

Live and Become

JUDITH SIMONS '10

Scarred Idealism

Kneeling down, she slowly puts her tongue to the child's cheek. The impassioned adoptive mother kisses and then licks her new child's face in front school faculty, parents, and students. Her bold statement is an attempt to prove that her adopted Ethiopian son is not a health hazard to the other students, that he is not a carrier of fatal African diseases like so many parents have claimed.



The movie ends and I walk out of the theater. Some of my faith in Israel lingers behind as I walk out of the theater. As a college first year, my world is rapidly being opened up to new ideas, perspectives and realities, and this film is no exception. "Live and Become" is a story about an Ethiopian boy who comes to Israel on the massive airlift of Ethiopian Jews, Operation Moses in 1984. His new life in Israel is not necessarily the ideal life that he had hoped for. Although he has access to a modern society, he is outcast because of the color of his skin. Parents of his fellow classmates accuse him of harboring African diseases, making him a health threat to their children. The family of his white Israeli girlfriend does not accept him because they question his Judaism, as they question the Judaism of all Ethiopian Jews. Although the main character is fiction, the harsh treatment he experienced from the rest of Israeli society is not.

My childhood understanding of Israel was that of a rescuer of the Ethiopian Jews. In just third grade, my Hebrew School teacher enthusiastically described how Israel sent massive jet planes, with all of the seats removed, to Addis Ababa and to refugee camps in Sudan in the dead of night without being detected by radar. The planes were loaded up with thousands of Ethiopian Jews, flying them to Israel, away from the persecution of the Ethiopian government. Israel carried out this top-secret operation not once, but twice, in 1984 and 1991. Therefore, I thought of Israel as a safe haven for the Ethiopian Jews, *for all Jews*, an image that became overshadowed by the movie's portrayal of the difficult lives of Ethiopian immigrants. It now seems that the government in

Israel is friendly to only Russian, the English, the American immigrants – the white faces that washed ashore. The reality of discrimination toward Jews in Israel is not one I want to face, though I know, as a Jew, it is one I need to help change. I cannot allow the Jewish state, founded upon values of the Torah, the moral rubric of the Jewish people, to mistreat some of her fellow Jews.

I internalize the harsh reality that not every Jew is openly accepted by Israel. My despair grows into idealism. I begin thinking that by interning at a legal rights organization for Ethiopian Israelis in Tel Aviv called Tebeka, I will help rip through Israeli discriminatory mentalities. I hope that the Ethiopians at Tebeka will accept my passion, however different their lives are compared to my own privileged white background.

Before my internship begins this past summer, Tebeka sent me a newspaper article about an elementary school that was accused of segregating six Ethiopian first-grade students from the rest of the class. For me, this article relays that the Israelis in this school view Ethiopians as inferior – a thought that further enrages me. When I arrive at Tebeka I am – more than ever – impassioned about the cause I believe in, my idealism at its height. I am especially excited to be working with the Ethiopian community from a legal perspective since my father's and grandfather's careers as lawyers and judges have made me an ardent supporter of positive change through law.

As I begin to meet Ethiopian Israelis and listen to clients' stories from Tebeka's lawyers, my image of the Ethiopian situation begins to gradually change. My idealism shifts, wanes, though it never completely fades. The tardiness of a client at her own court case illustrates Ethiopians' difficulty with the concept of time, a novelty for them in an industrialized, modern country. At another court case, I notice how the entire older generation of Ethiopians are dressed in traditional garb and require an Amharic translator, even though they have been in Israel for over ten years. I am told by Tebeka's lawyers, both native Israeli and Ethiopian, how easy it is to take advantage of Ethiopians in the workforce and in the housing market because they are not aware of their own civil rights since they were never privileged with such things in their country of origin.

Throughout the summer, I begin to realize that the racism of Israelis portrayed in "Live and Become" that I had intended to dismantle was not the core of the Ethiopians' struggles. The struggles the Ethiopians face are not rooted in the color of their skin. Rather, other monstrous hurdles stand formidably in front the Ethiopians as they enter the modern land of Israel. Language. Electricity. An egalitarian society. Holding a job. All of these issues and concepts are completely novel to the Ethiopians. I slowly understand how shocking a move from a rural African village to a modern country like Israel must be. The fact that Ethiopians live mainly in isolated low-income neighborhoods within different Israeli cities is not due to their black skin nor due to the racist mentalities of real estate agents or housing authorities. Instead, many Ethiopians cannot afford homes outside of the low-income ghettos since many Ethiopians in the adult generation work in low-paying jobs. The adult Ethiopians occupy low-paying jobs because of a language barrier, lack of education, or difficulty in adapting to a society where holding a job is essential for survival. It is this immense culture shock of immigration, along with the fact that the Israeli government has not done enough to alleviate their transition, that holds back Ethiopians – putting many in positions of poverty leading to stereotypes that envelop the community.

