

## Courage and Hope – The JDC in Ethiopia

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<http://www.bnaijeshurun.org>

The date was *last* Friday night, “March 22 2005” The clock on the wall has the large hand on the 12 and the small hand on the 2. What time is it? (Pause). That’s right, it’s 7:30 in the evening, time for Shabbat dinner. Welcome to “**Ethiopian** time!”

We are gathered at the home of Dr. Rick Hodes, Medical Director of Ethiopia for the JDC in Addis Ababa. As we all stand in a circle, Dr. Hodes tells us that “I was asked recently if there is an extra chair at my Shabbat table. There is no table and there are no chairs, but there is always room!” We are standing in a large circle that encompasses the living and dining rooms, holding hands as we sing that old Jewish traditional Shabbat hymn, “If I Had a Hammer.” Shalom Aleichem, Kiddush and Motzi will follow, after which the 50 or so guests will make their way in to the kitchen where Injera bread awaits us along with large pots steaming with soup and a variety of Ethiopian vegetable stews. But first, we will go around the circle, and each of us will share our name and where we are from. About 30 nursing and physiotherapy students are there from a Catholic university in Denver. A doctor and his wife are visiting from Atlanta. They sponsor one of Rick’s group foster homes. A young man is traveling through Ethiopia, on a break from his Yeshiva studies in Israel. There are various other visitors and JDC workers, and then there are the kids. Each one of the kids introduces him or herself and describes the treatment or surgery they have undergone or are awaiting. Among those children was a young girl whose name is Fontaye.

Following local custom Fontaye had been forced to marry at the age of 12. At the age of 14, Fontaye walked out on her husband of two years in the village of Gojam, and made her way east to Addis Ababa to live with her brother, Tesfaye, now 17 or 18 years old in Tesfaye’s apartment in Addis. Fontaye now attends a government school in Addis and plans to go to college. As we stood in a circle in his living room – doctors, visiting medical students, wandering Jews and about 20 or so of “Rick’s kids,” we all applauded her for her tremendous courage.

Several years before, Fontaye’s brother, Tesfaye, suffered from a spine shaped like a reptile and a lung capacity so low it was a miracle he was alive. He had come from Gojjam for medical care, speaking no Amharic, walking like an ape and supporting himself selling gum, tissues, and cigarettes on the street. The JDC Clinic sent him to Vancouver for a very complicated spine surgery that saved his life. Tesfaye in Amharic means Tikvah – hope. Fontaye, the young girl with such courage, and Tesfaye, whose name means hope, embody much of what I saw in Ethiopia this past week. Courage and Hope.

Like Bewoket, who as a young child suffered from hepatitis as well as Rheumatic fever and needed a valve replacement. One day he overheard his parents compassionately talking about how there was nothing they could do for him except let him die in peace. Bewoket started collecting scraps off the ground to sell, eventually raising enough money for bus fare to Addis where he found his way to the JDC Clinic. He was sent to Atlanta for surgery, treated at the Clinic in Addis and now is healthy and enrolled in nursing school at Addis Ababa University.

Courage and Hope. Like the mother of young Abinezer, who was so weak from a complicated congenital heart defect and lack of oxygen in his blood that he could not even take three steps. For years – through third or fourth grade – his mother carried him to and from school and everywhere he I went. She would set him down on the ground where the young boy struggled to breathe and could barely move. Abinezer returned recently from surgery in India, and his mother cried when he ran out the airport door and into her arms.

Like Workneh, a boy with deformed hands like a huge bunch of grapes who underwent 5 surgeries at Cedars-Sinai in California, and now can use his hands and is in a boarding school outside Addis Ababa.

And Tsehai who had a bowling-ball sized jaw tumor removed in Munich. Rick dressed her in a Moslem bourka to hide her disfigured face and brought her to Germany himself for 8 surgeries there. She is now in cooking school.

These are just a few of the dozens and dozens of Rick's kids – Menachem's kids – that I met during my stay in Ethiopia. Each one faced or faces a challenge greater than the next. Each one exhibits extraordinary courage and hope and determination to live, and each has been miraculously granted a new life by Dr. Rick and the JDC Clinic.

I don't have to tell you how extraordinarily proud I am of my son, Menachem, who is spending this year working as Dr. Rick's assistant. I had the privilege of watching him in action at the JDC clinic, assisting Dr. Hodes with patients, records, x-rays; discussing cases; taking care of Rick's kids; coordinating flights home from surgeries in Ghana and arrangements for surgeries by visiting doctors at the Korean hospital in Addis. In addition to working at the clinic, Menachem runs the nerve center of the operation out of Rick's house, sending scans and coordinating surgeries with overseas doctors and hospitals, arranging travel. He works past midnight digitizing x-rays and doing research. He heads to the Korean hospital with Dr. Rick at 11 PM to deliver pizza and beer to a team who have just operated on one of his patients. He spends hours dissecting data to check whether pregnant women are gaining the needed 10 kg on Plumpy Nut supplementation. He transfers 6 contorted spine patients who speak 3 different languages from the Bethel Hospital MRI unit to the International Clinical Lab station to check their hepatitis B and HIV status, and then finds his way into the airport—which is closed to visitors at certain hours – to meet incoming heart surgery patients from Cochin. He listens to the hearts of 12 year old patients for mitral stenosis from rheumatic fever and checks their oxygen saturation, then runs to one of Rick's four group homes to check on the kids.

