

Our Reunion

A SPECIAL REPORT BY ANDY GOLDMAN



Andy Goldman

Most of the last sixteen years of my life were spent in the company of Jews in Addis Ababa and Gondar Province, Ethiopia. No one lived in the compounds we established, but we came together in them almost every day, as the compounds were the center of our lives.

I have wonderful memories of Ethiopia over those years. The children especially. I loved them. They would scream out, "Endi! Endi!", and climb on my shoulders or scramble into my truck for a ride.

I had the joy of seeing the Beta Israel become incredibly creative and competent in many new ways – building the feeding centers, the schools, the mikvahs; creating beautiful embroideries and tallitot in their own needleworkers' co-op; teaching thousands of school children; cooking thousands of meals every day.

I'll never forget the excitement the first time we baked our own matzah for Passover, or the deeply moving ceremonies when a Torah, donated by American Jews, was carried into a compound by a procession of singing, dancing, rejoicing Ethiopian Jews.

These memories will be with me all my life.

But what I want to tell you about now is what I discovered a few weeks ago when I visited old friends from Ethiopia in absorption centers and schools and homes in Israel.



Joyful meeting in an absorption center.

It was an amazing experience.

I learned soon enough, of course, that many social workers and others dealing with newly arrived Beta Israel feel frustrated and discouraged about what they see as the slow pace of absorption in Israel.

But very few of these worried Israelis have ever been to Ethiopia.

They have no idea of the absolute squalor in which whole families lived there.

In Ethiopia, the Jews were crowded into tiny hovels without plumbing, with mud floors that became swamped even in a drizzle, with practically no possessions – at most a plastic bucket, a cou-



With old friends in a nice apartment in Israel.

ple of plastic plates, a thin blanket or two, the clothes on their backs, a spoon and a small pot.

Most also had a plastic bag holding treasured letters (which they usually couldn't read) and photographs from relatives in Israel. And that was all. For a whole family, that was all.

To the social workers, the sight of Ethiopian families living in tight quarters for a year or more in absorption centers is depressing.

But to the Ethiopians, who had shown great strength in the real hardships of Ethiopia, even modest conditions in Israel are a great improvement.

In an absorption center in Beersheva, newcomers from Gondar pulled out boxes and opened closet doors to show me the simple things they had acquired, and made sure I didn't miss a thing.

A former embroiderer from Addis took the blanket and sheets off his bed to make sure I admired the mattress that was now his.

And this pride in having things to call their own wasn't just shown by the newcomers. In Beit Shemesh, proud Ethio-

pian-Israelis who had passed through our compounds a decade ago, took me from apartment to apartment to see television sets, sofas, tables at which they insisted I had to join them in meals.

Yes, by our standards, they are poor – but so are many other Israelis, and so are other immigrants in other countries, and at other times.

In Israel, not one Ethiopian expressed any regrets to me about having made aliyah.

Of course, the situation is rather different for the children. Some were born in Israel, some had come at such an early age that they have no real memories of Ethiopia. They feel the poverty in Israel more acutely than their parents do.

In the NACOEJ after-school classes in Lod, I saw how hungrily the children devoured the hot lunches we provide. When one of the teachers told me that, making home visits, she noticed that none of her little pupils had toys in their apartments, I realized that I hadn't seen any toys anywhere either.

But the lack of toys isn't only because of poverty.

In Ethiopia, there were no toys (except in our compound pre-schools). At most, a child in a village might have a doll made of a stick with a scrap of cloth wrapped around it, or a little clay animal made by his or her mother.



NACOEJ After-School lunch.



NACOEJ After-School class.

Adults played checkers using bottle caps for pieces. The libraries created in our compounds gave children the only books they ever had.

Recreational things just weren't part of the culture of poor Ethiopians, so newly arrived parents in Israel take awhile to think of them as necessities.

But the children, going to school and making friends, even in the slums, know that other children do have toys and games, and so they want them too.

I became even more aware of how much the children needed when I spent time in crowded absorption centers and saw that when the children came back from the local schools, there seemed to be very little for them to do – they ran around aimlessly. There were no toys or educational games, that I could see.

In Lod, a lot of the absorption-center children were in our NACOEJ after-school classes, but in other places, there was a great need for structured play and learning that was not being met in the long, empty afternoons. I found myself wishing for NACOEJ classes everywhere.



Carrying the Torah in Israel.

Part of the time, I traveled around Israel with Rabbi Menachem Waldman, who directs Ethiopian spiritual absorption for the Chief Rabbis. So I saw a lot of the religious side of life.

The adult education classes at the absorption centers, which were taught by Ethiopian-Israelis (many of them already ordained rabbis), were very serious. They were not only important for their religious content, but served as forums enabling the students and teachers to share their aliyah experiences and learn from each other.

