

The annual Samuel Rothberg Prize for Jewish Education was established by the Hebrew University in 1975 in honor of the 65th birthday of Samuel Rothberg in deep appreciation of his dynamic leadership and dedicated service to the University, the State of Israel and the Jewish people. Samuel Rothberg was the National Chairman of Israel Bonds and the International Chair of the Board of Governors of the Hebrew University.

It is a great honor for me to stand here as a recipient of the Rothberg Prize for Jewish Education. I thank you so much for this honor.

For you to understand what has brought me to where I am today, and why I have invested my life's efforts in advancing the education of the Ethiopian-Israeli community, you must understand two basic concepts that drive my actions.

One: it was my dream, and the dream of my community for some 2,000 years, to reach Jerusalem.

Two: Education builds and strengthens a nation.

My dream of aliya burned inside me since I can remember. As a teenager I even left my home to search for a fishing boat that I heard could take me to Eilat. But my dream was fulfilled only years later, as an adult, in 1984. In fact, I owe a word of thanks to you—in the 1980's university scholarships were offered as a way to enable Ethiopian Jews to obtain an exit visa from the communist regime. Documentation from the Hebrew University helped me in my effort to reach Israel.

On the premise of a university scholarship, I was granted the right to travel to Israel, but on the condition that I leave my husband and four small children behind in Ethiopia, not knowing when I would see them again. My husband and I spoke and cried and decided finally that this was an opportunity that must be grasped, believing and knowing that we would, one day, be reunited. Joyfully, that reunification with my children and my husband happened just months later, thanks to the mysterious workings of the state of Israel. Today, my children are grown, and I am a grandmother of three.

My second belief that drives me is my understanding that education is the key to a successful Israel.

I believe that every child deserves an outstanding education that will enable them to fulfill their potential. But sadly, the fact that the vast majority of Ethiopian-Israelis live under the poverty line impacts upon their ability to gain a worthy education that will take them far.

As parents I can imagine how much time, effort and resources you invest in your children's education to help them succeed. Imagine a child whose parents do not have the skills to help him with his homework, or to guide her to stand the many obstacles she faces in her day to day life in the new country, language, society & culture.

And so, our mutual dream is to make Ethiopian-Israelis a success, to be the pride of the state of Israel and of all the Jewish people. Education is the key to make this happen. But while the efforts being done for immigration and the investment in the integration process is considerable, still more is necessary.

And this is where my efforts lie.

I knew from the very beginning that any work to better the community must be done hand in hand with the community itself, in partnership and inclusive, ensuring that instead of merely being a beneficiary, that the community itself play an active role in the work being carried out, thereby taking responsibility and accountability.

It was based on this concept that I brought the idea of training Ethiopian Israelis as social and educational mediators in order to bridge the cultural gap, to be role models & work with school staff, parents and children by building-up their confidence.

The initiation of the Fidel Association was a key strategy to advance the education effort and social integration of the kids and their parents. This strategy of social and educational mediators currently works in 140 schools all over the country.

Later, a shared initiative of global philanthropy and the Government of Israel resulted in the creation of the Ethiopian National Project, ENP, whose thrust is, in a community-inclusive methodology, to advance the education of Ethiopian-Israeli youngsters, diminish the risk factors that will lead kids astray, and provide the tools for leaders to lead their community. A bottom-up grassroots approach, with a focus on education and empowerment is having the impact we envisioned. Just a couple of examples of the changes that have taken place since ENP commenced its activities just five years ago:

Today, more Ethiopian-Israeli youngsters are taking the matriculation exams, than the general Jewish population: 85% vs 81 and a half.

Today, fewer Ethiopian-Israelis drop out of school than the general Jewish population! And, since the establishment of ENP, the rate of juvenile delinquency has decreased by more than 60%, after a nine year period preceding ENP where it had increased six-fold.

But these successes should not belittle the tremendous work that has yet to be done:

- The parents' poor command of the Hebrew language, the cultural misunderstanding of the education system, the higher education achievement gap and poverty together continue to make the community's situation very hard. Proactive work in the realm of education, such as that of ENP, must continue at an escalated rate to ensure every child and every family has an opportunity to succeed.
- Discrimination by individuals towards Ethiopian-Israelis is hindering the full integration of the community into Israeli society. A change in the perception and attitude will take place only once more Ethiopian-Israelis are integrated into elite faculties and professions, and positions of leadership.

I will not rest until I can ensure that every Ethiopian-Israeli youngster, that every school and every principal, that every Knesset member and every citizen, understand that the education of the Ethiopian-Israeli community will make Israel a better place for all, and will truly be the fulfillment of our dream to reach Jerusalem.

The effort that I describe requires the participation and full support of all. Together we have to overcome these challenges. Together we must all take shared responsibility for the success of the Ethiopian-Israeli community.

Martin Luther King once said: Our lives begin to end, the day we become silent about things that matter.

May we all continue to invest our efforts in this critical effort to ensure the Israel of our dreams.

I would like to say that part of this credit for the recognition of my work goes to my family & my friends who support me whole heartedly from the very beginning (some of whom are with me today).

Thank you again!!