

Lifeline

NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE
(212) 752-6340

ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY NEWSLETTER • SPRING 1989
165 East 56th Street, New York, NY 10022



Photo by Mort Broffman

UJA National Board Member Yona Goldberg makes the presentation to Mrs. Bush of a NACOEJ Lion of Judah and a photograph from one of our missions.

A LION OF JUDAH FROM WALEKA FOR BARBARA BUSH

When the UJA wanted to honor Barbara Bush and a group of Congressional wives at a Lion of Judah luncheon in

Washington, D.C., they came to NACOEJ for (what else?) a pottery Lion of Judah made by a Jewish woman in

Waleka village, Ethiopia. Along with the handsome Lion, Mrs. Bush received
(continued on page 8)



DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

When you read this, you will already be accustomed to writing "1989" on letters and checks. But I'm writing in the first weeks of the new year, and I want to take a quick look back at 1988. I am very proud to tell you that in 1988 NACOEJ people reached Ethiopian Jewish villages six times — in three large missions and in three very small quiet teams. The large missions, as you know, brought in medical teams, medicine, clothing and school supplies; direct aid to the people we were able to reach. The small fact-finding groups had a different agenda: Their job was to quietly reach communities the larger groups were unable to enter last year, checking the condition of our people, taking photographs for their children in Israel, and providing some assistance as well. They, too, were very successful. As a result of both kinds of visits, we have every hope that many NACOEJ groups will be able to visit many more villages in 1989, expanding our medical work, and bringing hope to increasing numbers of Jews in Ethiopia.

But missions are only a small part of what NACOEJ does. NACOEJ aid travels into Jewish villages no foreigners are ever permitted to visit, reaching communities, families and individuals in extremely remote and war-torn areas. About 1,000 Jews receive NACOEJ aid on a regular basis, and we expect that number to rise sharply in 1989. Entire villages get emergency funds as needed. Communities badly hit by drought or war receive funds that enable hundreds of people to start life again. Jews who have had to flee

from their traditional villages — some threatened by hostile neighbors, some frightened of the consequences of villagization — are aided rapidly and quietly to obtain shelter and food, and then to put down roots in a new location. Often, they use their NACOEJ funds to buy grain to plant and oxen to pull the plow. These basic necessities of Ethiopian life are usually available in local markets if our people have the money to buy them. Thanks to you, the money is there for them.

What about Israel? On page three, Hadassah Linfield tells you something about the work you, our members, are doing through NACOEJ in Israel. We will soon be sending you a special mailing to update you completely on that part of our work, with photos and stories that we think will delight you. Now, just let me say that we have been running a number of successful programs of our own, like the Adopt-A-Student project many of you are supporting — and that we also help fund many additional efforts on behalf of Ethiopian Jews.

In the United States, NACOEJ is a major force — I think the major force — in educating the Jewish community about Ethiopian Jews. Our mailings reach about one million Jewish households. We have speakers in demand all over the country, giving talks and slide presentations at no fee to Jewish organizations, schools, camps and synagogues. Our artifacts are on display everywhere (see page 1). We are a major resource for authors, media

people and anyone who wants to write or teach the story of the Ethiopian Jews. And our political advocacy on behalf of Ethiopian Jews reaches out to Congress, the State Department, the White House and to appropriate foreign countries as well. We are never noisy about it: we believe in quiet, responsible action, to be taken only when there is a real chance of success and a minimal chance of damage. The safety and well-being of Ethiopian Jews, the preservation of their Jewishness and the realization of their dream of family reunification are always our first priorities.

Sometimes these priorities impose a limit on the things we can talk about freely. Sometimes it means that we put certain photographs away without printing them, or treasure certain stories in our hearts without daring to share them. The letters we pass along to you are carefully excerpted to protect the writer and/or his or her family; some are signed only with one name, or an initial — or not signed at all. You know why we are so careful: The tragic, premature end of Operation Moses taught anyone who did not already know it the terrible danger of foolhardy publicity about Ethiopian Jews, the catastrophic consequences of talking too much about things better left unsaid — and the heartbreaking sorrow that can follow rejoicing too much, too soon over a triumph that is not complete. How many lives were lost because Operation Moses died in the glare of publicity? We will never know — and we will not chance adding a single one to the total.

