

## Ethiopian National Project

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הפרויקט הלאומי לקהילה האתיופית בישראל

### Yobsefer Melaku, SPACE Staff, Ramla Remarks, April 2019

Hello! My name is Yobsefer Melaku.

I bet this is probably the first time you have heard the name Yobsefer. For Ethiopian Jews, every name has a meaning. Mine means “Brings good things”. That is because after I was born, after a long period of difficulties in my family’s life, suddenly everything seemed better. I hope I will bring only good for you, too.

I believe that’s why I am here today. To be the messenger to share with you all the good you have done and are doing. You have done so much for my community and for the Ethiopian National Project, which does such important things. I hope my story can help you truly understand how very special my community is, and the difference you are making every day in so many lives.

So first, my story.

I was born in Ethiopia in a small town named Tekel Dingay. I was lucky—the town was near a school. So twelve of my 18 siblings—including me-- had an opportunity to be educated. That was a very rare thing for most Ethiopians Jews—almost all Ethiopian Jews lived in remote mountaintop villages— we were the exception.

Because we lived in a town, we lived mostly among Christians—we had to walk to a distant village to pray on Shabbat and holidays. But like every Ethiopian Jew, we knew Ethiopia is not our home—in fact, our house was always called a house, not home—we knew it is just a transit stop until the day we returned to Jerusalem.

As a child I always dreamed of Jerusalem. My father would tell stories of Jerusalem, especially after the Shabbat morning meal. He would tell us always, “We Beta Israel belong in Jerusalem. One day we will be in Jerusalem.” We felt a spiritual connection-- that Jerusalem is like heaven where everything is quiet, peaceful and Jews are united with love.

Even my father’s profession was exceptional. My father was a traditional healer. His father, my grandfather, taught him this special skill. He was so well respected among all the townspeople, and healed so many, with plants and all things in nature. I’m sorry he didn’t teach that to me! But he taught me so many other things.

In fact, my father was not just a healer. He was a hero. For we had a secret. Because we lived in that town, we were a critical, life-saving stop on the route to Sudan, on the way to Jerusalem. You could say, my home was a stop on the “underground railroad”. My father was an activist and leader who helped thousands survive the journey to Jerusalem. Our home was a refueling stop, where groups of families—infants, elders and everything



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in between—would rest, obtain supplies, be fed, replenish their food and water for the remainder of the journey. All of this was done in secret, in silence.

When the groups would come, we would speak in whispers or just body language. My mother served coffee and bread that she prepared before they came. I remember my father running around among people and talking all night with them, he would not go to sleep. But the adults would tell us "children go to sleep!" You can imagine, it is hard to sleep in that situation, so we all would pretend to sleep, but lied awake all night.

Still dark, around three or four o'clock, people would get up and organize for the journey with excitement and talk quietly. They all would hug each other, say prayers and blessings, before continuing on. This was our life for about two years.

But then one day, my father was caught by the authorities. He was sent to prison. My father, Meteku Sahalu, was a Prisoner of Zion, arrested for his role in helping my community fulfill its dream.

For my family it was very hard and very sad. He was held in prison for almost a year. At first they would not let us see him, and we did not know if he was dead or alive. After three months, they let us visit him once a week for 3 minutes. By the time he was released, after such horrible conditions, he was very sick, and never recovered.

The route through our town to Sudan was now closed. We heard many "Beta Israel" were killed, and the government already knew about the journey. One brother had made the journey, but the rest of us had to find another way.

After being released from prison, my father heard it was possible to reach Jerusalem through the capital, Addis Ababa. There, my uncle, my mother's brother, began working with others who found another route. This route, you may not have heard of.

For those few of us who were educated, we received scholarships to study abroad. So here, a huge thank you. Many of those fake scholarships were funded by North American Jews—by you. This enabled us to receive permission to depart Ethiopia. The Marxist government otherwise refused to let people leave.

At first my father sent another older brother, who made it. Then, he sent me. I was 18 years old, the year was 1983.

My father never fulfilled his dream of coming to the Promised Land. But before he passed, he remained a hero by helping me fulfill my dream. He came to visit me one last time in Addis Abeba and told me he dreamed I reached Jerusalem. He blessed me. From that moment I had the confidence that I would reach Jerusalem. That was the last time I saw him—soon after he died, less than a year after his release from prison.

I completed all the bureaucratic arrangements and boarded a plane for Switzerland, via Egypt with false scholarship papers. I held my breath until we were in the air-- I had heard stories of Jews who had been removed from planes after being discovered.

During the stopover in Egypt, a man came up to me. He whispered shalom, and called me by my name. He told me to give him my papers and wait at another gate. He gave me back my documents and told me to board a different plane. He said he would watch over me to make sure I was safe. Two hours later I boarded the plane to Israel.

