

Inspiring Heroes

The Yerusalem Forum aspires to build a more tolerant, inclusive, and resilient Israeli society by educating the public about the heritage of Ethiopian Jewry.

by Heidi J. Gleit

On Friday, January 18, 24-year-old Yehuda Biadga was fatally shot by a policeman in the city of Bat Yam near Tel Aviv.

On Sunday, June 30, 18-year-old Solomon Tekah was fatally shot by a policeman in the town of Kiryat Haim near Haifa.

While the circumstances surrounding their deaths differed and have been analyzed ad nauseam in the Israeli media, one detail is indisputable: Both men happened to be Ethiopian-Israelis, as is Demas Fekadeh, who was beaten by policemen in the city of Holon near Tel Aviv on Monday, April 27, 2015, while he was serving in the IDF. The shooting and the beating of each these young men

Facing page: Officials and activists from Kiryat Mal'akhi participate in an educational trip to Ethiopia in fall 2017. (Erez Roimi)

sparked widespread protests in the Ethiopian community not only regarding police violence, but also against the mundane racism, from offensive comments to overt job discrimination, that community members have been subjected to on a daily basis since the large wave of aliyah from Ethiopia several decades ago.

Shmuel Yilma, who made aliyah from Ethiopia in 1980, recalls the upsetting events of 2015 clearly because at the time, his oldest child was serving in the IDF.

“When I saw the video of the soldier being beaten, I saw my daughter and thought about how she would cope with all this. It really was a blow to my sense of security in Israel,” he says. “I was an

active member of the MAOZ leadership program and decided that I wanted to go to neighborhoods and hear from youths, the new generation of Ethiopian-Israelis, about what they feel. Together with a friend, I organized a group of decision makers to do so and the youths showed us their neighborhoods and all the problems they face. They asked why they have such poor conditions and why the police always are suspicious of us, stop us on the streets, search us, and treat us with disrespect. Even when we try to be normative, we all remain suspect.”

This led Yilma to realize that the problem is twofold. On one hand, the youths had barely been exposed to or learned about their own rich heritage, the thousands of years of history and traditions of Ethiopian Jewry, which could have served as a source of inspiration to help them address the challenges they face as well as contribute to building a more tolerant society. On the other hand, the general Israeli public is even more unfamiliar with this heritage and a variety of misconceptions prevail that have allowed racist attitudes and behavior to flourish.

“I understood that it isn’t enough to just teach the youths to be good students and soldiers and employees, we also need to work on their identity, their connection to their heritage, so that they will

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have the strength to work with Israeli society and change it and change how they see the situation,” Yilma explains. “The young generation’s lack of connection stems from growing up surrounded by Israeli society’s negative image of black people in general and of Ethiopian-Israelis in particular. Israeli society sees this community as weak and passive, has low expectations of it, subjects members to racial profiling, and more. This is a result of ignorance, discrimination, and racism.

“The young generation has not been taught that every wave of aliyah brings along something unique to contribute to Israeli society and we, the Ethiopian Jewish community, brought something connected to spirit, to values, to identity, to relations between people, and to beliefs and faith.



The Ethiopian community's contribution to Israeli society is values such as respect for the elderly and community solidarity."

All this prompted Yilma to launch what is today the Yerusalem Forum (www.forumyerusalem.org), which initially was called Gvanim, Hebrew for shades or variations.

"Since this is a problem of Israeli society, not just of Ethiopian Israelis, I wanted a round table that included a broad spectrum of Israeli society," explains Yilma, who has served as the chairperson of the forum since founding it in addition to heading the community and family unit of the Joint-Ashalim. "I turned to 20 organizations that deal with Jewish identity and education and asked them to come together and work on helping this community become part of Israeli society."

The result is a coalition dedicated to sharing the story of Ethiopian Jewry and transforming it into an integral and constructive part of the Israeli narrative. The forum has focused on two main areas of activity thus far. The first is organizing conferences on pioneering Ethiopian-Jewish leaders and heroes so they will become public figures that all members of Israeli society can take pride in and learn from.

