

# Being Part of the Change

AVRAM MLOTEK '09



“You are father of many,” the Ethiopian Airline employee said to me behind his Customs booth at Addis Ababa airport, in the Ethiopian capital. With a bit of a bewildered look I explained that I did not, in fact, have any children. He laughed at me. “No, no, no,” he went on. “Your Hebrew name means father of many, yes?” I smiled and nodded slightly; it was the first time I was able to sigh and feel a bit of comfort in what would be one of the most unfamiliar and foreign places I have ever been. It would also be the first of many interactions I’d have with Ethiopians regarding my *kippah*<sup>1</sup>, my Biblical name and anything having to do with my faith.

This past summer as an Ethics Center Student Fellow, I interned in two foreign countries: Ethiopia and Israel. I presumed the latter would be more familiar than the former. I had visited Israel numerous times and had spent half a semester during high school in Jerusalem. I had never been to Ethiopia and had never been exposed to the kind of poverty that I would come to face. As a traditional open-Orthodox<sup>2</sup> Jew, my travels this summer were anything but orthodox, and I was worried how I’d be able to serve as a helpful volunteer while adhering to my traditional practices and customs. I quickly realized I was thrusting myself into a plethora of unknowns: what would I eat and how would I prepare meals? How would I incorporate time for prayer in my work schedule and what would my work schedule actually be? I embraced this as best I could before leaving the States. My overall intention was clear going in: to work with Ethiopian children, teaching English and music. My plan was also simple: be flexible. The rest I figured I would learn along the way.

While in Mekelle, Ethiopia, I interned for Hope Community Services (HCS), an organization that runs an orphanage on the outskirts of the city, funds a girls’ home for the blind in the heart of Mekelle and helps organize a nearby public school, which serves over 1,000 students. I was involved in each of these centers, teaching children English and teaching Jewish melodies. In Israel, I interned at the Yemin Orde Youth Village (YOYV) on Mt. Carmel, just below the city

of Haifa in northern Israel. There I worked in the kitchens with other volunteers and workers from the Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt and Yemen, and I taught English and Hebrew in the afternoons to individual Ethiopian high school students, as well as leading sessions on music and poetry. The common thread in these communities is more clear to me now than it was when I first arrived: the commitment to their respective faith, albeit practiced and portrayed in a multitude of different ways, was apparent in each lesson I taught, each conversation I had, and in each person I met.

The people and leaders behind each of these institutions keep the communities vibrant and functioning. A huge aspect of the positive impact that these two communities have is due, I believe, to the character of their leadership. Each community is led by a dynamic, approachable and exciting leader, both of whom were very much alike although often times very dissimilar: Gebre Beyenne, executive director of HCS, and Chaim Peri, the former village director of YOYV. These two directors and their organizations exemplify the power of community and the success of local impact.

With my voice and my *siddur*<sup>3</sup> as my tools, my music and my faith served as commandeers of my experience. They were the basis for my connection with others and also a means of centering myself. These tools came in handy whether in an overcrowded classroom in Mekelle or in a synagogue in Israel. I used them at the airport in Addis Ababa, walking

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around restaurants and gift shops, at an Israeli beach near Haifa, and even while hitchhiking up Mt. Carmel to get to Yemin Orde. It was precisely my music and my faith that helped me navigate and understand my new environments, helping me adjust, reflect, remain present and take an occasional heartfelt sigh.

### In Ethiopia

“In Ethiopia, the only problem we have is being poor – that’s it,” Geb says holding a piece of *injara*<sup>4</sup> in his right hand, the other hand kept under the table as is customary in Ethiopia. He continues, “So God blesses and one day He’ll bless Ethiopia and Africa with wealth.” With that Geb takes a bite of the bread with some leftover bean dip. He chews quietly and I wait till he’s finished eating for him to show me to the orphanage’s dairy farm. This must have happened the first or second night in Mekelle and I quickly learned that Geb was as interested and passionate in talking about his work as he was in actually doing the work. We would come to have nightly discussions on the front steps of the orphanage about faith, service and the role of religion in our lives.

