from Israel reached Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in time for Rosh Hashanah services in the makeshift synagogue where hundreds of left-behind Jews pray for aliyah.

The Torah's journey began back in the summer of 2008, in the Bronx,

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## Despite Bombardment, We Ran Three Summer Programs in Israel for our Children!

In war, even more than in peace, children need summer activities.

This year, with rockets raining down and sirens screaming at all hours, with families scrambling for safety with only seconds between warnings and attacks, we were determined to bring some respite, some fun, and some learning to as many Ethiopian-Israeli children as possible – especially in places where it seemed impossible.

We chose three towns, all under attack: Rehovot, where a generous grant from the Samis Foundation promised a fun-filled three weeks; Lod, a very poor city close to Ben-Gurion Airport, which Hamas was trying to shut down; and Gan Yavne, a little town within easy range of rockets from Gaza, which fell there almost constantly.

It wasn't easy to get the programs started.

"So many of the staff we wanted were in the army," said NACOEJ-Israel Director Shoshana Ben-Dor, shuttling back and forth from comparatively quiet Jerusalem to all three towns, ensuring that shelters and security approvals were in place and that food for the children would be delivered.



*In Lod, children used drums and good loud singing voices to release tension and fears.*

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*The Torah,  
beautiful  
and perfect,  
was theirs –  
until a pitiful  
cry reached  
their ears...*

**Shortly before Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Waldman carried the Torah to the hundreds of left-behind Jews in Addis Ababa, who received it under an Israeli flag. (You can see some of the procession and hear the Jews singing – in Hebrew – on our website: [www.nacoej.org](http://www.nacoej.org). Enter Procession in the search bar at the upper right.) Later, Rabbi Waldman went to Gondar, where the other left-behind Jewish community celebrated the holiday with NACOEJ Torahs we had left for them some time ago. All the Torahs are well-guarded and will eventually come to Israel.**

## TORAH

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when a congregation closing their synagogue decided to send one of their Torahs to an Ethiopian congregation in Israel.

They called the NACOEJ office in Manhattan, and we contacted NACOEJ Board Chairperson Faye Lieman and her husband Mike, who was a long-time leader of NACOEJ missions to Ethiopia. The Liemans live in the Riverdale section of the Bronx.

Faye and Mike accepted responsibility for the Torah, and passed it on to their rabbi, Barry Dov Katz, at the Conservative Synagogue of Riverdale. Rabbi Katz offered to take it to Israel with a synagogue group going in August.

In Israel, Rabbi Menachem Waldman suggested that the Torah go to an Ethiopian-Israeli immigrant congregation in Ayelet HaShachar. So the Riverdale group adjusted their itinerary, and in the sweltering heat of the Israeli summer, brought the Torah to its new home.

As always happens, the Riverdale congregation returned to America saying that the presentation of the Torah was the highlight of the whole trip!

As for the Ethiopian-Israeli recipients, their entire community was so thrilled that they scrimped and saved to have their precious Torah repaired by an Israeli scribe and to replace the Torah's worn cloth mantle with a lovely Sephardic-style case.

The Torah, beautiful and perfect, was their most precious possession – until in 2014 a pitiful cry reached them – a voice that seemed to carry over the Red Sea from the parched throats of Jews still in Ethiopia – “We have no Torah for the High Holidays! We need a Torah for Rosh Hashanah!”

So when Rabbi Waldman, now the Jewish Agency's Director of Ethiopian-Jewish Spiritual Absorption in Ethiopia and Israel, came to Ayelet HaShachar to ask them if they would lend this most precious possession, this perfect Torah, to Addis, they said: “Yes. These are our brothers and sisters who are crying out to us. Take them the Torah. It will come back when they come to Israel.”

When Rabbi Waldman left for Ethiopia, as he does every year to celebrate Rosh Hashanah with the Jews left behind, he carried the Torah in his arms directly from the airport to the synagogue, through the rough streets of Addis

Ababa, and into the arms of the waiting, singing, dancing, cheering, smiling and weeping Jews.

