

Ethiopian National Project

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הפרויקט הלאומי לקהילה האתיופית בישראל

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Hello everybody.

It's such an honor to be here. And a huge responsibility. I am a messenger, sharing the story of my incredible community and the amazing work of ENP. But before that, I want to share a little of my own story so you can better understand why we've gathered today.

My name is Fraihewiott. I was born in 1978 in Ethiopia.

You probably all are curious about the meaning of my name. In Ethiopia it is customary to choose a name for your child connected to an event that took place at the time of the birth. I am the firstborn daughter to my parents who brought me to the world after many struggles and difficulties. In spite of all this, they always believed in life. Therefor the meaning of my name is "THE FRUIT OF LIFE".

Like the majority of Ethiopian Jews, my parents grew up in the remote mountaintop villages of Ethiopia, living among Jews. My mother had 11 brothers and sisters. My father had 9. My mother helped her mother with household chores and my father was a farmer. Only a very few children were sent to school, and fewer yet continued into high school.

Both my parents, amazingly enough, were among those lucky few. For high school, they both were sent to distant towns to continue their education, the only choice for those continuing past elementary school. Later, their parents arranged for them to be married. Soon, I was born.

Village life was idyllic in many ways, but living in an Ethiopian town was difficult. Jews had to hide their Jewish identity, or face persecution.

Ever since I was a little girl, I felt different from others in Ethiopia. We lived far away from our extended family. We were the only Jewish family around. Most of our neighbors were Christians and a few Muslims. Whenever a Muslim or Christian holiday came up, my parents made sure I didn't participate in the ceremonies held by the school. So on such occasions I came up with excuses not to go.

I remember a few kids kept calling me names like BUDA. Not THAT Buddha whom you know and think. I remember asking my parents what the word meant. They didn't reply.



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Years later, I learned it means a wicked creature that eats kids. I'm glad I didn't know that, then.

I studied in 1st grade in Ethiopia. There were 50 kids in my class, aged 4 to 9. I felt so fortunate to be at school. I remember my excitement when my parents bought me my first notebook and pencil. Our teachers were almighty—if we misbehaved, our hand was whipped with a tree branch. I still remember the feeling.

My parents, younger sister and I made Aliyah in 1984. Ethiopia was a Marxist regime, and only those with special permission could legally leave the country. Others risked their lives to leave secret operations. Technically, my family left at the time of Operation Moses, the secret operation where 12,000 left their villages in the dead of night, walking through Ethiopia to Sudan under the guise of being refugees, then rescued from the horrific Sudanese refugee camps by the Mossad.

4,000 lost their lives in that difficult journey—I of every 3 died.

But again, my family's story was different, exceptional. Again, we were lucky. Since my parents were educated, they were included in a different secret operation where the US government and Israel together came up with a cover story to send a very small group of Ethiopian Jewish families to the US for professional training, after which they were to be returned to Ethiopia. Permission granted, we boarded the plane, but instead of to America, we were flown to Cairo, and from there, directly to Israel. For my parents, it was probably almost like "Argo".

When we finally landed, my family's generations-long dream of returning to the land of Israel was fulfilled. I had no idea what was happening. Suddenly one day, I was among many friendly people, black and white.

Once we arrived to Israel we resided in a one bedroom room in the Absorption Center for new Immigrants in Nazareth Illit, for 5 years. During that time I met new immigrants from all over the world. My first friend was from Hungary. We had difficulties communicating with each other but that didn't stop us from finding many other things we had in common.

Growing up, I studied in a religious school. Apparently there was some doubt as to our Judaism so we had to "study" how to be Jewish in those schools. A year later I asked my parents if I could go to a secular school.

At my old school, I felt like I wasn't making any progress. At my new school, I quickly began to read and write in Hebrew. My parents also started studying Hebrew in ulpan. We regularly studied Hebrew together in the evening. I often would help them, and sometimes even felt like their teacher.

Even for me, with so much fortune in my life, it was a bumpy ride. My parents were educated, I was educated, we were airlifted without harm from Ethiopia at a time when thousands were dying, we rarely wanted for anything. But as an immigrant child, and a child of immigrants, I had to grow up fast. I wanted to help my parents acclimate in Israel quickly.