Gebremadin, Gabe or Geb for short, is in his fifties but looks like a thirty-year-old man. He is thin and keeps in shape. When he leaves the orphanage, he wears a pair of dark dress pants and a button-down white shirt, always with pens and papers in his breast pocket. But when he stays home at the orphanage and works with the cows, or plays with the children, he wears shorts, a torn T-shirt and old sandals. Comfortable, relaxed, Geb greets everyone with a smile. He says that the children used to play with his mustache when they were younger and drum on his balding head. It’s almost always difficult to tell when he’s being sarcastic or serious. He has scars by his eyes, leftover marks from when he was a child. Geb was raised in a town in northern Ethiopia in a traditional Coptic Christian family<sup>5</sup>. Since Geb had poor eyesight, the family kept to their faith’s practice and scraped some flesh off his face, near his eye, in order to cast away the demons that cause this poor vision. He still wears eyeglasses.

“The Coptics distort the word,” Geb says while driving through Mekelle. “They say they worship God and revere the saints.” But he scoffs as he honks a cow and its boy shepherd out of his way. “Worship, revere? How can a simple person, any person differentiate between the two especially when he doesn’t know what the text itself says?” Geb believes there is importance in having the Bible in the Tigrinya<sup>6</sup> vernacular. Geb’s main office is in Mekelle, at the city’s Bible Center. He works with other Coptic priests and leaders of the community translating the Bible into their common language, a project he’s been working on for a couple of years.

The Bible Center can be found on a corner of a typical street in Mekelle; there’s a hairdresser, a grocery shop and a store selling outdated and used electronics. When you first enter the Center, you pass a stand, which sells all kinds of books and pamphlets of Christian content. Even though the texts aren’t my own, there is something comforting about this space, being surrounded by literature of faith. Usually when I travel anywhere in Mekelle, I’m greeted with the sounds of “you, money, or *faranji*!”<sup>7</sup> but here I am almost always greeted with *Salaam*<sup>8</sup>. The titles are divisive and alienating, to say the least, but I introduce myself to the children who shout at me. As it turns out, many of them would become my students at the nearby public school.

Inside the Bible Center there are bookshelves, which compose the organization’s library, and a few desks for students from the nearby universities. There is a large blind community in Mekelle and many students come here to learn. The library has the Bible in Braille along with other religious books, like *How to Prove Moslems Wrong*. I don’t feel especially surprised. I’ve come to understand that the notion of coexistence is not promoted here, and I feel a bit more uneasy than when I first entered. Geb shares an office in the back of the Center with the other priests. They sit around a conference table and you can hear their hard laughter from afar.

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Geb's words stood out to me after my first visit to the Bible Center. We had just left the building, about to enter his car, and he had introduced me to a few of his coworkers, the various priests of the city. "You don't need to tell them I'm a minister," he said while getting into his car. Geb explained that if the other priests and men involved in the Bible Center knew that he was a practicing evangelical Christian, they would excommunicate him and would not allow him to be a part of all the projects he runs and helps fund.

"Or that I can read Hebrew," he added. Geb was referring to an earlier talk we had, where he shared pieces of his life story. After spending some time in India and attending university there, Geb eventually arrived in America and studied at a divinity school in New York where he was ordained as a minister. It was in divinity school where he learned Hebrew. He and his wife are Baptist and evangelical Christians, much like the many white missionaries who can be found volunteering in Mekelle.

"I won't mention anything," I said to him, hoping that I did not reveal my surprise at his request.

I asked if he finds it difficult having to conceal his particular faith. He said it's not ideal but he does it so that he can serve others. As long as one person learns or grows, he said, then it's worth it. Geb felt comfortable talking about these kinds of matters with me. I'm not sure why; maybe because I was a foreigner, maybe because I was transient and only present for about five weeks or maybe he identified with me on some level as a religious person. No matter the reason, Geb would often share his frustrations over his Coptic coworkers. I was always grateful for his candor even when he voiced opinions and beliefs that were contrary to my own, regarding Moslems and Israel. Despite his borderline fundamentalism, it led me to think about times I, myself, or my family had to conceal a religious identity.

