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Cityfront: A source of inspiration

By SAM CROSS
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Ethiopian Jews, half of whom are under 18, see education reform as imperative to their success - which is where Nigist Mengesha and the Ethiopian National Project come in.

Dr. Nigist Mengesha, director-general of the Ethiopian National Project (ENP), had always dreamed of coming to Israel. Born in a tiny Ethiopian village near Gondar, she had an innate yearning to live in the Promised Land.

“The dream to be in Jerusalem is a dream of 2,000 years of Ethiopian Jews,” Mengesha told *In Jerusalem*. “We always had the idea that one day we would live in Jerusalem. It was always in our minds.”

But it was only after Mengesha arrived in Jerusalem, where she found her fellow Ethiopian Israelis struggling to integrate into Israeli society, that she realized her life's work.

“My dream is to see those children integrated into Israeli society,” says Mengesha. “Like any other child, an Ethiopian-Israeli youth has great potential. I reached Israel because many people gave me the opportunity. I want every child to reach his potential and be a productive member of Israeli society.”

In 1984, Mengesha accomplished her first goal. As part of Operation Moses, the government granted Mengesha the right to travel to Jerusalem under the pretext of a Hebrew University scholarship. Although she had to leave her husband and four children without knowing when they would see one another again, Mengesha was reunited with them two months later.

When questioned about her decision to leave her family, Mengesha says, “This was an opportunity that had to be seized.”

This, however, was only the beginning of Mengesha's journey. Although she and her family had fulfilled their dream, they found that living in Jerusalem – integrating into a modern, technologically advanced city with highly educated residents – was not quite what they imagined. Seeing her four daughters struggle to adjust to an obdurate Israeli school system, Mengesha recognized a larger issue at stake – the fate of the Ethiopian people in modern Israeli society.

Misunderstanding of cultures in the Israeli educational system is at the core of the Ethiopian community's struggle, says Mengesha. The Ethiopian Jews – half of whom are under 18 – see education reform as imperative to their success.

“The fact that we are such a young community shows how important schooling is in helping the Ethiopian community,” says Mengesha. “We do not want these problems to be passed on to the next generation.”

In 1996, Mengesha and other Ethiopian immigrants helped found the Fidel Association. Operating in 140 schools throughout the country, the program focuses on advancing the education effort and social integration of Ethiopian children and their parents by training fellow Ethiopian Israelis to be social and educational mediators.

“I knew from the very beginning that any work to better the community must be done hand-in-hand with the community itself,” Mengesha explains.

Working with the Fidel Association, Mengesha made significant inroads in solving Ethiopian-Israelis’ problems. However, she did not stop there. About five years ago, she helped establish the Ethiopian National Project, a shared initiative of global philanthropy and the government focused on supplying Ethiopian-Israelis with academic, social and emotional assistance. The ENP has established 24 outreach centers across the country to date, providing youth with safe and supportive environments.

Roni Akale, representative of the Ethiopian Jewish Community Organizations in Israel, has known Mengesha since she arrived in Israel. Although they originally met because of their families’ relationship, their common concern for the Ethiopian community brought them in constant contact as colleagues.

“I think that without the work of Dr. Mengesha, the problem would be a lot worse,” says Akale. “In my point of view, although education is not the only area of importance to the Ethiopian cause, it is the major area that must be developed. We must push the students to get their degrees and become professionals in Israel. This has been Dr. Mengesha’s focus.”

Although Akale believes that Mengesha’s work has inspired tremendous progress among the Ethiopian-Israeli community, he thinks that her story itself has done wonders for motivating Israeli youth.

“Dr. Mengesha herself is an example of what young Ethiopians must strive to achieve. She came here as an Ethiopian immigrant, received a doctorate in social work, and now is a leader in Israeli society. Ethiopian youngsters look to her and aspire to attain similar success,” he says.

In pursuit of her dream, Mengesha has indeed achieved remarkable success. She is proud of the fact that in Israeli society today, 85 percent of Ethiopians are taking the matriculation exam, while the national average is 81.5%.

Mengesha looks at results like the 3,000 Ethiopian-Israelis attending university and says they are “signs of great progress.” She is pleased about the “shrinking gap between Ethiopian-Israelis and Israelis.”

However, serious problems remain on Mengesha’s agenda. And in order to resolve these issues, she is calling on the government for increased funding. “This is not a problem of the Ethiopian community but of the entire Israeli society,” says Mengesha. “We need more investment.”

The Ethiopian National Project was established on false promises, according to Mengesha and Akale. While the government promised NIS 660 million, Mengesha received only NIS 2 million from the government. The majority of the ENP’s funding has come from Diaspora philanthropy, namely the United Jewish Communities-Federations of North America (UJC).

“The purpose of the project was to solve all areas of problems, such as employment, education, language and culture. But because of a lack of money, the ENP has only really been able to focus on education,” says Akale.

“The funding, mainly from America, has been very generous, especially in light of the economic crisis,” says Mengesha. “However, the government made promises of funds that they never fulfilled.”

The government’s security concerns were the cause of the insufficient funding for the ENP, Akale says. But regardless of the financial obstacles that Mengesha faces, she continues to work for her community so that one day the members themselves can be community leaders.

“We need these kids to see Ethiopian-Israelis with college degrees and be inspired to become professionals in Israeli society,” says Mengesha. “That is why mentor programs and other programs within the community are so important. They give young Ethiopian-Israelis something to aspire to.”

In recognition of Mengesha's relentless efforts to improve the Ethiopian-Israeli community, the Hebrew University awarded her the 2010 Samuel Rothberg Prize for Jewish Education for her outstanding contributions in the field of education in Israel.

"You have been and are a leader and initiator in the realm of education of the Ethiopian community in Israel," said Hebrew University president Prof. Menahem Ben-Sasson in his speech at the award ceremony on June 6. "Your educational work with immigrant communities has been sensitive to the special needs required to advance and fulfill the untapped potential of every Ethiopian-Israeli boy and girl."



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