As the big sister, I had many responsibilities, especially babysitting my younger siblings. I also had to help my parents whenever they needed me. But even with all those responsibilities and the uncertainties, I successfully completed school with a full matriculation certificate.

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In my military service I was stationed in Jerusalem. After one year in the army I received a Certificate of Excellence. I enjoyed every moment in the army, mainly for two reasons: I had the privilege of serving my country, and for the first time I was on my own.

After the army, I had a little bit of an identity crisis.

When I arrived in Israel, immigrants were given a Hebrew name. Mine was HAVA-Eve.

I am NOT an Eve. Even as a child, I knew I wouldn't keep my new name. But only after my military service in the Israel Defense Forces did I return to my original name, the one my parents gave me.

And now, today, I know precisely who I am. I am a Proud Black, Jewish, Israeli, Ethiopian Woman and Mother!

In 2001 I received my BA in Communication and Management. Last year, I completed my Master's degree in Education System Management.

Especially now, when I know how I am- black Jewish Israeli Ethiopian woman and mother also needs to be a role model. Not only for my children, but for my community.

And that is what led me to the Ethiopian National Project and its SPACE, School Performance and Community Empowerment program. So many Ethiopian-Israeli kids don't know what to do with their life.

In my role, I am able to steer them in the right direction, guide them with their problems and serve as a bridge between their parents, teachers and even themselves, all to help them make the best decision regarding their future.

I also work with, guide and counsel the professionals to help them make an even greater difference in children's lives.

I am proud to say, standing here today, that is precisely what we are doing, together!

Through your support of ENP, WE are changing lives. There are so many stories of how we do that, day after day, child after child.

One of those stories is Avichai, his counselor and his mom. Avichai started SPACE last year, in 7th grade. He's from a tough family in an even tougher city. His father is very strict and his mother overwhelmed, not knowing how to help her youngest of four succeed in school and in life.

At the end of last year, the kids were told SPACE would continue into the next year—from year to year we continue SPACE only if funding allows.

Since SPACE is a voluntary program, the children can make the choice to continue to participate, or not. In a private meeting with his SPACE counselor, Avichai announced that he planned to drop out and had no intention of explaining why.

Our SPACE program coordinator calmly accepted his decision.

Avichai responded in disbelief. "Aren't you going to try to convince me to stay?" he asked? She told Avichai that she trusts his judgement and accepts his decision, whatever his decision may be.

Of course, the counselor called Avichai's mother to let her know. But she told his mother that we should give him time, that she understood he was struggling, and would respond only negatively to any pressure.

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Sure enough, a couple days later, Avichai asked to meet his SPACE counselor and confided in her. He is a small child and stutters, has low self-confidence and self-esteem, is insecure and has poor grades. Often he'd get angry for no reason, without warning. Everything for Avichai was difficult. He told her, he felt alone, frustrated and scared of failure.

But for the first time, he was given a choice, respect and trust. That gift of space and time changed something in him. He realized people wanted to help him. It was just up to him to let himself be helped.

Together, they decided Avichai would continue in SPACE. His counselor promised SPACE would be there for him, as would his teachers, the counselor, coordinator, everyone, as much as he needed.

That evening, Avichai's mother called the counselor, in tears. She shared that for the first time ever, Avichai opened up to her and shared what he was going through.

She even mentioned that not once did he stammer, as he shared his feelings. "Never before has anyone reached him the way you have," she said: "I feel like you've opened up a new life for my son."

Today? Not only does Avichai attend every single SPACE session and activity. He is even his group leader, playing a key role as the contact person between the staff and his peers.

I see my role with ENP SPACE as a mission, to help others. I have so much to give with the life experience I have gathered. It is my hope that I can influence others also to make change.

My name is the fruit of life. One of the most beautiful fruit trees in Ethiopia is the lemon tree. There, we had a saying. "Fifty lemons are a burden to one person, but when carried by many, they are light, delicious, and have a beautiful fragrance."

Together—you, me, my colleagues, supporting Federations—we all are transforming the lives of our SPACE kids, one by one.

Thank you, and thank you to Federation, for playing a part in ENP, and helping my community, and Israel, be all it can be.

AMESEGNALOW!!