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“Enticed by childhood stories of a land paved with golden streets, flowing with milk and honey, a black preacher's kid escapes to Jerusalem where he discovers love and bittersweet reality while living among a group of Ethiopian friends.” Sounds like a made-for TV. movie, right? First, if you agreed with that statement, shame on you! Second, it’s not a spec script for some up-and-coming cable network, but an original musical for the stage. Third, that musical is based loosely on my Israel experience while studying at the Rothberg International School.



The story begins with my non-eventful landing at Ben Gurion airport. Given the novelty of the journey, my inclination was to kiss the ground in awe. I opted to shoulder my luggage, put on my sunglasses, and allow the desert heat of the summer wash over me while I fantasized of the year to come. Prior to my arrival, my exposure to Israel was both familiar and distant. Nightly news programs, university course-work, exulted sermons, and Sunday school lectures made the Holy Land feel like an old friend.

The reality of my first semester contained more challenge than romance. First there was Ulpan, then biblical Hebrew, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Archaeology of Jerusalem, and so on. As I took inventory of my time, I was encouraged by how much I had learned. But Israel is more than a classroom. This simple self-confession launched me into my final semester with new purpose: I wanted to discover Jerusalem afresh. After a little searching, I found the perfect solution – volunteer with a local organization... and, join a choir...or, two...and star in a Rogers and Hammerstein musical in the city center?! Each week, it seemed as though my extra-curricular commitments ballooned to the point that I found myself suspended within a web of *Egged* bus routes. Still, a bus pass is a small price to pay for a good time.

My first stop took me to Jerusalem’s Jewish Agency Building. Within the massive labyrinth of Jewish advocacy groups, a set of unassuming offices housed the Ethiopian National Project (ENP). I eagerly chose to partner with this organization based on its commitment to support Israel’s burgeoning Ethiopian Jewish population. As a black American, I was certainly curious to learn more about the community’s rich history, and the benefits and hardships they encountered within greater society. Through my participation, I forged significant connections and friendships that carry me into the present.

A college friend’s recommendation led to a choir gig at the Rubin Academy of Music, which led to another gig with an Anglophone Jerusalem-based group, which in turn led to an audition for a production of *Oklahoma!* My final months abroad were balanced between touring both Israel and nurturing my ever growing passion for all things musical and Ethiopian.

By the time I returned to the US my experiences left me full of stories and gratefulness. However, as is the case with most life-changing excursions, words failed me. Every time well-meaning friends, family and acquaintances requested a summation, all I could provide in response was, "It was Israel!" My travels introduced me to a passion that I would not have discovered had I not ventured to Jerusalem.

As I move forward, I hope to infuse my ideas and stories with the lessons and memories gleaned from my time abroad in Israel and at the Rothberg International School.