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When I reached Israel, I kissed the ground and said lulululululu! At passport control, they asked me where I was going. I had no idea! I just told them proudly “I am a Jew, I have returned home!” They let me sit and gave me drinks. They asked “who do you know in Israel?” I told them I have two brothers here and said their names but they could not find them. Finally, after a few phone calls, they reached my uncle. He came to pick me up. That was the first day of the rest of my life in Israel.

That night, asking of my family, my uncle told me one of my brothers is a soldier on the border of Lebanon. It was during the first Lebanon War. My brother received special permission to come see me the next day. We had two hours together-- for two hours we cried. He then had to go back to his unit, to continue to fight for our country. It was a difficult time.

The rest of my family came on Operation Solomon, in May 1991. Here, another thank you. **You** wrote the check that kept the rebels outside of Addis Abeba long enough for the rest of my family and 14,000 others to board the planes that brought them to Israel. All of this, in 36 hours.

I quickly understood education is the key to success in Israel. I first lived in the Tiberias Absorption Center and studied Hebrew in Ulpan. I completed a pre-academic program at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, then received a BA from Tel Aviv University and a Masters in Education from Kiryat Ono College.

All my professional life, I have worked as a mentor, an educational coordinator, a leader. I work with parents and children and school staffs, too. Today, I feel I am making the biggest difference possible, as the city coordinator of the Ethiopian National Project's School Performance and Community Empowerment (ENP SPACE) program in Ramla. It's an amazing after school program. The best name for it is SPACE Embrace. We give kids everything they need—help with their studies, role models, a lunchtime meal—all after school. We, the staff, are like aunts or big sisters, sometimes even like a mom to these kids. For every child in SPACE, we try to give them the key to higher education, to good military service, to a good job and a good life. We, the staff of SPACE, are often the difference between success and failure.

Since 2005, I am proud to say, through SPACE, I have helped thousands of children and parents.

SPACE is so important. Most Ethiopian parents never went to school or had very little education. The Israeli school system is totally unknown to them, they don't understand their role. The kids struggle to help their parents-- school comes only *after* family. Many feel the need to work, often at the expense of their studies. It is hard to steer the kids and the parents in the right direction. But day after day, that is what we do.

I'll share one example-- a seventh grader named Shimon\*. All of his teachers and the school principal believed he would drop out of school. He barely went to class.

But that was before SPACE. After we met him and gained his trust, he confided in us that his mother had cancer. His father was out of the picture, he had one brother who was in the army. Shimon cared for his mother, brought her to hospital appointments. That is why he was frequently absent and late for school, and often did not attend class.

Soon after, we held a meeting with Shimon, his mother and the school staff, and built a personal plan for him. He began to have amazing improvement in his studies. SPACE was there for him all the while.

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In 10th grade, Shimon's mother passed away. His brother returned to live with him, but worked all day. Studies became more difficult and Shimon very sad. He would come to school with no food, would not wake up in the morning. So we SPACE staff took action. Every morning Shimon did not come to school we would call and wake him. We made sure he had meals. We helped every way we could. After school, even on days he did not have SPACE, he would stay near us, and do his homework. We not only helped whenever he needed help. Even more importantly, we hugged him whenever he needed a hug. We worked with his school-day teachers to ensure they were aware of his situation so they would also help him along the way.

Shimon graduated high school with a full matriculation. He currently serves in The Israel Defense Forces in the elite Golani unit as a combat fighter. He is our pride and joy. Sometimes, he even calls me mom.

I'll also tell you about Rivka\*. She spent most of her days on the streets. I would talk with Rivka non-stop. I met with her parents—they were shocked, they had no idea that Rivka was not attending school and was about to be expelled. Rivka finally agreed to give SPACE a try. I can tell you, absolutely—it is because of SPACE that Rivka finished high school—not only that, but she finished with a full matriculation. Without us, she would still be on the streets. Rivka today is an officer in the IDF.

We have many stories of students like Shimon and Rivka. So many more of students who need that special attention, that caring teacher, someone to trust, someone who helps them believe in themselves. Someone that teaches them that they can ask for help, and get it. That we are there for them.

YOU are there for them. Because of you, I am there.

So again, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. You helped me fulfill my dream of returning to Jerusalem. You help me help others. Thanks to you, I am fulfilling my father's legacy, while helping my community succeed.

You are helping me fulfill my namesake of bringing good things. Because of your support of Federation, of the Ethiopian National Project and its SPACE program, these children will build a strong Israel. Together. And I know, you will be proud.

Thank you.

\*Names changed to preserve anonymity.