After a long day's work at the Bible Center, Geb comes home and almost always heads directly to the dairy farm where he cares for the cows. He expresses his affinity for all of "God's creations" and it brings him much peace to help something that can't ever say "thank you." He told me how one of his cows gave birth to a stillborn and how he stayed up with the mother animal all night, along with the veterinarian, helping her through the birth. One day he joined me in my daily chores, cutting the tall and prickly leaves of elephant grass for the cows, feeding them, and later cleaning their stalls.

As we hacked away at the plants, I asked Geb about his day. He had a hard day, he said. Apparently, a recently widowed young mother met him at his office at the Bible Center with her two young daughters, ages five and three. She implored

him to take her children from her. She was HIV positive and did not know if the kids were too. She explained that she couldn't keep a job and simultaneously be there to take care of her kids. She pleaded with him, "I can't feed my own children and that's why I come to you." Geb said this to me as he cut away at the grass. This is not the first kind of meeting he has had with needy families. He listened to her plea and listened to her cry, and played with her two girls who immediately took a liking to him. He said it was probably because of the absence of a father figure. And finally he explained that he wouldn't take the girls and said so to the young mother. He said that he just couldn't deprive these children of a mother's love.

He continued to cut the tall bushels of grass, sweating profusely as he was telling over the story in great detail. He saw that my pile of grass was large and that I was listening intently and working at the same time and so he continued with the story. "I gave her whatever money I had on me for groceries and took pictures of the girls," he said. This is something Geb does quite often with children he can't take into the orphanage. When any of his board members or friends from the States come to visit and are eager to help, he shows them pictures of these neighborhood children and he tells their stories. He introduces everyone and by the end of their first meet these visitors would be sponsoring a family. He didn't have a match at that point to offer this young mother. He further explained to me that he wouldn't take the girls while the mother was still living. It is his policy.

We continue cutting grass and he told me more about his stressful day. I'd ask him questions throughout our talk, about his work, the role faith has in it, even about his coping mechanisms. He later thanked me for asking him about his day and letting him vent. He usually goes to the cows right when he returns home and they, he said, are pretty unreceptive and inarticulate.

As I listened to Geb and watched him cut the hard elephant grass, I felt humbled to a part of his work. I was grateful to have the opportunity to learn from him. After working with the cows, we'd usually sit by the entrance of the orphanage, around sunset, when there was a refreshing breeze passing by. Geb would let out the two dogs and they'd roam around, having their howling matches with the hyenas. By the front steps, Geb would ask me why some people feel the call to work more than others and would insist that people were greedy wherever you go. I shared with him a verse from Ethics of our Fathers, from the *Mishnah*<sup>9</sup>: "You are not required to finish the task but you are not free to desist from it either." And I remember how his eyes lit up. When we had a bonfire welcoming some American guests, we sat around eating fresh corn and sang Christian spiritual songs, a few in Tigrinya.

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Geb would also sing songs in English, a verse from Psalms: “I raise my eyes to the mountains; where will my strength come from? My strength comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.” I shared the same verse but in Hebrew, in a different melody. We went on like this throughout the night, him trying to think of English melodies from Psalms and me finding the Hebrew equivalent. We laughed.

I recall once having come home from the nearby public school after teaching in the afternoon. Geb asked me how my day was and I told him. As I started my English lesson, students would kneel by the entrance of the door, in the threshold, waiting for me to acknowledge their presence and welcome them in. This went on for about fifteen minutes and I invited literally dozens of students into the classroom. Geb laughed. He explained a traditional Ethiopian custom of waiting for your host to allow you in to his home. When listening to a recording of that lesson I can be heard saying, “Please, come in,” “yes,” “there’s plenty of room” dozens of times, interrupting my lessons on grammar and sentence structure. Geb said smiling that it sounded like I did a fairly good job.

