

Accentuate the Positive

The first female Ethiopian physician in Israel is not only healing, but inspiring young people across the country

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DR. HADAS MALADA-Matsree, 26, an intern at Soroka Medical Center and the first female Ethiopian-Israeli doctor, is slowly getting used to being seen as a role model.

“At first, I did not feel the need to do anything special as a result of the title, but the more I saw that people cared about it, especially young kids, the more I realized I do have a special role and I can have a positive influence,” she said in a lengthy telephone interview with *The Jerusalem Report*.

Presently on maternity leave to care for four-month-old baby Tamar, Malada-Matsree’s life is a balancing act involving career, family and a major commitment to community service. For the past two years, she has lectured to students about her own experience of success. She travels throughout the country for the lectures, organized by the Education Ministry. For many young Ethiopian-Israelis, in particular, she has become a symbol of what is possible.

“After I speak, they come up and ask me a lot of questions. Sometimes the questions are really basic, like ‘How do I apply to university?’ But they have no one to ask. I try to support them and help them along,” she says.

Her message to young Israelis is twofold. First, she tries to show immigrant students that despite the hardships brought on by aliya – and the perception many immigrants kids have of being abandoned – their parents do care about them. Second, she tries to inspire young people to dream big. “I find, generally, they either don’t know how to dream at all, or if they dream, they set their sights very low. I want to show them how to believe in themselves and not give up on their dreams,” she says.

Soft-spoken and self-effacing, Malada-



COURTESY HADAS MALADA-MATSREE

ROOTS TREATMENT: Dr. Hadas Malada-Matsree chose to do her pediatric medicine elective in Ethiopia, traveling to Black Lion Hospital in Addis Ababa, in April 2010, to work with Ethiopian children.

Matsree’s polite manner seems to coexist with a palpable inner strength. Her core of confidence is the likely result of a lifetime of surmounting challenges.

THE FIRST FOUR YEARS OF HER life, a period she no longer remembers, were spent in a rural farming community in Ethiopia. The family sustained itself with agriculture as well as by raising sheep and cattle. Her mother, married by 12, was busy raising the growing brood, while her father became active in working with Israeli officials to help the Ethiopian Jewish community immigrate to Israel. At one point, he was sent to jail for his activism.

At 4, she immigrated to Israel with her parents and six siblings; four more were born in Israel. On the journey, Malada-Matsree contracted malaria, measles and a third mystery illness that caused all her hair to fall out. When the family reached Israel, she had to be hospitalized for five months. By the time she was healthy again, she had also found her life’s calling.

“I said to my mother: ‘I want to be like the people in white.’ I meant the doctors and nurses,” she explains. “Since then, it’s been obvi-

ous. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do.”

She says that her parents, neither of whom finished high school, believed completely in her ability to reach her goal. Although they supported the family through manual labor – cleaning, construction, washing dishes – they were adamant that their children aim for a different life.

They would often use their own financial struggles as a cautionary tale. “They would say to us: ‘Study. Do your schoolwork, or you’ll end up doing the kind of work we have to do.’”

Malada-Matsree credits a large part of her success to her parents’ active involvement in her life. Although they had no time to study Hebrew formally, as they had to work to support the large family, they declared that Hebrew was the official language at home, so that they could be fully integrated in their children’s lives. They even attended parent-teacher meetings, despite not always understanding everything.

She contrasts her family situation to the situations of other Ethiopian immigrants to Israel. Like her family, they, too, faced the pressures of moving from a rural, agrarian culture to a technologically advanced one. They had to learn basic domestic chores, like using an oven

or gas stove, and also had to acquire skills to organize a modern household – opening a bank account, for example. The children, who learn the language and pick up cultural clues more quickly, became the experts at home, while their parents, once revered as decision-makers, were reduced to the role of dependents. Additionally, most social programs target Ethiopian-Israeli youth, leaving older adults out, further compounding an already tough situation, she says.

“Children sometimes begin to feel that their parents don’t care about them or what they are doing at school,” she adds. She explains that the desire to strive for achievement at school goes together with knowing that someone at home cares and knowing that someone is tracking their academic progress. When that feeling is absent, the children often start to act out, finding the sense of caring and belonging from their peers instead of from their elders.

Malada-Matsree believes she was lucky; she experienced a caring family as well as a supportive community.

Arriving in Israel, the Malada family settled in an absorption center in the southern town of Arad, where they lived until moving to Beersheba, when she was 9. “In both places we lived in diverse communities. In the absorption center, we were together with immigrants from Russia, France, America, and other places.” She points out that a sense of isolation can make it more difficult for Ethiopian-Israeli youth to find their way within Israeli culture. “All they see is other kids going through the same thing, with nothing to do after school hours.”