During the whole week I was there – except to me -- Menachem barely spoke a word of English, carrying on long conversations in Amharic as if it was his native tongue. Ethiopians who meet him are amazed at his fluency. Only one teenage girl teased him about his American accent! Most of all, I was moved by the way Menachem relates to these children, to whom he is part older brother and part father figure. At Dr. Rick's house, every child I met told me they were Menachem's best friend, that he was their big brother. He was met with excitement and warm embraces by each and every one. I was deeply moved watching him banter with them in Amharic, making them smile. When one stuck out his hand to thumb-wrestle with me, I knew Menachem had taught him.

The patients at the JDC Clinic in Addis Ababa are not Jews. They are Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Muslims. The Clinic is part of the JDC's International Development Program, or IDP. IDP comprises only 1% of the JDC budget, but serves those in need in over 35 countries. IDP projects include Tsunami relief, women's health and empowerment and care for the elderly to name just a few. It is the arm of your Federation dollars that engages in the Jewish value Tikkun Olam, seeking to help repair and heal our broken world. It also seeks to use these Tikkun Olam projects to strengthen pro-Israel feelings in strategic countries. Ethiopia is critical to what Israeli policy makers call the "strengthening the periphery": developing strong friendships with nations that border Israel's enemies. Ethiopia borders Sudan, Somalia and Kenya. It is just south of Egypt and across the Red Sea from Yemen and Saudi Arabia and so is of key strategic importance to Israel. Through its many IDP projects the JDC has fostered very strong positive feelings about Israel among Ethiopians at the same time that it is transforming their lives.

The Clinic is just one part of the JDC's work in Ethiopia. In Gondar, we also visited one of some 250 water wells that have been dug by the JDC. Ethiopian women carry large plastic jugs miles from the nearest river to bring water to their families. Often, as we would drive down long winding country roads, I would see women carrying these jugs on their backs or even balancing them on their heads. One large plastic water jug weighs 66 pounds! I lifted one on my back and can attest to their weight. I do not think I could carry it more than a few feet! The JDC wells enable the women to access water right in or very near their villages. The deep well water is also safer, being free of the disease and contaminants that severely pollute almost all rivers and lakes.

A crowd of children, their teachers and families, greeted us with singing, clapping and dancing as we joined them for the dedication of one of the many primary schools the JDC builds in Ethiopia. The school is a beautiful building painted bright yellow. Inside each room are plaster walls, large windows for light and a cement floor. The room is filled with benches and desks, a blackboard, bookcases with books, and educational posters on the wall. It seems like an ordinary classroom, but then we walk across to the old school building: made of mud and concrete, dark with no windows, only slightly raised rows of mud mounds on the floor to serve as desks. The site serves as more than just a school. These schools become the center of the community.

Beyond clinics, wells and schools. The JDC funds higher education for women to go into healthcare, engages in micro-financing to help Ethiopians launch small businesses to help lift themselves out of poverty and much more.

When we think about Ethiopia in the context of Passover, we usually think of the flight of Ethiopian Jews to Israel as a modern day exodus. I will speak about that on Yizkor. But I was reminded this year that there is much more to freedom than liberation from physical bondage to a human master. There is also freedom from illness and physical suffering, freedom from poverty, freedom from hunger, freedom from want, the freedom to realize our dreams and fulfill our destiny, to not merely exist but to truly live.

On Second day Passover, I recalled Rabbi Israel Salanter's teaching that too often people are overly concerned with their own gashmius and with other people's ruchnius – that is, we are quick too quick to act for our own material gain while too quick to pass moral judgment on others. It should be the opposite: we should be more concerned with our own ruchnius and other people's gashmius – we should worry more about our own morality and about other people's material needs. That is the work of the JDC.

At our Passover seder, we follow the custom of the Rophschitzer rebbe, who taught that each person at the table should pour a little wine from their own cup into the Elijah cup, filling it drop by drop, in order to teach us that it is our obligation -- through the contribution of our efforts -- to bring about the coming of the Messiah. Traveling through Ethiopia this week and observing the work of the JDC, I felt like the Messiah was a little closer. It is my hope and prayer that we as a congregation can find ways to support the important work JDC is doing and to be inspired by their work to make a difference in our own community as well.