It would be nice to say that this wonderful moment was a happy ending to the story.

But there is no ending at all.

The Jews in Addis, rejoicing in their Torah and their sacred holiday, are no closer to aliyah than when we last wrote about them.

The Committee of Exceptions' report on who will live in Israel and who will die in Ethiopia has been postponed until December. This means no action can be contemplated till 2015 – if then. As we write, a new Minister of the Interior in Israel has yet to be heard from. New ministerial budgets may have been signed by then with no provision for new immigrants from Ethiopia.

So a happy ending is not yet here, and that means we still have urgent work to do to make it happen. You can help. Please see the enclosed letter and postcards. ■

*As always happens, they  
returned saying it was the  
highlight of their trip...*



**To see the Jews  
of Addis Ababa  
celebrate the  
arrival of the Torah,  
please scan this  
QR Code.**



*Retreating to safe rooms didn't mean the end of fun...*

*Left: In Gan Yavne, a cease-fire let us organize a trip to the zoo. Our photographer said the kids were too fascinated by the animals to look at the camera.*

**BOMBARDMENT**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

In the end, we had to settle for two weeks instead of three in Rehovot and Lod, and only five days (!) in battered Gan Yavne – but over 100 children had a wonderful time.

In all three programs, retreating to safe rooms didn't mean the end of fun. Drawing, singing, telling stories, and reviewing last year's school work in preparation for the coming new school year, were all lively, creative and enjoyable.

Though our planned day trips to swimming pools and other sites had to be cancelled for safety's sake during the war, on the first day of the last cease-fire we were able to put together a terrific trip to the zoo for the Gan Yavne children – a first for many of them.

In Lod, the Rambam School, where we hold Limudiah classes during the school year, urged us to open our summer program to our children's non-Ethiopian classmates.

With contributions from many NACOEJ supporters, and a grant from the wonderful Croland family, we were able to say, "Yes, come and join us!"

Very quickly, we saw children begin to relax, to smile, to eat heartily, and to enjoy themselves. Some had barely been out of their hot, crowded apartments for weeks.

Now they had room to run, to dance, to throw balls, to play with friends and to get ready for school in September.

But we know that for many of them, a short respite isn't enough.

Some children still hear imaginary sirens in the night and wake up screaming. The children of battered Gan Yavne can't forget that they can be in deadly danger even in their homes.

In this school year, our children will have special need for the reassuring closeness and warmth of our Limudiah classes, as well for the essential skills, self-confidence, and opportunity to flourish in school that mean so much to their future success.

May all of you in our incredible NACOEJ family, without whom none of this would be possible, accept our warmest thanks for helping our children find new hope in the months to come.

Thank you and bless you, now and always.

*Barbara*



*Above: In Rehovot, any game with a ball delighted both girls and boys, especially when they could play in an open schoolyard with shelter just a few feet away.*

*Photos: Win Robins*



## Tough and Tender: How Two Ethiopian Girls in Israel Grow Up with Different Views of Their Lives

**Avital Seneke and Tigist Mengistu have a lot in common. Each is being raised solely by an immigrant mother whose lack of education means a constant struggle to support her children.**

**"I see how difficult it is for her," says Avital, very Israeli, already determined that her own future will be different.**

**"She can barely make enough money," says Tigist, focusing on her traditional Ethiopian role as her mother's helper right now.**



### Avital's Story:

As a tenth-grader, Avital has shown such special academic talent that her school has assigned her to a high-level program. That means higher fees.

But Avital is determined to stay in the program somehow and do well, because it can mean a better future for herself and her family. Her focus is on the future.

"In tenth grade," she says, "you have to choose an area of study. I chose computers. It is the hardest area, but for those who finish successfully, you receive not only a matriculation certificate, but also technological certificates that can help you enter many fields in the army and in life."

This year, she faces important exams, and says she is nervous – "But I think I will pass with success." She will do whatever she has to do to make that happen, because the future she wants depends on it.