In contrast, Malada-Matsree’s school years were marked by a growing sense that her dream of being a doctor was achievable. Her favorite subject was science, with bible and literature coming in second. She is quick to note, however, that for her, “literature is a hobby but medicine is a love.”

EVENTUALLY, WITH EXCELLENT test scores, she began studying medicine at Ben-Gurion University as part of a government scholarship program that covers many of her medical studies expenses in exchange for a commitment of five years of service as a doctor in the IDF. Supporting herself financially while studying has been an ongoing challenge. Time spent working has meant less time to study, which in turn initially made it more difficult for her to excel, despite her talents.

A \$3,000 a year stipend has made a big difference. “When I received a stipend from the ENP (Ethiopian National Project, a non-profit

funded by the government, global Jewry and the Ethiopian-Israeli community), things became a lot easier. My grades went from 70s and 80s to 90s and 100s, and I was cited for excellence,” she says, adding that the handful of other Ethiopian-Israeli medical students she knows all benefit from the program, supported primarily by the Jewish Federation of Lehigh Valley, as well as other charities.

She is firmly in favor of programs that level the playing field and also says she’s not averse to affirmative action, although she’s not sure if it should be awarded based solely on ethnic background. She points out that a high school student who can’t afford NIS 6,000 to pay for tutoring for the college entrance tests, or a medical student who is unable to take time off from work to study for qualifying exams is at a distinct disadvantage. “The only affirmative action I’m aware of at Ben-Gurion is for Bedouin students. So why not for Ethiopian-Israelis, as well?” she asks.

Yet she earned her own medical education without such benefits. Currently in the last few months of her year-long internship, Malada-Matsree has navigated the system of higher education largely on her own. And she can still remember feeling particularly disturbed when she first entered medical school and realized there were rumors that her ethnicity had helped her win a spot in the class. “One ‘brave’ person even asked me to my face,” she says.

“My first real encounter with racism happened in an academic setting,” she adds with irony.

Although the members of her family have all experienced incidents of racism, it is something she chooses not to dwell on. “If you spend too much time involved in it, it just brings you down,” she says.

The rumors ended as soon as it became clear that she was indeed a gifted student, but her encounter with bigotry had a deep effect on her, ultimately helping to bring her closer to her Ethiopian heritage. When she realized that no matter how Israeli she was, people saw her as different, she decided to learn more about her tradition.

In 2004, she traveled to Ethiopia for a closer look at her roots. Later, as a medical student, she chose to do her pediatric medicine elective in Ethiopia, traveling to Black Lion Hospital in Addis Ababa, in April 2010, to work with Ethiopian children. While there, she also improved her command of Amharic, with a special focus on learning medical terms and understanding more about Ethiopian cultural approaches to medicine and healing.

For example, she explains, when an Ethiopian patient says his stomach hurts, it

may mean that he’s experiencing physical pain, but it may also mean that he is feeling worried or distraught. The seemingly lyrical statement “my heart has spilled” actually just means the person is experiencing heartburn. She points out that making the effort to understand the meaning behind such terminology can help Israeli doctors to bridge a significant cultural divide with their patients. She is now at work on a dictionary of Amharic medical terminology, which she has already begun sharing with some of her peers.

Her Ethiopian heritage also plays a key part in her personal life. Although her husband, architect Yonatan Matsree, is not Ethiopian, the young family keeps the community’s traditions alive at home. “People always say that he’s more Ethiopian than me,” she says, giggling and adding that she and her husband make an effort every year to travel to Jerusalem for the main ceremony of the Sigd, the Ethiopian Jewish holiday that commemorates those who died on their way to Israel. Since many of her siblings live nearby, she remains in close contact with family and community.

And while baby Tamar doesn’t speak yet, when she’s ready, Malada-Matsree has already enlisted her mother to teach her Amharic. “I would do it, but my accent is too Israeli,” she says. She says she is also looking forward to teaching Tamar the Ethiopian children’s stories she grew up on.

Yet she also emphasizes that her heritage as an Ethiopian-Israeli is just one facet of her life. When not working, she tries to find the time to read, catch a yoga or spinning class, and travel, “preferably in Israel,” she says.

And like the young people she inspires, she too has big dreams. She wants to spend as much time as possible with her family and to eventually take time to practice medicine in the developing world.

She is proud of her own success, but says that she is not alone in being an Ethiopian-Israeli who is contributing to Israeli society. In addition to herself, she knows of at least two other Ethiopian-Israeli doctors and six medical students. On the lecture circuit, she also meets many Ethiopian-Israeli high school students who are choosing challenging coursework and excelling.

“The press is very critical of the Ethiopian aliya. But if you look at how long it takes to become a doctor – 12 years of primary and secondary schooling, four to seven years of medical school, army service – it adds up to 20 years, and that’s as long as we’ve been here. People need to see the positive accomplishments too. We need to focus on the success stories.”