My last memories of Mekelle are being with Geb. As we sat in the Mekelle airport, having already gone through the light security, he thanked me for coming. “There is a difference between giving money and giving yourself. Not everyone who gives money can give himself and not everyone who gives himself can be helpful. You were.” I thanked him and kept on thanking him, before he even thanked me, and I felt like I was repeating myself: I needed him to know that I was sincere. I left a letter by his desk at the orphanage, knowing he’d find it when he returned.

After we went through the initial security of the airport, Geb said to the security guard, “You forgot to check him. Avram, go through that machine.” The lightheartedness and joking at an airport was so foreign, so bizarre to me. When we checked my baggage, he told the clerk that I wanted “super first class.” When asked what that meant, Geb explained that it meant I needed to sit “on the wing of the plane, for the best view.” Here the clerk played along and said, “Well, of course, that will cost extra.” I knew there would be absolutely no joking whatsoever with regards to airport security once I arrived at my next destination.

As I checked my last bag, Geb explained that he had to run and apologized for leaving me. He was sponsoring cataract surgery for a blind student in the community and the child’s parents did not support the use of medicine. Geb was asked to serve as a guardian. We hugged and said so long. The airport was full of windows and I stood by the glass and watched him drive off. I imagined where he’d stop next, probably the hospital. When we drove once to the girls’ home

for the blind, Geb pulled the vehicle to a quick and jarring halt. He put the car in park, took out his digital camera that he keeps hidden under the chair of his jeep, and ran out to the nearby stream. When he returned a moment or so later, he showed me what he called a “crime against humanity.” An oil spill from a nearby construction zone was contaminating a stream that feeds this entire village; hundreds of families use this water. I asked him what he’ll do next and he said, “At least I will report it.” He knew the former mayor of the town. “Maybe he can help me,” he said and with that he put the car back into gear and drove off to town. Fully aware that I had entered someone else’s living space, working environment and world for a short period of four and a half weeks, I was grateful to have the relationship I had with Geb. I now ask myself the question he once asked me regarding the call to work, “How is it that one man can feel the call so vigorously and intensely?”

#### A Transition

My journey hadn’t finished. I had only started. And yet I was as overwhelmed, tired and homesick as I would ever be throughout my trip as I was when traveling to Israel. When I landed I felt a sudden jolt throughout my body. It might have been seeing the Hebrew lettering surrounding me, being able to understand the language people spoke. It might have been the fact that I was no longer the only person wearing a *kippah*. It might have been simply the notion that, “I’ve been here before.” Whatever it was, I felt home upon arriving in Israel.

I went to a supermarket my first night in Israel with a friend of mine. We walked through the aisles of the *kosher*<sup>10</sup> market. Fruits, vegetables, wines, cheeses, meats, crackers, cookies, tomato sauces. Pickles, pita, chocolate – and about fifty kinds of each. Not to mention orange juice, mango juice, apple juice. Did I mention it was watermelon season? Suddenly, the checkout line at the exit of the market grew intense. The smell of the food was unbearable and part of me wanted to sit down and eat everything I could afford and another part of me was so nauseous, I could vomit. My meals in Ethiopia had consisted of peanut butter and bread for lunch and noodles and maybe tuna for dinner, with little variation. The abundance and diversity in food was overwhelming, to say the least, and it sunk in hard and deep: I was back in the West.

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## In Israel

The Yemin Orde Youth Village can be found on top of a small mountain, amidst the lush and green mountains of the Carmel. It is home to 500 immigrant high school students from Ethiopia, Sudan, Brazil, Russia, France, Georgia and other countries around the globe, 20 percent of whom are orphans. It was founded in 1953 by the British Friends of Youth Aliyah who originally intended “to accommodate Holocaust orphans and immigrant children.”<sup>11</sup> Its literal name means “In the memory of Orde,” referring to the British Major General Orde Charles Windgate. Windgate was a strong supporter of the Jewish cause in the Land of Israel. He helped train Haganah<sup>12</sup> fighters and ultimately liberate Ethiopia from the Italian occupation in World War II.

