INTEGRATION OF ETHIOPIAN ISRAELIS: MORE BORDERS TO CROSS

Ethiopia has a long and rich Jewish history. For many years, the Ethiopian Jewish community aspired to immigrate to Israel and did so in two major waves beginning in the 1980s. Facing persecution, famine and violence under a new regime in Ethiopia, Ethiopian Jews requested aid from the Israeli government. Israel then engaged in a series of operations, including Operation Moses, to help them escape these conditions by bringing them to Israel.

While Israel provides a safe haven for Ethiopian Jews, those who have immigrated to Israel during the past 30 years face numerous obstacles to their successful integration. The community—numbering approximately 120,000—still grapples with day-to-day challenges, including unemployment, housing shortages, youth-at-risk and social alienation. Drastic cutbacks in government assistance since 2001 have further exacerbated these problems.

CHALLENGES

- About 70% of the Ethiopian Israeli community was born in Ethiopia. More than 75% of the immigrants 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.

Looking at the Numbers

- 65% of children from Ethiopian families live in households below the poverty line
- Only 36% of Ethiopian students who attempt matriculation exams actually pass
- High school drop-out rates for Ethiopian youth are almost double that of the general population
- 14% of the Ethiopian Israeli community is unemployed, compared to only 6.6% of the general population
- Ethiopian immigrants have generally been placed in impoverished development towns or absorption centers where they are isolated from mainstream Israeli society. In these areas there is a lack of access to better educational and employment opportunities, and even menial jobs can be scarce.
- One repercussion of these problems is the erosion of the family unit within the Ethiopian Israeli community. Finding it difficult to integrate into Israeli society, parents’ ability to act as strong role models is weakened and their children stray away from the family. This contributes to falling behind in school and juvenile delinquency.
- The gap between many members of the older and younger generations has also been exacerbated by the government’s policy of sending Ethiopian high school students to state-run boarding schools. In these schools they tend to lose their Ethiopian culture and language, as well as the guidance of their parents.
- Ethiopian Jews are particularly troubled by stereotyping and discrimination by institutions and the authorities. For example, in 2009 three private religious schools in Petah Tikva refused to accept Ethiopian students. Skeptical of Ethiopian immigrants’ Jewish identity, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi declared they could not be accepted into religious schools. The High Court of Justice eventually ruled that the schools must accept some Ethiopian students.
RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES

Ethiopian Israelis are establishing organizations to strengthen and empower their community as an equal part of Israeli society. These organizations are 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
- Empower Ethiopian Israelis with the skills and confidence to change their own situation.

Examples of organizations making a difference on the ground include:

**Tebeka—Center for Legal Aid and Advocacy for Ethiopian Jews in Israel**

*Tebeka* ([www.tebeka.org.il](http://www.tebeka.org.il)) is the leader in providing legal assistance to protect the rights of Ethiopian immigrants and aid their integration into Israeli society. *Tebeka’s* director, Itzik Dessie, is the first lawyer of Ethiopian origin in Israel and a graduate of NIF’s Civil Liberties Law Fellows Program.

Recently, *Tebeka* has worked to promote legislation which will outlaw all forms of ethnic discrimination. In 2009 *Tebeka* played a strong role in combating discrimination against Ethiopian students in the Petah Tikvah school system (see Challenges), and in 2010 *Tebeka* helped organize a demonstration against the segregation of Ethiopian preschoolers in Be’er Sheva.

**Friends by Nature- Community Empowerment**

With the help of the New Israel Fund, young adults of Ethiopian and other origins established *Friends by Nature* ([www.friendsbynature.org](http://www.friendsbynature.org)) to better the status of the Ethiopian community in Gedera. Their approach highlights the role of the parents and the preservation of the community’s traditions. The organization has developed a successful model for community empowerment and runs activities such as a Homework at Home tutoring project, multi-cultural youth projects, youth leadership development projects and neighborhood committees.

Since *Friends by Nature* began their youth clubs in Gedera, the school dropout rate among Ethiopian-Israelis in the town has dropped to zero. New groups have been established in Beer-Sheva, Beit Shemesh, Yavneh, Rishon Lezion, Netanya and Ramle, and a national network is now being formed.

Learning to Lead: Asher’s Story

Asher Elias gave up his own lucrative career in high-tech to help Ethiopian-Israeli youth grappling with high rates of petty crime, mounting poverty, drug abuse and a troubling sense of social alienation. In 2004, after several years of volunteering in immigrant organizations supported by NIF, Asher established the *Tech-Career Association*, offering young Ethiopian Israelis hi-tech study opportunities. Today, *Tech-Career* graduates successfully compete with university graduates in computer studies for jobs in the hi-tech market.

In recognition of his work, Asher was 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.