However, instead of striking down stereotypes, it is my idealism that is pierced. It is easy to look at a stereotyped group from a removed standpoint of a different color and resolve to erase the misjudgments bounding that group. In a turn of events that I never could have imagined, I witnessed an ugly truth in the depths of stereotype. An Ethiopian friend of mine became a mournful portrait of how life in the cycle of poverty can in fact perpetuate prejudgments.

Although scarred, my idealism is not entirely destroyed. Ethiopian Israelis have made progress since their arrival in Israel and will continue to do so. I now realize, however, that the daunting task of acclimating to a new country and language with an entirely new set of societal and cultural norms actually is not a black or white task, but rather a gray one.

Tel Aviv Beyond the Surface

"*Boker tov!*" I smile and flash my bus pass at the bus driver as I step onto the bus across the street from my beautiful concrete-walled suburban apartment. The street is similar to my white neighborhood back home. At this point, the bus is quiet and peaceful as we hum along a sleepy-eyed road with an island of green grass reflecting the morning sun. In contrast, the next stop, a few meters down the road, stood across a posh version of an American strip mall. The bus stop bustles with early morning risers: loud school children, newspaper-reading professionals, iPod-listening beauty queens, migrant worker Filipinos, people of all shapes, sizes, and colors. As we speed through the wide, open streets of Ramat Aviv, past Tel Aviv University and past the Ramat Aviv Mall, people continue to fill the bus. Not a word is spoken to the driver except a shouting chorus of "*Nahag (driver)!*" in case he closes the back door before someone successfully exits the bus.

**I slowly
understand how
shocking a move
from a rural
African village to
a modern country
like Israel must be.**

As the bus makes its way across the bridge over the Yarkon River and into Tel Aviv, the streets narrow and number of cars increase. Drivers of tiny cars and long buses impatiently honk at red lights, agile motorcycles weave in and out of lanes, and hordes of people briskly cross the street with the permission of the neon-white walking-man. The bus fills up faster than it navigates through the streets of Tel Aviv, held up by traffic thicker than tar.

Bus riders are representative of Tel Aviv's diverse population: pregnant women, women showing more skin than clothes, religious women with no skin showing, men with tattoos, men with yarmulkes and religious fringes, soldiers clutching their guns looking still somewhat sleepy. People squeeze together, neglecting the notion of personal space. The soundtrack of the bus is a combination of a radio station of the driver's choice, a few loud phone conversations, and the murmur of the motor. Those sitting enjoy the most comfort and are the quickest to fall asleep, though if an elderly person struggles to climb up onto the bus, someone immediately makes a seat available. The elderly have a deserved monopoly on the first row of seats underneath a sign that reads "*mipnei seivah takum,*" or "before the elderly stand," a verse from Leviticus.

The bus crawls through north Tel Aviv with its average-looking apartments that boast above-average prices for their more than desirable locations next to the Mediterranean, a cerulean sea. The bus continues to inch past the train station, packed with people waiting among the thicket of bus stops. Finally after about forty minutes, the bus bumbles along under a gorgeous glass and stainless steel overpass of modern design announcing our arrival at Azrieli, a series of three of the tallest buildings in the Middle East. At this bus stop, the bus begins to empty out as all of the soldiers exit and prepare for another day of duty at headquarters across the street from Azrieli.

The bus leaves Azrieli behind. High-class Tel Aviv washes away in the distance and an industrial, overcast Tel Aviv looms into sight. It is here that I hop off the bus, next to an expansive yet decrepit building. I usually have to stifle a cough from the intense smell of cigarette smoke and auto exhaust and tip toe around the dirty drops from the ancient air conditioners that speckle the windows of the building. One lonely *makolet*, a half-inside-half-outside mini market, occupies the dingy side of the street. It is ironic that the area in which I will work to alleviate gray problems is gray itself.

