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Successful integration of Ethiopian-Israelis through education and the Ethiopian national project

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The Ethiopian National Project was created by government decision in 2001 as a partnership between the government of Israel and Diaspora Jewry. The Prime Minister's Office crafted a strategic plan with ENP that can immediately engender the transformation so many seek. So what's the hold-up?

Baltimore is not Israel. At least not yet. Ethiopian Jews came to Israel as a free people to fulfill their dream of reaching the Promised Land. But the decision makers in the government of Israel and Diaspora Jewry that helped return Ethiopian Jewry to the land of their forefathers need to take swift action and invest funds to remedy the current situation. The longer we wait, the harder it will be to fix.

The protests that followed the circulation of a video depicting the use of excessive force by Israeli police against a uniformed Ethiopian-Israeli soldier was the emotive outcry of a community that has experienced all too many incidents of racism, unfair police treatment and prejudice. Their outrage is not new, but the regrettably violent demonstrations have once again brought into the public eye the disparity the community has protested so long. The burning question now: will effective action finally be taken?

Combating widespread prejudice – primarily an expression of ignorance and unfamiliarity with the “other” – requires a targeted, strategic bi-directional approach both to reverse the negative perceptions of Ethiopian Israelis that have been accumulating over the past three decades and to enable Ethiopian Israelis – immigrants and children of immigrants – to compete as equals so they may fully and successfully integrate into Israeli society.

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Reversing perceptions requires a series of comprehensive steps in a variety of areas to combat decades of negative exposure and well-meaning but ill-fated policies, including in the realms of media, employment, housing and more.

Competition as equals can be achieved through one very basic action: provision of supplemental education to Ethiopian Israeli children who require it, today.

With a high-level matriculation certificate, Ethiopian Israelis can study in the elite faculties including engineering and medicine; they can compete on a level playing field and enter the profession of their choice. Gainfully employed, they will be able to support their families, assist their children and ensure the next generation of Ethiopian Israelis are the neighbors, co-workers and classmates of all Israelis. In doing so, they will batter down the walls of unfamiliarity that are the root of preconceptions that lead to prejudicial behavior. In doing so, such intervention programs can finally conclude and will be needed no more.

But without such support, an equal playing field in the job market is a delusion.

Why is supplemental scholastic assistance so desperately needed? Two thirds of Ethiopian Israelis under the age of 18 were born in Israel, but to immigrant parents who came from an agrarian society where formal education was a rarity, not needed to flourish as farmers and shepherds in Ethiopia. Thus today, many parents of school-aged Ethiopian Israeli children are uneducated or underemployed: there are five times the number of dual bread-winner working poor families within the community.

Their children return to an empty home, or to illiterate parents who are unable to assist or afford provision of extra scholastic assistance to their children, while more and more Israelis are doing just that. The outcome is evident: in a comparison of achievement gaps, Ethiopian-Israeli children swiftly fall behind their peers, and by the 8th grade the gap is nearly insurmountable.

Not every Ethiopian-Israeli child needs such assistance, but those in densely-populated Ethiopian-Israeli neighborhoods and schools do. Some 12,000 school-age children – 40% of the school-age population – meet such criteria, unable to obtain the support they require to succeed in school that, if provided today, will prevent the very trends that give root to negative perceptions.

The ENP was created by the government of Israel as a partnership with Diaspora Jewry and Ethiopian Israelis to ensure the full and successful integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Its very purpose for existence is to allow government- and Diaspora-funded action to assist Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Over the past decade, ENP developed and executed a proven-successful after-school educational program called SPA CE, which addresses the holistic needs of Ethiopian-Israeli children so they can succeed in school, develop greater self-confidence and pass matriculation exams at university-entrance levels.

So successful is ENP, in fact, that the Prime Minister's Office crafted a ready-to-launch plan approved by all relevant governmental ministries – education, immigration and finance – in 2013, asking ENP to serve not only the 7th through 12th graders it reached in small numbers, but to include all 3rd through 12th graders in need. Budget was to be equally distributed between the ministries and Diaspora Jewry in a 10-year strategic initiative. Budgeted, it awaited just a go-ahead.

Instead? More talk: the formation of ENP's strategic plan in the realm of education prompted the Immigration Ministry to launch a Round Table Initiative called "The New Way," aimed to craft additional strategic plans in all realms in a "community inclusive process."

Regrettably, no operative plan resulted from "The New Way." On the contrary: it served to freeze the launch of the ENP-GOI Educational Plan which, already from 2014-15, would have been serving 12,000 schoolchildren in 46 cities. And ENP was already community-inclusive: ENP involves Ethiopian-Israelis at every level of its operations, planning and oversight, from parents of children to its most senior positions, including even prioritization of programs.

ENP is the solution to the community's woes. The change ENP engenders for the 4,100 children currently participating is without compare. In a study conducted by the Myers-JDCBrookdale

Institute of ENP's work in the realm of scholastic assistance through the SPA CE program, ENP succeeded in lessening the matriculation gaps between Ethiopian Israelis and non-Ethiopian Israelis in the same schools where ENP operated over a six year period by 36 percent. Further, in 2013, 81% of ENP participants passed at least 14 points of the matriculation exams by 12th grade – nearly reaching full matriculation. This statistic surpasses that of the general Jewish population (76%) and is sufficient for entrance to practical engineering and other professional career-directed courses following graduation from high school.

Perhaps, if these 12,000 children had been included in SPA CE, the despair that brought so many of their older siblings and parents to the streets could have been averted, instead replaced with a glimmer of hope due to a program that would have touched nearly half of all Ethiopian Israeli families in Israel.

More committees, more talk, more inaction will only serve to preserve the unacceptable status quo of too few Ethiopian Israelis in key careers in an increasingly racially divided society.

Instead of a temporal socio-economic barrier due to a cultural gap upon immigration that is effectively addressed and overcome, ignorance and prejudice will become a norm and increasingly ingrained into Israeli society. Instead of an ingathering of the exiles embraced by all, Ethiopian Jews will be strangers in their own land – with increasingly violent outcomes.

No, Baltimore is not Israel. But ENP's work can ensure Israel is a light unto the nations instead of a scathe unto all those who played a part in bringing Ethiopian Jews back to the Promised Land, Government and Diaspora Jewry alike. So why wait?

The writer is the North American co-chair of the Ethiopian National Project.



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