*A good job with a good salary for a good life...*

"It is important for me to study," she says, "because if I don't, I will not have a good future. I see my mother without an education and therefore she must work in cleaning, and I see how difficult it is for her to provide for us.

"For my future, I would like to have a good job with a good salary so that I

could give myself and my children a truly good life."

We asked Avital what she would say to someone in America who might help her with a sponsorship, and she replied, "I will truly appreciate your help for a better future for myself and future generations as well."

Avital is growing up Israeli, tough, focused, determined to make a better life for herself and those she loves.



### Tigist's Story:

Tigist is growing up in a family that believes in maintaining some of the beautiful Ethiopian traditions and values they brought with them "from the old country".

When Tigist talks about her 8th grade schoolwork, she is very concerned that her junior high doesn't have a Limudiah like the one that she says helped her so much in elementary school -- and gave her a good hot lunch besides!

"I love science and math," she says, "but I have some difficulties with math, and here there is no one to help me -- and no lunch!"

"I love science and math," she says, "but I have some difficulties with math, and here there is no one to help me -- and no lunch!"

But when it comes to her home, she herself is an important helper. Like proper Ethiopian daughters, she and her older sister do much of the cooking for their large family, making traditional Ethiopian injera (flatbread), brewing Ethiopian coffee, and doing the washing up afterward.

*They make traditional Ethiopian injera and brew Ethiopian coffee...*

Tigist helps with her two younger sisters (and is grateful that they at least are now in a Limudiah in their elementary school), and takes pride in the fact that the family has traditional Ethiopian white garments for Shabbat and holidays. She's also grateful to an older brother who is out of the army now, has a job, and helps out.

When she describes how six children can be bedded down in a tiny apartment, she ticks off the arrangements cheerfully: "My brother sleeps on the couch. My mother sleeps with my youngest sister, and in the same room, we older girls (Tigist is 13!) sleep in a bunk bed."

She is also hopeful that the Limudiah she remembers so fondly gave her enough skills and strength for the school work she's doing now: "I hope to be successful in my studies!"

But she worries a lot about her overworked, underpaid, struggling mother. Cherishing, honoring and caring for older people is a very strong Ethiopian value, and even in youth-centered Israel some Ethiopian young people like Tigist still hold it dear.

When asked what she would want to say to an American sponsor who might help her with school costs, Tigist

*To become a sponsor, please call Karen Gens, our Coordinator of High School and College Sponsorship Programs, at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email her at Education@nacoej.org.*

knows exactly what matters most: "I will be so thankful if you will give me a scholarship," she says. "It will help my mother so much!"

Tough and tender, these two lovely girls growing up in Israel are so different from each other, but so alike in the promise of becoming wonderful, caring citizens.

But they need a helping hand right now.

It only costs \$350 a year to take a big part of the burden off the shoulders of their struggling mothers, and enable the girls not only to work hard at their studies, but to have the books, school supplies, extracurricular activities, and important school trips they otherwise can't afford. ■

*We are happy to report that as we were finishing this Lifeline, Avital got a sponsor! Tigist still needs one. And there are many other Ethiopian-Israeli high school boys and girls like them who also urgently need sponsors to help them fulfill their great potential. Want to know more? Please contact Karen at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email her at Education@nacoej.org.*

## Strong Feelings...

The very special NACOEJ friend who told us why she is leaving a bequest to our work for Ethiopian Jews in her will, asked us not to use her name when writing about her. So we will just call her our friend.

Our friend doesn't remember exactly when she first heard about Ethiopian Jews, but it was back in the 1940's, when she was just a child – and the source was probably her father, who often talked about this ancient community and "their amazing stories". He had wide-ranging intellectual interests, she says, and this was one of them.

She also grew up with intellectual interests, in her case especially scientific. She began a career as a research biochemist, became a college professor, and taught students who were on their way to professional work in laboratories where diseases were diagnosed. Our friend found that she loved teaching.

In 1987, when NACOEJ was just five years old, our friend became a donor. She found that she had "very strong feelings" for this ancient community that had so intrigued her father, and more recently, having been widowed, and thinking about her future, she decided to leave a bequest to NACOEJ.