We have sometimes been reproached for not taking advantage of the fund-raising opportunities that some quiet NACOEJ activities could generate if

(continued on page 8)



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

I want to wish you all a happy, healthy and peaceful 1989. At the same time, I also want to thank you so very much for the steadfast support you have given NACOEJ, support which has enabled us to carry out our lifegiving work.

In place of my column this month, we've decided to give Hadassah Linfield, our new Administrative Director, the opportunity to share her feelings and thoughts about NACOEJ's work in Israel with you. I know you will enjoy meeting her as much as I have and will give her your full support in the work she has ahead of her.

Jonathan Giesberg
President



ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

The first thing that happened to me when I arrived at NACOEJ to take my new job as Administrative Director was that I was told to leave – for Israel. The NACOEJ Board wanted me to get to know our complex and rapidly growing efforts in Israel, and to meet Maizie Avichail, our Associate Director there, Sharon Bindelglas, who coordinates the Adopt-A-Student program at the Israel end, and some of the wonderful Ethio-

pian and non-Ethiopian Israelis with whom we work.

I had been to Israel before, but never like this. Before I had unpacked my bags, my phone was ringing – an Ethiopian student was in the lobby of the hotel, wanting to meet me. Before she left, another arrived. I spent every day roaming Israel, visiting schools, absorption centers, Jewish Agency offices, kibbutzim, apartments – even an Army base – to get a feeling of the variety and extent of what NACOEJ does, and what we still need to do in Israel.

A highlight was my visit to K'dumim, a community where twenty-five young Ethiopian women who have no families in Israel are living together in a warm and nourishing environment. The women are learning to earn a living and cope with the challenges of Israeli banks, stores, kitchens, etc. I was greatly impressed by K'dumim, which is considered one of the best Ethiopian absorption programs. K'dumim directors told me sadly that due to cutbacks in Israel's absorption budget, they would only be able to take in eight Ethiopian women this year, instead of the larger group they hoped for. NACOEJ was one of K'dumim's earliest supporters, and this year we will increase our commitment to make sure that more of our wonderful young women get the chance to grow and flourish here.

Naturally, I fell in love with the students I met – bright, diligent young people (some of them married, with families to

support) who are trailblazers for their community. With our help, they will become the first generation of well-educated Israeli Ethiopians. I also loved the children – high-spirited but courteous youngsters – and I worried about those I found in some impoverished Israeli towns where there was no after-school programming for them. Some of these youngsters who are so desperately eager to learn, go to school for only four hours a day and then gather somewhere to watch television. We must have more staffed community rooms where they can get help with their homework, read and catch up on the Israeli cultural backgrounding they have never had.

NACOEJ has always taken a strong interest in the preservation of Ethiopian Jewish traditions and culture. I met several highly talented artists in the Ethiopian community. For a while they were able to study and work in their fields, but today they are holding factory jobs to support their families. Some very special NACOEJ people are undertaking to help them continue their artistic work as well – we'll tell you more about that soon – and work of very high quality is emerging. The entire community will take pride in it.

I came home filled with excitement about what we are doing, worry about the immense work that remains to be done, and ideas for how we go about it. By the time you read this, NACOEJ should have a modest office in Jerusalem, easily accessible by bus to our Ethiopian friends. We can't operate any longer out of Maizie Avichail's tiny, out-of-the-way apartment, especially since she gave birth to her second child only a few weeks after I said goodbye. Since we have become the court of last resort for so many Ethiopians whose very real needs can not be met by the

(continued on page 8)



AT WORK IN WALEKA VILLAGE: THE NOVEMBER MISSION MEDICAL TEAM

Peering into ears, listening to heart beats, cleaning infected eyes, examining teeth and gums, discussing the progress of a pregnancy, our wonderful medical team of three MDs (Jeff Fisher of Albany, NY; Joe Carver of Philadelphia, PA; Jon Ostrow of Seattle, WA) and a

dentist (Sheldon Kupper of NYC) managed to see some 200 patients in an intensive day of clinical work in Waleka village last November. Many of the lay people assisted.