I noticed that the classes always seemed to start right on time (very rare in both Ethiopia and Israel!), and that the students were very attentive and asked really good questions. I found myself thinking that these classes were probably a high point of absorption center life.

Siged, the special Ethiopian Jewish holiday, came while I was in Israel, so of course I went to the big celebration in Jerusalem.

There I met hundreds of young people who had passed through our compounds. We exchanged a lot of kisses, Ethiopian-style, and talked.

They were very honest about their problems. School was difficult, they were not well prepared, many had to leave school because they had no money to feed themselves, and others because they had to get jobs to help their parents and younger siblings. The lucky ones had NACOEJ Adopt-A-Student sponsors who helped them.

Many were upset about friends and relatives who had not succeeded and "were up to no good", which meant they had taken to drugs or street life or crime.

And yet, despite their problems, every young man and woman I met at *Siged* told me how happy they were to be in Israel, how much better life was than in Ethiopia.

They knew from long experience in Ethiopia how to deal with hardship, how to keep hoping and dreaming and working toward something better. Now they were putting those lessons to good use in Israel.

I was very proud to know them.

The young people, like their parents in the absorption centers, and even those who had been in Israel for quite a few years, told me over and over how much they appreciated what NACOEJ had done for them in Ethiopia, in what they remembered as the darkest hours of their lives.

A common theme was that their family might not have survived to make aliyah without the help NACOEJ gave them.

The young people were also aware that the compound in Addis had been closed down, and were very worried about how the Jews there would survive.

Yes, there are big problems in Israel. The community on the whole is very poor. Unemployment rates are staggering. Those who are lucky enough to have a job often make less than a living wage. Transportation can be so expensive that it makes it hard to look for a job, or hold one.

Using, or even affording, Israeli foods can be so difficult that many children are not getting proper nutrition. Education in crowded slum schools is a challenge for even these children, who are so eager to learn.

So why did I come away greatly optimistic about the future of Ethiopian Jews in Israel?

First, because it was clear to me that,

problems or not, most of the young people I met did not feel like outsiders, strangers – *falasha* – in Israel, as they had in Ethiopia. They felt like Israelis, and they were proud and glad to be home.

Second, because in elementary and high schools, on college campuses, I saw the terrific effect that NACOEJ programs in Israel make in helping Ethiopian youngsters to overcome the hurdles and move on to the lives they dream of. I saw success stories in the making – or already established. I met scientists and government officials and army officers – old friends whom I knew when they were barefoot in Ethiopia. It is good to know that we can make a critical difference.

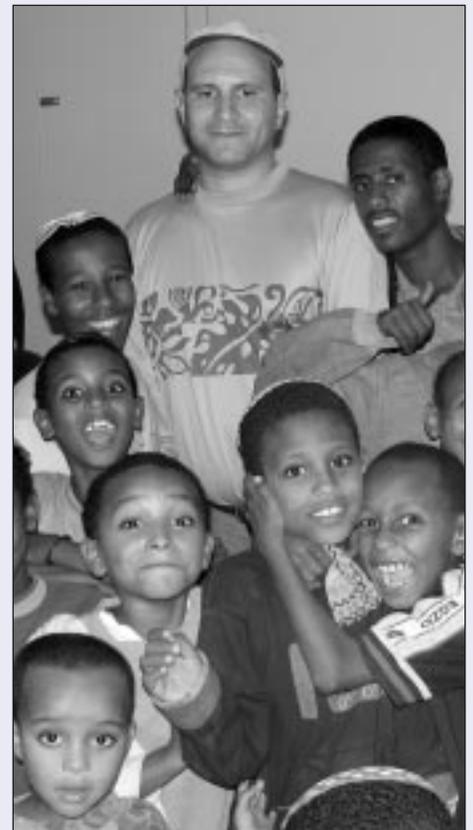
I hope we will be able not to just go on with our work in Israel, but to expand it more and more.

And third, because of what an older man in northern Israel told me.

He hadn't had an easy time in Israel – he arrived too old to get an education – but he told me proudly that when he left Ethiopia, he tossed a black stone behind him.

He said it was an Ethiopian custom to do that when you are putting the past behind you and leaving for a better place.

Despite the problems in Israel, he never regretted tossing that stone.



Andy and friends in Israel.

This is a long report. Thank you for reading it to the end.

I would have made it shorter if I could have thought of anything to leave out – but I can't.

I am heartened and cheered and warmed by meeting my old friends from Ethiopia in Israel, and I thank all of you in NACOEJ for giving me the opportunity to play a role in their great story.

Together, we are helping them create a happy ending. Let's not stop now.

Andy Goldman
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