Open 365 days a year, Yemin Orde hasn't been closed since the day it started and is considered the gold standard of youth villages in Israel, a community where children and adolescents live and go to school. I arrived on the day of the senior graduation along with countless guests who were coming to celebrate. I had hitchhiked up the mountain where the village stands with one heavy bag. Along the way, I cut myself along the suitcase's metal handle. Sweaty, tired and overwhelmed from my travels (and now bleeding slightly), I spotted the electric gate at the barred entrance of the village, equipped with cameras and a security guard who sits in a booth with a T.V. and radio. From a distance I noticed the flags and plaques at the decorated entrance and I began to realize what adequate funding can actually do for an organization.

The youth village currently receives 70 percent of its ten million dollar yearly budget from the Israeli Education Ministry and the other 30 percent comes from American donors. The village employs a diverse staff of “50 full-time teachers, 42 part-time teachers, 22 full-time professional counselors, 6 social workers, 5 part-time psychologists, 12 housemothers, 10 full-time and 2 part-time administrative staff and 9 full-time and 1 part-time maintenance staff.” I am taken in by everything: the location, an elaborate campus, trees and a garden of red flowers, a large wooden map of the village, soccer and basketball courts, a swimming pool, and as a musician sensitized to sound, the familiarity and comforting sound of Hebrew being spoken. But it is the mountains that remind me of Ethiopia. On top of the orphanage building in Mekelle, I could look out and see the brown mountains, dusty and bare. Here the mountains of the Carmel are a lush green and I'm constantly reminded of where I am and where I came from.

It's hilly here as I drag my suitcase to the dining hall. Despite the amount of workers at the village, no one from the staff can meet me just yet because everyone is preparing for tonight's celebration. I'm told I'll meet another volunteer later but for now I'm on my own as I introduce myself to a group of young men and women engaged in conversation. I come to realize that they are graduates of Yemin Orde and had just arrived for today's celebration.

Yemin Orde graduates, in general, have gone on to become such notables as the first Ethiopian Israeli lawyer, a mayor, chief of police, army personnel, commanders and paratroopers, medical professors, governmental staff, businessmen, engineers and responsible parents and citizens of Israeli society. I learn much of this from a group of graduates conversing and from my own research of the organization. These young Israelis are a group of mostly Ethiopian and Russian graduates who have stayed in touch with Yemin Orde after their commencement. The village's success with the Ethiopian community is especially noteworthy. “Compared to the national rate of 28 percent of Ethiopian 12<sup>th</sup> graders passing their university matriculation examinations in 2004, 50 percent of Ethiopian 12<sup>th</sup> graders at Yemin Orde passed.” These young graduates are eager to explain their stories to me. One tells me that he lived in the graduate dorms for many years, through the army, until he could raise enough money to afford his own apartment. Yemin Orde keeps special dormitories open for their graduates, many of whom have no place to move after they finish high school. Israeli high school graduates attend the army and not college right after graduation and Yemin Orde has dormitories open year-round for these young adults as well. I later find out that I'll be living in these dormitories.

I finally place my things down in another volunteer's room and I go for a tour of the village. In the library, I see a book by Chaim Peri, the visionary director of the youth village. Peri recently stepped down after serving the community for over twenty-five years. His successor, Ofer Yerushalmi, moved in to Peri's house in the village the week I arrived on campus. There is an aura around Chaim Peri on this campus and as I read through the first pages of his writings, I can see why. I am immediately enamored with his philosophy on education and children.

As I flip through the Hebrew book, I begin to get a feel of the environment and the village's personal philosophy. The village owns seventy acres even though the actual village takes up about an acre's space, if that. The dormitories, dining hall, synagogue and village library are on a completely different side of campus than where the school buildings and classrooms can be found. This distinction is important in the philosophy of Yemin Orde. A student

can get punished at school, get into a fight with a teacher or principal but ultimately always has a home to return to. Even though the physical distance is so small, the students certainly feel this distinction and it's evident in how they talk about where school is or where home is, as in two separate places.