Had I stayed on the bus, I would have traveled a couple more miles to the south tip of Tel Aviv. I would have driven by more abandoned buildings, a large park filled with scores of African refugees, many dingy looking *makolets* displaying countless Filipinos, and a few sex shops. I would have ended up at the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station, a seven-floor complex, seedy hubbub of shops and food stands, and hangout for Tel Aviv's Ethiopian population.

But I don't venture to that last stop. Instead, from my bus stop, I make my way over to a parallel street, the street on which I work. *Rechov Hamasger*, is a noisy, busy street with more cars than pedestrians. Tall office buildings are intermingled with a bank, a gas station, an outdoor parking lot, a car service center, a falafel stand, and of course *makolets*, essential to every Israeli street. Surprisingly, the street boasts multiple kosher eateries, a seeming paradox in Tel Aviv, one of Israel's most secular cities. With the majority of the population secular, it is much more difficult to find a kosher restaurant in which to eat in Tel Aviv than it is in Jerusalem.

After a walk up the street, I come to my destination: number fifty-three, a tall unassuming, gray cement building. I squeeze through the motorcycles parked in untidy formations outside of my building and walk through an open door to what could be defined as a lobby, but is more or less a gray open space with dirty floors, a dusty mirror, and two elevators. Sometimes, for exercise, I choose to make the trek up the stairs to the third floor, though the gray smoke my lungs receive counteracts the workout for my legs. The staircase is home to the smokers, construction workers, and office workers on break.

Once at the third floor, I walk through a glass door, through an entryway, and buzz myself into the office of Tebeka: Advocacy and Equality for Ethiopian Israelis. I make sure to close the door behind me, for a locked-door policy was emphasized at all times by the Tebeka staff. Previous thieveries were the impetus for this policy. The office is an oasis of color in gray south Tel Aviv. Small and simple, the office contains five small office rooms encircling an open common space, which is home to the receptionist and a copy machine. The wooden floors and wall hangings give the office a homey feel, though the out-of-date computers detract somewhat from the aesthetic. The air conditioning keeps the office at a chilly temperature, enough to evoke goose pimples, and the closed windows overlook an unsatisfactory view of Hamasger Street.

The most beautiful part of the Tebeka office is the staff themselves and their radiant, smiling faces of white, tan, and black hues. A microcosm of Tel Aviv's population, the Tebeka staff, of all different ethnic descents, welcome me with open arms.

A Family of Justice Seekers

On my first day at Tebeka, Sophia, the secretary, throws her arms around me and plants a kiss on each of my cheeks.

Each smile comforts me more than the previous one. I feel excited, heartened, loved! How wonderful it is just to be hugged, after feeling quite alone for a few days in a place across the ocean from my own home.

I quickly notice that the Tebeka staff is like a family. Cakes and cards honor birthdays. More cakes and cards welcome back staff members from vacation. Everyone constantly asks me if I am OK, if I need help sorting out problems with my apartment, or whether I need a place to stay. I soon learn to answer to “*motek*” (sweetie), “*boobah*” (doll) and even “*dah-ling*” (darling).

The strength of the family at Tebeka is rooted in their shared passion and commitment for justice and equality for all Ethiopian Israelis. Staff meetings are typically heated: loud, firm voices that each interrupt one another with the fervor of their beliefs. They indignantly lash the Israeli government for not allocating the 870 million shekels, approximately \$228.6 million, to the Ethiopian-Israeli community like it promised this past January. They share frustration over the seemingly purposeful absence of Rava Dana, an Ethiopian rabbi, an integral part of the case they are trying in the rabbinical court. They celebrate together over successes in court. They brainstorm and pool all of their resources together in order to send an Ethiopian-Israeli law student to American University in Washington, D.C., for a program in legal English. The staff even constantly engages in enthralling and incessant debates over the possibility of integrating Ethiopian-Israeli students into Israeli schools. Some staff members favor integration while others favor allocating more funding to Ethiopian-Israeli neighborhood schools in order to improve their quality.

Though I am astounded by the intense debate and the constant interruptions, I am most impressed by the level of respect each staff member holds for the others. While each is quick to shout above the other person, s/he just as quickly acknowledges the worthiness of other perspectives. No one shouts in order to hear his own voice, and no one interrupts in order to control the conversation. Everyone speaks with the mission of Tebeka in mind and at heart: to bring justice and equality to Ethiopian Israelis. This genuineness refreshes my mind and soul and reinvigorates my belief in the cause.

