

# Background

## Integration of Ethiopian Israelis

הקן החדשה לישראל  
New Israel Fund  
الصندوق الجديد لإسرائيل



### More Borders to Cross

Ethiopian Jews who have immigrated to Israel during the past 30 years face numerous obstacles to their successful integration. The community---today numbering approximately 105,000---still grapples with day-to-day issues of unemployment and under-employment, housing, youth at-risk and social alienation. Drastic cutbacks in government assistance since 2001 have further exacerbated the problems.

- 47% of community members aged 25-54 are not part of the workforce;
- 72% of children from Ethiopian families live in households below the poverty line;
- High school drop-out rates for Ethiopian youth double that of the general population;
- Only 32% of Ethiopian students who attempt matriculation exams actually pass;
- 25 percent of all cases of wife murder are in families of Ethiopian origin.

One major contributing factor to these problems is the erosion of the family unit within the Ethiopian Israeli community. The parents' difficulties in integrating have weakened their ability to act as strong role models for their children born in Israel and has left many young people feeling confused. Additionally, as they see their parents struggle, young Ethiopian Israelis often fail to understand the value of learning about their Ethiopian heritage and culture. This schism between many members of the older and younger generations has been exacerbated by the government's policy of sending Ethiopian high school students to boarding schools.

Furthermore, the treatment of many Ethiopian Israelis at the hands of authorities—such as the Rabbinate's demand that Ethiopian immigrants undergo a symbolic conversion—has served to alienate the community from Israeli society. Even so, large numbers of immigrants continue to struggle to develop an Israeli and/or Jewish identity, to integrate socially and to find their place in Israeli society.

### Challenges

- More than 75 percent of the Ethiopian Israeli community came from rural, agrarian environments and have few skills marketable in a modern economy. This has resulted in severe inequalities between Ethiopian citizens and other citizens of Israel.
- Unfamiliar with Israeli bureaucracy and lacking the ability to navigate the system, Ethiopian Israelis are often unable to access their rights to education, health care, fair employment practices and other vital services.
- The majority of Ethiopians live in impoverished development towns where even menial jobs are scarce, and the lack of educational opportunities has relegated others to entry-level positions with little upward mobility.
- Cultural differences continue to impede their integration into Israeli society—Ethiopian Jews are particularly troubled by stereotyping and discrimination. (One example is an ongoing battle for Ethiopian *Keses*—spiritual leaders—serving the community to receive equitable salaries to those of community rabbis.)
- More than 17,000 Ethiopians who claim to be Jewish—the *Falashmura*—many of whom have relatives in Israel, still await immigration in Ethiopia.

### NIF Activities and Achievements

NIF is working to:

- Promote the acceptance of Ethiopian Jews into Israeli social and religious life;
- Address poverty, unemployment and housing issues in the Ethiopian community;
- Ensure equal access to education for all Ethiopian children;
- Provide opportunities for Ethiopian youth-at-risk;
- Raise public awareness of the challenges facing the Ethiopian population and of the solutions to those problems; and

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- Empower Ethiopians with the skills and confidence to change their own situation.

Our grantees and projects include:

- **Fidel: Association for Education and Social Integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel**, which works to raise awareness among educators about the educational needs of Ethiopian children, and to improve their academic performance. Fidel conducts advocacy, professional training of community liaisons, empowerment efforts for students and parents, and other projects such as an information center for youth-at-risk in the central bus station in Tel Aviv. Fidel mediators can be found in many schools with large concentrations of Ethiopians. [www.fidel.org.il](http://www.fidel.org.il);
- **Netzigut – Forum of Representatives of the Ethiopian Jewish Community to the Ethiopian National Project**, a coalition of twelve organizations from across the country dedicated to involving Ethiopian community representatives in the National Project. The Project aims at promoting integration of Ethiopian immigrants in three key areas: education, employment and building community infrastructure. [www.nif.org/content.cfm?id=2418&currbody=1](http://www.nif.org/content.cfm?id=2418&currbody=1);
- **SHATIL project – Ethiopian Women's Empowerment Project**, which empowers Ethiopian women on the individual, community and national levels to effect change in their communities. SHATIL seeks to encourage women's activism and leadership in the Ethiopian community, a traditional community in which women are generally absent from activism and from leadership roles. The women meet on a regular basis to facilitate their involvement and contribution to community issues and problems, and representatives from each group attend skill-building workshops;
- **Ethiopian Student Union**, which promotes leadership skills among Ethiopian students and facilitates the students' activism and involvement in the community. With SHATIL's assistance, ESU has helped students win funding for and implement educational programs, such as peer tutoring and English enrichment programs for Ethiopian university students, a technology-*Mechina* (college preparatory program) for Ethiopian students, and a mentorship program for Ethiopian children and their families;
- **SHATIL project – Yachdav for the Prevention of Violence in the Ethiopian Family**, which aims to raise awareness in the community of the issue of domestic violence, and to address the issue in a culturally sensitive fashion.

## Learning to Lead – SHATIL Helps Ethiopians Young and Old Take Responsibility for their Community

Efrat Mekonen, an Israeli gym teacher of Ethiopian origin, was making herself a cup of coffee in the teachers' room of her school when another teacher tapped her on the shoulder and, assuming she was the maid, said, "Could you wash a cup for me?" Rachamim Gosha, a young teacher in another school, is more often than not mistaken for the guard. When an Ethiopian family moved from one city to another, they were automatically added to the city's welfare rolls.