"Our idea was if we could share the stories of some 20 people, it would have an impact," he says. "We started with Ferede Aklum, then Baruch Tegen'e, and then Herut Tekle and Asresi Getu, who all played pioneering heroic roles in the aliyah of Ethiopian Jewry. We also honored young women who are spearheading significant changes in Israeli society today. The next conference will

Below: The Yerusalem Forum has published books on women leaders (left) and Ferede Aklum (right).

Facing page (top): Shmuel Yilma (left) and *kessim* (right) address the Yerusalem Forum's 2019 conference. (Yoav Lin)

Facing page (bottom): The Yerusalem Forum's 2019 conference honored women leaders from the Ethiopian-Israeli community (left) and attracted a broad cross section of Israeli society. (Yoav Lin)

highlight pioneering spiritual leaders. Everyone sees the *kessim*, but no one knows what is special about them and the Israeli rabbinate does not recognize them. Our next conference will demonstrate the respect due to the *kessim*, who maintained the religion generation after generation."

For each conference, the forum produces a book with a detailed biography of the selected figures and supplemental material for educators. Hundreds of agents of change, decision makers, and community activists from Israeli society in general and the Ethiopian-Israel community in particular participated in the conferences, which already are bearing fruit. For example, IDF units have chosen to name squads after Ethiopian-Israeli heroes, a public square in Beersheba has been named after Ferede Aklum, the Beit Hafutsot-Museum of the Jewish People included Ferede Aklum in its pantheon of Jewish heroes, and an educational campus in the town of Kiryat 'Ekron was named after Baruch Tegen'e. On the educational level, the national religious education system has decided that Baruch Tegen'e is one of the educational figures whose story will be taught in all its schools; youth movements are organizing educational activities about Ethiopian-Israeli heroes in order to position them as heroes everyone can learn from; and a pupil who attends a Tel Aviv school that does not have Ethiopian-Israeli students did a report on Ferede Aklum and presented it to his class, introducing schoolchildren who rarely interact with Ethiopian-Israelis to an inspiring chapter of the community's story.

"That is the impact we are working for: to make the Ethiopian-Jewish narrative a natural, integral part of Israeli society and not just Ethiopian," Yilma says. "The more that we do, the more people will use this knowledge and see doing so as natural."

The forum's second major activity is organizing identity trips to Ethiopia for groups of influential Israeli professionals in the public, social, academic, and media sectors. One of the first groups hailed from Kiryat Mal'akhi, a town where 17 percent of the residents are Ethiopian. Some 25 municipal department heads, community



"The trips [to Ethiopia] were successful because they shook up the participants and opened a window for them to investigate Jewish identity and history and meaning," Yilma says, adding the forum plans to repeat the model developed in Kiryat Mal'akhi in other places.

activists, and other decision makers from Kiryat Mal'akhi participated in the eight-day tour. This trip was a joint effort of the Yerusalem Forum, MAOZ, the Rashi Foundation, and the Kiryat Mal'akhi municipality, with the generous support of the Gazit-Globe foundation, to transform the Ethiopian-Israeli community from a *netel* (burden) to a *neches* (asset) in participants' eyes.

"At first, there was a struggle between the Ethiopians in the group and the other members," Yilma recalls. "As the trip progressed, the tension was replaced by serious and emotional dialogue. Everyone ended up connecting, seeing problems they had been blind to over the years, feeling guilty, admitting mistakes, and understanding the Ethiopian-Israeli community better. Their





response was: ‘Wow, we didn’t know this and we will do things differently when we go back so that many others will know this’ and ‘We want to continue to act as a group to facilitate changes.’”

