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From Ethiopia to Israel ... with a stop-off in Austin

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By Abe Selig
Special to The Jewish Outlook

It was a long, difficult road that led Nigist Mengesha from the small Ethiopian village where she was born to Jerusalem, the city she and her family had yearned to live in — for more than 2,000 years.

After enduring years of setbacks in Ethiopia and Eritrea while trying to make aliyah, the wife and mother of two finally made it to Israel in 1984 as part of "Operation Moses" — the first airlift of Ethiopian Jews to new homes inside the Jewish state.



So it was far less of a stretch for Mengesha, Ph.D., who now heads the Ethiopian National Project in Israel, to arrive in Austin in early November, where she and fellow project representative Grace Rodnitzki spent the day briefing community members on the ongoing challenges that face the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel, and the ways their organization is mobilizing to help them.

"The Ethiopian community in Israel continues to suffer from a social gap, from the challenges of integration," Mengesha told an attentive audience during a "Lunch and Learn" with Jewish communal professionals in the JCC Community Hall — the first stop on her and Rodnitzki's schedule after arriving Nov. 3 in Austin.

"And this has been especially apparent amongst the younger members of that community," she continued. "Just five years ago, drop-out rates and levels of juvenile delinquency were spiraling out of control."

Education and poverty levels at that time were also of great concern, Mengesha said.

In 2005, about 40 percent of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel had the equivalent of an elementary school education or less and more than 50 percent of the community was living off of incomes that made up less than half of Israel's average minimum-wage level.

Vocational skills were also sorely lacking, and integrating the new arrivals into the workforce, much less mainstream society, had become a task of dire concern.

For new olim (immigrants) like Mengesha, who had struggled for so long just to arrive in Israel, the realization that the Ethiopian Jewish community might not endure the pangs of immigration was an alarming prospect.

"I was afraid of what was going to happen to all of us," Mengesha said.

But the situation was also not without remedy.

While 2005 saw some of the worst statistics emerge with regards to Ethiopian immigrants and unemployment, poverty, spousal abuse and juvenile delinquency, it also marked the first full year programming by the Ethiopian National Project, which had been officially launched in August 2004 with \$2 million raised by the Jewish Federations of North America.

"And the Austin, Texas, Jewish Federation had donated part of that seed money," Mengesha reminded the audience. "You were some of the first to come to our aid and to help turn back the trends that were becoming so distressing."

Over the last five years, the Ethiopian National Project truly has succeeded in turning back many of the alarming trends that were plaguing the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel.

Rodnitzki, who explained that while funding for the project had remained an elusive and sometimes frustrating prospect, "the ENP has forged on, focusing its efforts on engaging the Ethiopian community's young people, who comprise more than half of Israel's 120,000-strong Ethiopian Jewish community."

She added, "By the end of the 2007 school year the ENP had expanded from operating in a handful of locations to 27 cities and towns across the country and reaching more than 7,500 youth."

This, Rodnitzki explained, was exactly what was needed: a concerted effort directed at tackling the problems facing this immigrant community head-on. And the results backed that up, at least momentarily.

"We saw (matriculation exam) scores going up, drop-out rates decreasing," Rodnitzki said. "And the juvenile delinquency rates plummeted — namely because we had youth centers set up around the country as places for these kids to go."

But despite such gains, the Ethiopian National Project was forced to scale back its work just one year later due to a lack of funding. About 2,000 youths who had been receiving scholastic

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assistance from the project were no longer able to as a result of the cutbacks.

“And the financial crisis added to this downturn,” Rodnitzki said. “So much so that the ENP’s future is uncertain. We’ve been forced to cut another 1,500 youths from our scholastic assistance programs, and funding for our outreach centers has been drastically scaled back.”

Furthermore, she said, programs that had been put in place to help ease the enlistment of Ethiopian 18-year-olds into the Israel Defense Forces (Israel has a mandatory military draft for Jewish and Druze citizens at 18) had been scrapped altogether.

“And that’s also such a shame,” Rodnitzki said. “Because the army is such a great equalizer within Israeli society and we had been getting really great feedback from those initiatives in particular.”

But financial hardships aside, both Rodnitzki and Mengesha told their Austin audience that, while concerned, they weren’t overly worried.

“Our connection to Israel is far deeper than dollars,” Mengesha said.

“I remember when I was a young girl in Ethiopia, and my grandmother, who was blind in both eyes, would have the small children lead her out of her hut in the mornings as soon as she arose,” she said. “She would have them lead her to this rock that was in front of the hut, and from there, she was able to direct herself as to the direction of Jerusalem.”

“And she would pray,” Mengesha continued. “She would pray for something that we have already accomplished — arriving in Jerusalem. The next part — what we do now that we’re there — is up to us.”

Abe Selig is director of Austin’s Jewish Community Relations Council.