The village itself is religious and has a kosher dining hall along with a synagogue where daily services are held. Electricity is not used on the Sabbath. Most of the student body do not come from religious homes and the village educators say the purpose of keeping traditions is not to make students more religious by the time they leave; rather, it is to raise students in a traditional Jewish environment and ultimately instill in them a sense of self and purpose. The sooner the students "get it," they believe, the sooner they will work on themselves. "Getting it" means understanding that this is a community that will nurture and support them throughout their endeavors. Thus, the sooner the students understand that the community and staff will "be there for them," the sooner they will develop their own aspirations, academic interests and dreams.

"It works," says Peri. I'm deeply intrigued by Chaim Peri and I feel as if I'm getting a better sense of the village and the environment than when I first arrived. With so many guests for the graduation and so much excitement in the air, the village is very crowded and I was grateful to find space in the library and read. Eager to meet Peri or simply observe him from afar, I continued reading his writings.

The *kfar*<sup>13</sup>, as it likes to be called, is not a boarding school or orphanage; it is a village and strives to be a home for these young immigrants. It's often said by staff that the most important word in the village is "yet." This student hasn't conquered his drinking problem *yet*; this student hasn't stopped cursing, stopped being physically aggressive – *yet*. And so it is this use of positive reinforcement, sometimes subtle and sometimes loud and clear that surrounds the students. I read in Peri's book the village's idea of the "garden of late bloomers." He explained that there are students who come in and cause trouble until, in one case, a week before graduation. But the village insists, their hugs are wide, wider than most people's, and they tolerate more. Peri and his administrative staff constantly ask themselves, "And how would I respond if my own child acted accordingly?" They offer sincere answers.

Perhaps, though, the unique part of the village is the African hut that stands in the middle of campus, right by the dining hall, near the computer lab and amphitheater. The book says that the adolescents who live at Yemin Orde are often separated from family and are far from home and familiar

culture. The *kfar* believes strongly in affirming one's cultural background. To this end, there is a traditional Ethiopian hut in the center of campus, a typical home of the Ethiopian students who lived in Gondar and other communities before arriving in Israel. Inside the hut, one can find pictures of Ethiopia, stories, clothes and furniture similar to those one might find in a traditional Ethiopian home. The main difference is that there is electric light, and there are cement floors. The hut is there for the students as much as it is for the tourist groups who often come visiting Israel. It is there to remind the students of their past. Yemin Orde encourages their students to continue speaking Amharic or Russian, and provides staff that speaks their languages. To this end, they go one step further. They say to their students: "It's not enough that you appreciate your heritage; you have to make me appreciate it as well, and be open to sharing it." There are cross-cultural activities around the village on a nightly basis.

My first night at the *kfar* I witnessed the high school's graduation ceremony. Aside from the traditional lineup of guest and class speakers, the students performed an original play that they composed for the special night. It was a story of a young Russian immigrant struggling to fit in and come to terms with her new Israeli identity. There was thunderous applause and cheers when the Ethiopian students danced a traditional Russian dance and when the Russian students danced a traditional Ethiopian dance. I remember feeling that I was part of a unique community. I remember listening to a teenager named Adam speak, a young Darfurian, who traveled to Israel illegally and was held in prison with dozens of other Sudanese refugees. Chaim Peri was one of the first people to go to the Israeli prisons and offered to take in the Sudanese children and bring them to Yemin Orde. The way Adam and Chaim told the story this night was that the judge was a Yemin Orde graduate himself and so, how could he say no? Adam now runs an Israeli youth equivalent of *Save Darfur*<sup>14</sup>. The *kfar* asks their students to invite family and friends to the graduation ceremony: who does Adam invite? Dozens of Sudanese Israelis whom Chaim Peri helped release. I remember Chaim speaking in Hebrew that night and watching the crowd listen to his every word, even the cynical students who congregated around the back of the field. It was at these moments that I recall my feelings shifting from feeling overwhelmed to feeling motivated and suddenly eager to work.

