



Seen on the Israel Scene

Ethiopian National Project showcases traditional culture

By Sybil Kaplan

Many years ago I started a file on the then Falashas, Jews of Ethiopia, because it interested me. In the 1970s, while living in Israel, I wrote a background piece on the Jews of Ethiopia, under strict scrutiny of the Government Press Office censors, which made the International Edition of the Herald Tribune.

So it was with great excitement when recently, I received an invitation to attend an evening showcasing both Ethiopian traditional culture and the activities of the Ethiopian National Project (ENP) activities for youth. The ENP was created in 2004 as a joint effort of the Israeli government, world Jewry and the Ethiopian-Israeli community to provide Ethiopian-Israeli teenagers, 13–18, opportunities to integrate into Israeli society.

ENP sponsors an after-school, six-year enhancement program with educational and social intervention; neighborhood outreach centers for youth at risk, preparation for the army and a variety of other programs and workshops for parents and lay leadership.

Organizer of the evening was Tracey Shipley Amar, marketing director of the ENP, who announced that 60 artists had donated their time for the evening and introduced some of the acts. The masters of ceremonies were an actor and actress, Tehila Yeshayahu-Adghe and Beyne Getahun, performers in a popular Ethiopian theatre company.

Not only was the evening an opportunity for those unfamiliar with Ethiopian culture to have the experience of seeing and hearing music and dance, but it was an opportunity for the young performers to feel good about their accomplishments and show off before an audience.

As the audience came in, Solomon and Adgo played traditional Ethiopian music on a krar, a five-string bowl-shaped lyre and a masenqo, a single-string violin.

First on the program was the Nitzenet Dance Troupe from a Jerusalem neighborhood, consisting of seven women in white dresses with blue embroidery down the front and blue and white scarves tied around their waists. Their performance of traditional Ethiopian dances was a lot of energetic head, neck and shoulder movements and repetitive music and dance steps.

They were followed by the headliner, Kanobesh, a well-known Ethiopian singer, with black, shoulder-length braided curls, dressed in a street-length red dress with gold embroidery on the dress and scarf. She also sang with the sharp head, neck and shoulder movements.

Other performers were: Bubot Shchorot, a dance group of five teenage women and three teen young men from Lod who performed traditional Ethiopian songs and dances; a singing group of five girls; Shavei Zion, a rap group of five Ethiopian boys and one Israeli from a suburb in Jerusalem who rapped about it being tough to be an Ethiopian in Israel; Tseli, a group of three young men and two young women from Arad in two very well-rehearsed songs; and Lev Le Lev, a dance troupe of two couples from Petach Tikvah.

The program closed with the Hologub Theater group performing a physical-musical adaptation of Ethiopian folk tales.

In between were welcome remarks from Herzl Makov, director of the Menachem Begin Heritage Center, which hosted the evening. He told of his conversation in 1977 with Prime Minister Menachem Begin and the head of Mossad (Israeli-style CIA) when Begin asked that the Jews of Ethiopia be brought to Israel.

"This was not an easy journey," he said. "There were a lot of hardships and pain, and the journey wasn't finished when they arrived. That's why the National Project is so important."

Roni Akale, chairman of the representatives of Ethiopian Jewish community organizations, also welcomed the group and urged donations. Eliezer (Moody) Sandberg, co-chair of the ENP, spoke on how the ENP meets challenges. "The only problem we are facing with the general economic crisis is the need to decrease the number of students in the 31 cities. We plant the seeds for the future. We need your help. We need your support," he said.

Amir Tewabe, ENP director of operations, presented leadership certificates to adults; Rivka Aragi, supervisor of youth programs in the south, told of her experiences and a video clip with ENP youth expressing their feelings about integrating into Israeli society was shown.

At the conclusion of the entertaining evening, all this reporter could say was, this should have been a television telethon where viewers could call in and pledge money for this worthwhile nonprofit organization showcased here.

Anyone interested in sending a contribution to further the work of the Ethiopian National Project can send a check to them at 1 Ibn Gvirol, P.O. Box 7171, Jerusalem 91071.