These are some of the experiences that came up during a recent meeting of a SHATIL young leaders' training group for Israelis of Ethiopian origin in Bet Shemesh. Organizational consultant Arie Plat meets with the group weekly as part of SHATIL's 10-city effort to train Israelis of Ethiopian origin to become local decision- and policy-makers in matters affecting their community. He teaches the basics of community organizing, project planning, needs-assessment, the responsibilities of a community representative and how to respond to racism. "This course is an opportunity," says Esther Zelka, a young mother. "I see a lot of problems in my community and I want to help. Here, we acquire tools: how to deal with the establishment, with the community. And we get to know ourselves and what we can contribute." As to the Ministry of Education's 25 percent limit on Ethiopians in a particular school, Esther asks, "How are Ethiopians defined? Is a girl born in Israel Ethiopian? I teach my daughter she's an Israeli of Ethiopian origin."

This group and others like it reflect a revolution in the integration of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. Says Shlomo Berihun, coordinator of SHATIL's Assistance to Ethiopian Immigrants Project, "Until now, Ethiopians didn't participate in decisions affecting their fate. This training process is a very meaningful step in the maturation of the community. The community is changing its perception about its own ability to influence processes and programs that affect it. They've moving from passivity to activism."

## One Israeli Inspires Ethiopian Youth



"As Jews, Israel is our home. Ethiopia was the exile."

In recognition of his work with the Ethiopian Israeli community, Asher Elias has been selected as a Social Entrepreneur Fellow for 2007-2009. The **Social Entrepreneur Fellowship Program** is run by Israel Ventures Network in partnership with **New Israel Fund** and the Sacta-Rashi Foundation. The program provides a stipend, funding for projects, and a personal mentor to the fellows, each of whom is implementing innovative solutions to social problems in Israel. Previously, Elias served as finance director for the **Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews**, a former New Israel Fund grantee that has since graduated from our support and stabilized its own sources of funding.

Elias, now 36, has never lived in Ethiopia. He was born in Ashdod, and learned at age 13 how his aunt carried his dying grandmother's body on her back across the desert so she could be buried in Israel. For Elias, this story began a discovery of the plight of his community---not only their struggle to get to Israel, but also their struggle since arriving in the land they now call home.

Elias was exposed to the distress of Ethiopian immigrant youth at age 26, when he discovered a community grappling with high rates of petty crime, mounting poverty and drug abuse, and a troubling sense of social alienation. Elias's cousin volunteered at an Ethiopian youth center in the Tel Aviv central bus station, and showed Elias the stark situation. "I was shocked to find 14- and 15-year old kids with police files," he says. "In its desire to advance the youth and turn them into Israelis, the state cut these children off from their parents and transferred them to inferior government-run boarding schools together with children from broken homes."

Asher gave up his own lucrative career in high-tech to work in the Ethiopian community. He authored "An Ethiopian in Your Backyard" (Gefen Publishers, 2001), a book that describes the unfortunate fate of Ethiopian youths in Israeli society.

In 2004, Asher partnered with American immigrant Glen Stein to establish **Tech-Career**, a training center for Ethiopians enter the high-tech work force. Based in Kibbutz Nachshon between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Tech-Career offers a year-long intensive program for high school graduates from the Ethiopian Israeli community.

Elias sees employment as the key to full integration. "Of course, employment is tied to education," he said, "but even so, there are over 3,000 university-educated Ethiopian Israelis. That's a huge potential reservoir. The problem is that they are channeled toward low-paid careers in teaching, social work and nursing. Ethiopians cannot be accepted into the computer science departments of universities and go into high-tech, which is one of the most lucrative areas in the economy, because the academic elite set criteria in the form of psychometric exams, on which individuals from our community achieve low scores. I chose to create an alternative that will prove that if the Ethiopian Israelis are given a chance, they will succeed in achieving a breakthrough and succeed using their personal abilities and accomplishments."

In Tech-Career's first year, nine out of 15 students graduated the course and found work in high-tech, while in the second course (still running) nine students began and six remain.

*Quotes taken from Vered Lee, "Initiative prepares Ethiopian youth for high-tech careers," Haaretz, March 2, 2006.*

### Questions for Discussion

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#### General Discussion

1. What did you know about Ethiopian Jews in Israel before watching this video? After watching, what confirmed your view? What challenged it? What new information did you gain?
2. What is your reaction to Asher's perspective on how Ethiopian Israelis are treated? How would you characterize the struggles of Ethiopian Israelis?
3. What is your notion of Aliyah? How would you compare the ideals of Aliyah and its practical implementation given Asher's comments? How do you react to the Israeli state's placement of recent immigrants in boarding schools?
4. Asher speaks of many Ethiopian Israelis identifying with the African-American community, and choosing African-American celebrities as role models. How does that choice strike you? What might Asher see as a point of success in the model of African-American identity?
5. Ngista identifies herself as an Ethiopian, but says she'd "rather be Israeli." What is your reaction to this statement?

#### Going Deeper

1. Many believe in the idea of Israel as a melting pot, bringing together Jews from all over the world and from vastly different cultures to form one nation.
  - a. What do you think of this concept?
  - b. How can/should immigrants retain their cultural identity while gaining a national (Israeli identity)?
  - c. What differences, if any, do you see in the experience of immigrants to Israel and immigrants to the United States?
  - d. Some see racism as playing a part in the struggle of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. What is your view?

### Further Resources

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Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews: [www.iaej.co.il/](http://www.iaej.co.il/)

North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry: [www.nacoej.org/](http://www.nacoej.org/)

New Israel Fund website (Issue Area: Immigrants): [www.nif.org/content.cfm?cat\\_id=1582&currbody=1](http://www.nif.org/content.cfm?cat_id=1582&currbody=1)

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

[www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Archive/Communiques/1996/The%20Absorption%20of%20Ethiopian%20Immigrants%20in%20Israel%20-](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Archive/Communiques/1996/The%20Absorption%20of%20Ethiopian%20Immigrants%20in%20Israel%20-)