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The very next day I went to morning prayers at the village's synagogue. The sound of prayer with a *minyan*<sup>15</sup> was empowering. There are certain prayers and verses that are only said with a minyan and hearing and saying their words was refreshing. It was only after prayers that I realized I was in a couple of rows behind Chaim Peri. As I finished putting away my *tefillin*<sup>16</sup>, Chaim came up to me and introduced himself. I smiled, explaining that I knew who he was. He asked me a bit about myself and mentioned his friendship with Jehuda Reinharz, the president of Brandeis University. As we left the synagogue, he told me he had an assignment for me.

He explained that there was a group of Arab mothers from Haifa who run a playgroup for their kindergarten students and were looking for a cheap place to have an end-of-the-year party. He had found out about the group from Ahmed, one of the head workers in the kitchen staff, a father of four and an Arab who has been working at the village since he was eighteen years old. Peri immediately opened up the village to them at no cost. He also offered to bring in a clown, music and set up refreshments. He asked if I would help prepare the room for the party, organize the food and stay there in case anyone needed help. And so I did. The two-dozen young mothers wearing their *hijab*<sup>17</sup> danced with their kids and I would float back and forth from setting up the food to watching the kids dance with the clown. Afterwards, I helped clean up and helped the D.J. pack up his equipment. He spoke to me

in Hebrew, thinking I was Israeli, and I would answer in the little Arabic I knew and he'd laugh.

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Over my time in Israel, I had flashes of interactions with Peri. Along the pathway to the swimming pool, or outside the library, or maybe after prayer services. It was always short, polite and to a point. I knew him more than he would ever know me but I didn't mind. He wasn't on campus as much nowadays, now that he'd officially moved off-site. I continued to read his work and I spoke with other staff and with volunteers about him. I listened to tour guides describe Peri's work as they walked around the village, with groups from New York or Philadelphia. I would listen to him address a group from AIPAC<sup>18</sup> or address the village on a Friday night before Sabbath services. He would talk about the power of storytelling, how it's important to look

at the leaders of our world and think of what it was like for many of them growing up. Learn about their foolishness. He would ask his students, "Do you know that Albert Einstein was a terrible math student?" He talked about the Torah being the storybook of the Jewish people and encouraged his students to be in touch with their roots – constantly. When Chaim spoke, the students looked at him and most listened. He captured their attention and it seemed as if he was always able to tell a story so that it meant something to each person present.

When I think of my first day in Israel, my first day in the village meeting their graduates and watching the commencement ceremony and even my first assignment with the birthday party in particular, I realize the uniqueness of YOYV. Their work is an active testimony to their mission: building a sustainable community of children from divergent cultures and countries, helping their students grow and ultimately coexist. Led by Peri for over twenty years, the *kfar* is not just a youth village; it is home.

### Unpacking

My journal entries from this past summer remain unedited, raw, and my suitcase is now empty in the basement of my family's suburban home in Teaneck, N.J. I am blessed to be in university and to write this paper. I feel slightly more attuned to what I learned this summer and I must confess: I feel slightly self-indulgent, even comical, asking myself to conclude. Aware that my experiences in Ethiopia and Israel are stints compared to those who live there daily, believing in the interconnectedness of all things, and that lessons of any particular experience can seep past airport comings and goings, the question of what and how to include are therefore challenging.

Nonetheless, my weeks abroad provided me with an opportunity to peek into and even take part in some of the tremendous work that people in Ethiopia and Israel are – through their local community efforts – doing in repairing the world.