"We treated individuals non-stop for hours," reports team leader Jon Ostrow. "Elderly persons and those felt to be most ill were seen first, followed by



many other villagers." The doctors found acute eye, ear and skin infections, ringworm of the scalp, cataracts, musculoskeletal problems, chronic cough, a suspected malignancy, headaches and other problems.

While the doctors looked after acute cases, all babies, children under six, pregnant women and young mothers progressed through the "vitamin line," staffed by well-coached volunteers. On this important "line," every infant received a squirt of liquid multi-vitamins, and mothers were given the bottles and shown how much to administer daily on the marked drop-



pers. Children from two to six got chewable multi-vitamins, and their mothers were told to give them one a day from our supplies. Pregnant and/or young mothers got multi-vitamins pre-packaged by us in plastic bags containing enough to carry a pregnant woman through her pregnancy and into critical post-partum days.

In addition, a single dose of vitamin A was given to all young children and anyone complaining of night-blindness. Infants were given a squirt of liquid





A tattered child with an eye disorder clutches gifts after being treated by our medical team.

vitamin A. (A single, carefully measured dose of this vitamin will help protect eyesight for a long period – by which time we hope to be back to administer it again!)

And, of course, those volunteers who weren't assisting the medical team or administering vitamins, were busy with crowd control, distribution of school supplies, clothing, etc. or taking the photographs that then went to Israel with the group.

WE WANT YOU!

You can participate personally in many NACOEJ activities. To get information about joining us on a mission, adopting a student, arranging a parlor meeting, setting up an exhibit and/or sale of Ethiopian artifacts, obtaining a speaker for your group, organizing a NACOEJ chapter or getting materials to distribute – just write to us at NACOEJ, 165 E. 56th Street, New York, NY 10022. or call (212)752-6340.

SCHOOL FUNDRAISER

Here's how a Talmud Torah teacher at Congregation Ohav Shalom in Albany, NY, helped her class raise money for Albany participants in the November 1988 mission to take to Ethiopia. If you have a special way of encouraging youngsters to give tzedakah for Ethiopian Jews, please let us know. Write to NACOEJ (*Lifeline*), 165 East 56th Street, New York, NY 10022.



David Hyman of Philadelphia, in Israel with Shimson, a new Ethiopian friend.

The spirit of the children:

A REMEMBRANCE FROM THE NOVEMBER MISSION

We experienced many memorable events and encountered an array of unique people during our November mission to Ethiopia. However what affected me most and what I expect to remain with me forever is the inspiration I felt from the Ethiopian children.

In Ethiopia amongst poverty, broken families and repression, the children's smiles prevail. Their thirst for knowledge, respect for others, and spontaneity are wondrous.

In Israel the new young immigrants' smiles, if not their new wardrobes, are strikingly familiar. Haunted by indefinite separation from their families and a difficult absorption process, they carry on, excel and win the hearts and minds of people like me.

David Hyman



Members of the special Magen Zion Ethiopian Jewish unit in the Israeli army watch educational films on video equipment supplied by NACOEJ. Behind the Ethiopian soldiers are NACOEJ Associate Director for Israel, Maizie Avichail, Administrative Director, Hadassah Linfield, Adopt-A-Student Coordinator for Israel, Sharon Bindelglas and two unit's officers.

"LONE" SOLDIERS

Young Ethiopian Jews serve proudly and often brilliantly in the Israeli Defense Forces. Integrated into many different units, they serve as soldiers or officers, pilots or clerks, doing their jobs alongside Israelis of every background. Many Ethiopian youngsters start their IDF experience as part of the absorption process, in a special educational unit called Magen Zion (Shield of Zion). One third of the young Ethiopians in Magen Zion are "lone" soldiers.

What is a "lone" soldier? It is a special name Israelis give to young men or women soldiers who have no family to go home to on Shabbat. To Israelis, anyone who does not have the warmth and comfort of a family on the Sabbath deserves special compassionate attention — and even an effort to provide a homey environment to share with others in the same position.

NACOEJ is proud to have been asked by Magen Zion to help make "Shabbat homes" for Ethiopian "lone" soldiers. We have provided such simple things — sheets, blankets and pillows for their beds, towels for the bathrooms, second

hand refrigerators, gas cookers and cabinets for the kitchens — but the letter we received from Matti Elias, who represents Magen Zion soldiers, tells us how much it means.