In the almost two years that have passed since, the participants implemented several significant changes. They felt the memorial day for those who died on the way to Israel from Ethiopia should be observed by all Israelis, not just Ethiopian Jews, leading the city to officially decide to host a formal memorial day event each year. They also decided to commemorate the fallen by creating a memorial bearing the names of all the relatives of Kiryat Mal’akhi residents who fell on the way to Israel and arranged for municipal staff to interview community members to gather information. After hearing the story of Ferede Aklum, they decided to name streets after him and Yona Bogale.

Another group trip, for a MAOZ delegation, included a visit to Aksum, the historic capital identified with the Queen of Sheba and the site of the Saint Mary of Zion church, which is traditionally believed to contain the Ark of the Covenant.

Above: The Yerusalem Forum conference in March 2019 focused on pioneering women leaders from the Ethiopian-Israeli community. (Yoav Lin)

Facing page: Officials and activists from Kiryat Mal’akhi participate in an educational trip to Ethiopia in fall 2017. (Erez Roimi)

Aksum residents hold a candlelit procession around the church before sunrise once a month; this age-old tradition inspired by the Bible demonstrates how Jewish practices have influenced Christian practices in Ethiopia. Witnessing that ritual led one Israeli educator to ask what the Israeli believes in today and to realize that the Ethiopian Jews survived thanks to a communal dream that was much greater than a single individual. The trip also led him to realize how active the community members were in their aliyah and that they were not simply rescued by Israel.

“The trips were successful because they shook up the participants and opened a window for them to investigate Jewish identity and history and meaning,” Yilma says, adding, “A trip is an extremely powerful tool for changing awareness and inspiring action so the forum plans to repeat the model of Kiryat Mal’akhi in other places and is seeking partners and donors to help make this possible. We want to do this first in the communities that have a large Ethiopian population and try to build a group in each place that will think about how to change the reality in its hometown.”

While the forum is focusing on the municipal level for now, Yilma notes that the same approach could be applied in the Israel Police, IDF, and other Israeli institutions.

“Changing awareness among agents of change could bring about a long-term change,” he explains. “If the teachers’ thinking changes, what they pass on to their students, that is, how they train police officers or IDF officers, will change.

“I believe racism comes from ignorance, fear, and lack of familiarity. For it to change, people must know the story and connect to it and the heroes and the people. When you do this in Israel, it has a small impact, but the trips to Ethiopia are



a powerful way to change awareness and then the participants go on to make changes.”

That said, since not everyone can take off eight days to travel to Ethiopia, Yilma also is exploring a third area of activity: heritage trips in Israel. He hopes to create an information kit on educational and tourism sites throughout Israel that tell aspects of the Ethiopian Jews’ story and make this information accessible to all so these sites will be easier to include on tour routes.

While Yilma is a firm believer in education – telling the story from an angle that society does not know – he is aware that there also is a need for more immediate interventions.

“Everywhere there is racism, people need to fight it,” he says. “To file complaints, to open their mouths, to hurt people’s pocket, to use the legal

system... just like sexual harassment was attacked, racism should be attacked.”

He notes that the protests in January were peaceful except for some minor, isolated incidents at the end, yet almost all the attention focused on that. Some protesters drew conclusions from this and there were more violent incidents in the July protests. Even so, the protesters made a gesture to Israeli society that launched a valuable public debate that Yilma hopes will result in policy change and legislation.

Meanwhile, the Yerusalem Forum remains committed to the long-term educational process to familiarize Israeli society with the heritage of

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Ethiopian Jewry in order to broaden the Israeli narrative to fully include Ethiopian Jewry and strengthen Israeli society by making it more inclusive and tolerant.

“I think if that is done on a broader scale over time, it will influence the young generation greatly by giving young people examples and hope. This is the response to the ignorance and the fear and the judgment and will make us a better society,” Yilma says. “It introduces Israelis to a story they do not know so they get to know Ethiopian Jewry in a fuller way and also broadens the Israeli narrative and then things will be done differently in the field. They also will see that this enriches the Israeli story, which actually consists of many different stories, and adds new values and reinforces existing values.” ■