An idea that's prominent in Yemin Orde literature is a notion of *Tikkun HaLev*, fixing of the heart; taking time to do a thorough introspection and focus on the self and attempt to fix some of the brokenness in one's own life. The idea is concurrent with *Tikkun Olam*, fixing of the world. *Tikkun Olam* is a fundamental pillar of Judaism, calling on each person to give of one's self in whatever way to help others. These two "fixings" need to take place simultaneously and both, ultimately, are reciprocal. The philosophy and ideology of this special Israeli youth village makes its way into every building on campus, every event, almost every conversation. When

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I would sit by myself watching a sunset or look towards the Mediterranean Sea, I would think of Hope Orphanage in Mekelle and realize just how similar these communities were in their essence: work towards your utmost potential, give back to your community.

The village directors, Gebre Beyenne in Mekelle and Chaim Peri in Yemin Orde, outwardly couldn't be more different from one another. Dr. Chaim Peri, the son of Holocaust survivors, born in Israel, is a traditional Jew and has won numerous awards in Israel for his work with both the *kfar* and children. Gebre Beyenne is a Christian minister, a devout Baptist, born in Ethiopia and returned from America to work with the Ethiopian orphan community. As one might deduce, their religious affiliations alone set them apart. Yet there are countless similarities. Their passion for helping others is tremendous and stems from, among many places, a connection with their faith and relationship to God. As individuals, they are tireless, determined and caring, committed to their work. Personally, they serve as ultimate role models, as a young person interested in working with children in a religious context.

In hindsight, I think of these communities and I am grateful to have lived among them. I look at their websites and I wait for updates. Proper funding is crucial and I know that Yemin Orde will be around as long as the State of Israel exists; it is a well-funded governmental institution with all the necessary components, including a highly influential and wealthy board. Hope Services will be around as long as Geb and Connie are; they too have an active board, with members from the U.S. who frequently visit, bringing books and medical supplies. Once, I asked Geb if he's thought about successors; he told me, "It's on the to-do list." But this stark contrast in wealth doesn't faze me entirely. Yemin Orde started with nothing and grew, and Geb and Connie also are building castles out of bricks, literally.

I think of what my flash abroad has left me with and I think of Chaim and Geb. It is the simple understanding of the power one person may bring to one's own community. As a traditional and practicing Jew, my personal religious beliefs have not prevented me from working in communities outside my own, rather have inspired me to do just that. My time abroad reaffirmed the possibilities of interfaith and intercommunity building, of helping others while being true to my own beliefs. It is possible to stay open but still remain rooted, to share myself with others and let others share themselves with me, to work on myself and never stop working on the world. And I still sing of the Psalmist's idea, "Where is the dwelling place of the Lord?" and now answer quietly with greater awareness, "Everywhere."

## Notes

1. *Kippah* or *yarmulkeh* is a skullcap traditionally worn by Jewish men. Most agree that it symbolizes an acknowledgement and belief in God and an identification with the Jewish people
2. Observance to *Halacha*, Jewish Law, with a concurrent commitment to modern society and culture
3. Jewish prayer book
4. A traditional Ethiopian sponge-like bread
5. Coptic Church based mostly on teachings of the saints; observe certain sacraments such as baptism, confession
6. A Semitic language spoken by northern Ethiopians in the Tigray region. It is also one of the two official languages of neighboring Eritrea
7. *White devil* in Amharic
8. *Peace* in Arabic, Amharic
9. Fundamental work of Rabbinic Judaism, called the Oral Law. Debated during 70-200 C.E. by rabbinic sages and was redacted by Judah the Prince
10. Food that is in accordance with Jewish dietary laws
11. All quoted information on Yemin Orde is from the Friends of Yemin Orde Website, which can be found at: <http://www.yeminorde.org/village/index.html>.
12. Jewish paramilitary organization during the British Mandate, later became a core unit of the Israeli Defense Forces
13. Hebrew word for village
14. An alliance of over 150 faith-based and human rights organization dedicated to ending the genocide in Darfur
15. Minimum number of men required for certain religious obligations
16. *Tefillin* or phylacteries are a pair of black boxes, which contain scrolls of parchment that have Biblical verses inscribed in them
17. Modest dress for women, sometimes a head or entire body covering
18. America Israel Public Affairs Committee, America's pro-Israel lobby