



Montgomery County Executive Ike Leggett, at head of table, meets with a delegation of Ethiopian Israelis, along with local Jewish community representatives.

## Out of Ethiopia

Ethiopian Israelis bring tales of their treks, learn about community leadership

Rachamim Goshen was just 12 years old when he walked from Ethiopia through Sudan and made his way to Israel on a treacherous path. It was 1980, before the massive Operation Moses and Solomon airlifts of 1985 and 1991.

An orphan, Efrat Mekonen was 9 years old when she arrived in Israel on Operation Moses.

Goshen is now a rabbi, teacher and community leader, Mekonen a school mediator. Both were part of a five-person Ethiopian National Project delegation from Israel's Beit Shemesh that spent nine days in Greater Washington. Their itinerary included meeting with representatives from the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and Montgomery County Executive Ike Leggett, giving workshops at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in D.C., visiting the Ethiopian Communication Development Center in Arlington and spending time at several local synagogues.

ENP is a project designed to help the Ethiopian Israeli community find its voice, according to Ina Lerman, the federation's Israel and overseas director. The federation and its United Jewish Endowment Fund funds an ENP community leadership and empowerment project; the delegates came to the D.C. community on a federation-sponsored trip to speak about their experiences and learn about community leadership.

"We wanted the delegates to inspire members of our community, both donors and potential donors, about the wonderful things this project does," Lerman said, as well as provide the delegates with leadership development opportunities and "introduce them to the richness of Jewish life in our Jewish community."

Among their visits was one on Tuesday of last week to B'nai Shalom of Olney, where they spoke with fifth-, sixth- and seventh-graders.

"Their eyes were open wide to everything new," said Jill Epstein, B'nai Shalom of Olney's religious school director. "A lot of what we take for granted they needed explained to them."

Sixth-grader Lauren Alexander was charmed by their stories. "They were so beautiful, because it could prove if you set your mind to anything, it could happen, and now they can live in Israel and have a wonderful life and study Judaism, and I think it's really nice that they can do that," she said.

Each of the delegates sat at a table with a translator and approximately 10 students, telling their tales of escaping from Ethiopia by walking to Sudan and then traveling to Israel.

"At each table the member of the delegation told their story and you could have heard a pin drop in terms of the way the kids listened," said Epstein, who was watching the room as the students listened to the stories.

When students asked how the Ethiopians were able to fight through their fears and not turn back, the visitors, according to Epstein, explained that nothing could be worse than what they had already experienced in Ethiopia.

The students walked away from this experience with two main thoughts in their head, Epstein reported. "Their feeling is they made a new friend," she said. "And they know that there are many places in this world [that] are not accepting of Jewish people. They felt that was very sad." — Ilana Yergin



Uri Zeleke shows B'nai Shalom of Olney students the route he took from Ethiopia to Sudan to Israel.

Photos courtesy Jewish Federation of Greater Washington

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