Here is part of his letter:

"All the material/spiritual assistance provided by NACOEJ in Israel and in Ethiopia is and will continue to have a highly significant long-term impact on the Ethiopian communities. Specifically, it will help bridge the gap of the underprivileged "lone" soldiers. NACOEJ and its many contributors help make up the difference in support where the Army must fall short. Once discharged, participants in the Magen Zion program, having served their country and the Jewish people, will be better equipped to become active members in Israeli society and life. On behalf of the "lone" soldier, the orphaned soldier and the underprivileged who are struggling to overcome so many barriers, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Making "Shabbat homes" is only part of NACOEJ's help for Magen Zion. We have also provided VCR equipment, including a television set and tapes.

We take great pride in participating in a program that helps educate our youngsters for civilian life even as they serve their country in uniform. But our hearts are especially with our "lone" soldiers. Until the day when they are reunited with their loved ones, they will be our special concern. To them, from all of us at NACOEJ — Shabbat Shalom!



An Ethiopian Wedding in Israel.

LOVING COUPLES

For years, NACOEJ has given little wedding presents to Ethiopian newlyweds like this couple: a small gift of money to help them start their new homes in Israel. Now, we are happy to tell you, the Israeli Rabbinate has given our newlyweds a big present, as this article, reprinted from the *New York Jewish Week, Inc.*, explains.

We love happy endings to painful problems—and joyful beginnings for new lives. Mazel Tov to us all.

CONVERSION REQUIREMENT FOR ETHIOPIAN BRIDALS LIFTED

Jerusalem—With the recent wedding of two Ethiopian Jews, the Chief Rabbinate's ban on marrying Ethiopian Jews who have not undergone a symbolic conversion has apparently been lifted.

That requirement was the cause of a month-long protest strike three years ago by hundreds of Ethiopians opposite the Chief Rabbinate's office in Jerusalem.

The strike ended with the leaders of the Ethiopians believing the rabbinate would ease its demand for the symbolic conversion. Couples wishing to marry, however, found that without a certificate indicating they had undergone the ceremony, no official rabbi would marry them.

Unwilling to undergo any sort of conversion when they already considered themselves Jews, some couples chose to be married in unofficial ceremonies conducted by the *kes*, the traditional Ethiopian Jewish religious leader. Others searched the country for rabbis willing to marry them without proof of conversion.

The Supreme Court already is considering a petition asking the Chief Rabbinate to allow marriages of Ethiopian Jews to be conducted by rabbinical marriage registrars, or alternatively, to register a *kes* as official.

A month ago, the Chief Rabbinate appointed David Chelouche, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Netanya, as a special marriage registrar for Ethiopian Jews.

Chelouche, who has written a book saying that Ethiopian Jews are full Jews according to *halacha* always said he was willing to marry Ethiopian Jews who had not submitted to the special conversion but was unwilling to defy the Chief Rabbinate on the matter.

According to the new arrangement, Chelouche will be responsible for all the registrations and will be empowered to delegate other rabbis to perform the actual wedding ceremonies. He officiated himself at the recent wedding.

The Jerusalem Post Service

KEEP THOSE POSTCARDS GOING TO WASHINGTON!

Many, many thanks to all of you who have been sending the postcards we provided to your Representatives and Senators in Washington, DC, urging them to see to it that Ethiopian Jewry has a high priority on the agenda when the U.S. and Ethiopia discuss improving relations. Thanks to your enthusiastic response, calls from Congressional offices have been coming into NACOEJ, asking for more information about Ethiopian Jews, and offering support. If you want more postcards for your friends, or to distribute through your synagogue or other Jewish organizations, write to us at NACOEJ (Postcards), 165 E. 56th Street, New York, NY 10022, or call us at (212)752-6340. **KEEP THOSE CARDS GOING. THEY CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE TO OUR PEOPLE'S CHANCES OF BEING REUNITED WITH THEIR FAMILIES AT LAST!**

NACOEJ OPEN MEETING

The next NACOEJ Open Meeting will be held on Thursday, April 6th at 8:15 PM at Lincoln Square Synagogue, 200 Amsterdam Ave., (at W. 69th Street) in Manhattan. We'll hear the first reports from the March mission to Ethiopia. If you're in the New York area, don't miss it.