"I'm not sure what my own needs will be in the coming years," she told us, "but I want to make sure I leave behind a legacy that will make a difference to Ethiopian Jews later on."

We are so grateful to our friend, whose strong feelings for Ethiopian Jews will continue to bless them in the future.

If you would like to ensure that your own concern and affection for Ethiopian Jews will live on past your lifetime, and that the NACOEJ educational programs you support so generously today will be there for Ethiopian children who need them tomorrow, please leave a bequest in your will. It will help release the next generation from a cycle of poverty.

A recent article that appeared on Yahoo summed up the critical importance of education:

*Preschool can lift children from poverty.  
Top high schools prepare students for college.  
A college degree boosts pay over a lifetime.*

This says it all. ■

**For questions about making a bequest, please contact your lawyer, accountant, or financial advisor. For questions about NACOEJ programs, or to let us know you are leaving a bequest to NACOEJ, please contact Danielle Ben-Jehuda at donors@nacoej.org or phone 212-233-5200, ext. 227.**

## Congratulations to...

- NACOEJ Board member **Jeremy Feit** and wife Lenore, on the birth of their second son, Dorian, and to the grandparents, Board member Joseph Feit and wife Surella.
- Ethiopian-Israeli leader **Avraham Neguise** and wife Leah on the birth of a second granddaughter, Maya, and to daughter Ruti and son-in-law Ariel Gerschman.



## This NACOEJ Supporter Knows What it Means to Be An Immigrant

**A**s a Jewish child in Vienna in 1939, Anne Kelemen was very fortunate; she got a place on the famous Kindertransport, the unforgettable rescue operation that began after Kristallnacht in November, 1938 and continued into 1940.

Thanks to Kindertransport, Anne was among close to 10,000 children, almost all Jewish, from Austria, Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia, who reached safety in England, just in time. The children went unaccompanied, without their parents, and in most cases never saw them again.

Anne was, however, able to reunite with her sister, who was already in England.

But Anne didn't settle in England. She became an active Zionist and soon after World War II, she tried to immigrate to what was then called Palestine. But under British rule, most Jewish immigration to Palestine was illegal.

Her group made it only as far as the Haifa port, where they were turned back by the British, and sent to Cyprus. In 1948, Anne immigrated again, and this time she reached what was soon to become Israel.

Two years later, she immigrated one last time, to the United States.

It's 64 years later, but Anne never forgot what it was to be an immigrant. She began donating to NACOEJ to help other Jewish children – this time Ethiopian – find a safe haven in Israel.

She also became a Board member of the Kindertransport Association and brought NACOEJ's work to their attention. The Association has since made several generous gifts to us, for which we are most grateful.

We are honored by Anne Kelemen's membership in our NACOEJ family of supporters, and by the Kindertransport Association's recognition of our work for Ethiopian-Jewish children. ■

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Visit NACOEJ on Facebook and receive news about our programs, plus updates of immediate interest relating to the Ethiopian-Jewish community.

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### **NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY**

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## Condolences to...

- Long-time NACOEJ supporters **Alvin and Esther Reinstein** and their family on the loss of Alvin's beloved mother, Esther Malka bat Yisroel.

### **Marion Rettek Seidemann**

Our hearts go out to Marion's beloved husband, Hans Seidemann, and to Marion's children, Jonathan, Michele and Ilse, and Hans' children, David, Daniel and Joel, their spouses, and all the grandchildren who make up this long-time blended family.

We at NACOEJ, Marion's professional family, who spent at least one day a week with her in the NACOEJ office for many years, are also stunned and stricken by her passing. She was not only a highly skilled volunteer (computers her specialty) but a warm and cheerful presence, never failing to show up smiling, even in the worst weather. To some of us she was also a close personal friend; a fellow-traveler in Ethiopia and Israel; a sponsor, with Hans, of Ethiopian high school students in Israel; and a cultured and delightful companion.

We will have to find a way to replace Marion at the computer, but no one can take her place in our hearts.