Every NACOEJ mission goes from Ethiopia to Israel, bringing its most precious gifts: pictures of the Jews left behind, for those who have made it home. Here, at a school called Hofim, Ethiopian youngsters search eagerly for photos of a beloved face, perhaps not seen for four long years.

WHEREVER YOU ARE, THERE'S A NACOEJ SPEAKER

That's a slight exaggeration — but only slight. NACOEJ speakers, who have been to Ethiopia and/or Israel to meet and work with Ethiopian Jews, can talk to your group on the East Coast, the West Coast, the Midwest, the Southwest, and many places in between. NACOEJ speakers do not charge a fee and have breathtaking slides to show and stories to tell. To request a speaker for your group, please call (213) 470-4653 for the West Coast, or (212) 752-6340 for the East Coast and elsewhere. Or write to NACOEJ (Speakers), 165 East 56th Street, New York, New York 10022.

(BARBARA BUSH, from page 1)

one of NACOEJ Board Member Ed Weberman's magnificent photos of a Jewish matriarch in Waleka, displaying her work. And each of the Congressional wives received one of the elegant Solomon-and-Sheba silk scarves we bring home from Ethiopia.

NACOEJ pottery, photos, scarves, jewelry, metalwork, baskets, cloths and other beautiful Ethiopian artifacts have been displayed and offered to donors all over the United States and in Israel — isn't it nice to think that they are in the White House now? For more information, write to NACOEJ (Artifacts), 165 East 56th Street, New York, NY 10022 or call (212)752-6340.

CONGRATULATIONS TO:

NACOEJ Board Member Ed Weberman and his bride, Ann Bergmann, on their recent marriage ...

NACOEJ Board Member Dr. Jay Luger on his engagement to Dr. Zita Goldfinger ...

NACOEJ Board Member Dr. Harris Schoenberg, on publication of his book, *A Mandate for Terror: The UN and the PLO*. The new book, published by Shapolsky Publishers, is getting rave reviews ...

NACOEJ Associate Director for Israel Maizie Avichail and husband Dael on the birth of their son Shalom. Shalom joins sister Tami.

(DIRECTOR, from page 2)

they were known. We have several times refused to accept funds from organizations raising them in ways we consider dangerous to the very people we are trying to help. We have always felt that we would rather do without the money than risk the future of our people.

Kabbalists, the ancient Jewish mystics who guarded their precious secrets so carefully, used to say, "Those who understand, will understand." NACOEJ people have always understood. Bless you all.

Barbara Ribakove Gordon

(ADMINISTRATIVE, from page 3)

various ministries and agencies that exist in Israel, we will have to try even harder to help those who turn to us. NACOEJ has always believed that our work does not end when an Ethiopian Jew arrives in Israel — it only moves into a new and happier phase.

Hadassah Linfield

Look for a special mailing on Ethiopian Jews in Israel this Spring.

ADOPT-A-STUDENT-REPORT

NACOEJ is currently supporting more than 50 Ethiopian Jewish students in Israel. About half of these have "adoptive" families, groups or institutions in the United States. We hope soon to have some Australian "adopters" join us in this extremely important work — and we need more Americans urgently. These students are future leaders of their community in Israel. Help us help them stay in school and achieve their very great potential. To find out more about how you can have the joy of helping, knowing, visiting and loving an Ethiopian Jewish student in Israel, write to NACOEJ (Adopt-A-Student), 165 East 56th Street, New York, NY 10022 or call (212)752-6340.

LOSE — AND SAVE!

"Dear Ann Landers," writes a reader with an idea. "I have tried every diet under the sun. . . I am deeply concerned about world hunger. Whenever I feel like snacking between meals, I put a quarter in a box on my desk and drink a glass of water instead. The satisfaction I get from that act helps me resist the treats."

Thanks to the World Development Forum for sharing this wonderful idea with Lifeline readers. When you send your contribution in, please let us know how many pounds you lost as you helped save a life!