The founder, and director and father of the Tebeka family, is Itzik Dessie. Upon his law school graduation, the first Ethiopian Israeli to do so, Itzik was offered a position in a

high-powered firm in Israel. He was quickly flooded with Ethiopian clients in need of legal services they could not afford. This reality inspired Itzik to found Tebeka, a legal nonprofit. With the immense financial support of countless Jewish-American philanthropic foundations, Tebeka has soared to now include branches in three separate cities and office hours in two more. Itzik has become an inspiration for the Ethiopian-Israeli community.

One day would not pass without at least three mentions of Itzik's name. “Itzik e-mailed this,” “Itzik said that,” “You should ask Itzik.” Although currently in Washington, D.C., for a master's program, Itzik was still heavily involved in Tebeka's daily activities. I quickly learn that Mr. Itzik Dessie is a firecracker of a man. His visions see no bounds and his perseverance sees no obstacle. Without ever meeting Itzik, I am immensely impressed and moved by this man's commitment to his community and his steadfast belief in his organization's mission.

How blessed I am to be part of such a team, such a family. Who would have thought that the bell of justice ringing throughout Israel was based in the lowly southern side of Tel Aviv?

A (Not-so) Black Story

These justice seekers seem focused on other international advocates of equality, mainly Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Barack Obama. This is apparent in the office of Tebeka.

“Do you like Barack Obama?” I was asked for the seventeenth time on my fifth day in Israel. My response usually instigated harsh criticisms and comments, most of which were baseless and inaccurate.

Barack Obama is Muslim.

Barack Obama is bad for the Jews.

Barack Obama does not like Israel.

**The strength
of the family at
Tebeka is rooted
in their shared
passion and
commitment
for justice and
equality for all
Ethiopian Israelis.**

This time, the question came from a young, sophisticated-looking Ethiopian-Israeli lawyer. Her eyes pierce me from behind her slight glasses. The other lawyer in the room, a young Ethiopian-Israeli male, classy with his briefcase and gelled curls, looks up from his computer. I hesitate, anxious and nervous for the debate I was about to spark.

“Yes...” I trail off trying not to wince before the whiplash began.

Another pause.

“Welcome to the club,” the young Ethiopian-Israeli woman smiles.

I force a laugh. Could it be, I ask myself, that I have met an Israeli in support of Barack Obama?

“He will be good for the blacks. Give the kids goals. It will be good to have a black man in the White House!” the ebony-skinned lawyer laughed at her own joke.

I am stunned. But then I begin to understand that the Ethiopian Israelis connected to Barack Obama based on their shared color of skin. I am not certain if Barack Obama’s black skin and the black skin of Ethiopian Israelis are representative of the same story. Although not his personal story, Barack Obama’s black skin represents the story of black America, a story saturated with baseless hatred, cruelty, and injustice. A black man as candidate for a major party in American politics, whether born to a white woman and Kenyan man or born to the descendants of slaves, symbolizes a new era in American history. His candidacy indicates that America has begun to swim away from the turbulent waters of racism and inequality, of which black skin in America is reminiscent. Discrimination, racism, and inequality are still sadly prevalent throughout America’s neighborhoods and streets. Barack Obama’s candidacy as a black-skinned man, however, proves that these disturbing realities are beginning to subside.

Contrarily, in Israel, black skin means Africa. It means small villages, one-room huts, and floors of soil. It means fathers in the field and mothers in the home. It means that that person walked to Israel by foot, or came over on an El Al plane, packed with hundreds of other Ethiopian Jews on an overnight undercover rescue mission.

An Ethiopian-Israeli child may struggle in the tenth grade just like a black student in America may struggle in the tenth grade. The Ethiopian-Israeli student may receive poorer grades and may be more likely to drop out of school than

his native Israeli classmates. Similarly, the black American student may be more likely than his white classmates to receive lower grades and opt to drop out of school rather than graduate. This is where the commonalities end. The Nubian Mountains are a different backyard than the streets of Harlem. African-Americans and Ethiopian Israelis may suffer from poor school performances and high dropout rates, but they do so for different reasons. In America, the history of slavery, segregation, and racism has made it difficult for many African-Americans to break the cycle of poverty. In Israel, the mandated education system itself is a new concept for Ethiopian Israelis. This area of assimilation, along with others, has made it difficult for many Ethiopian Israelis to climb the ladder of success.

Just like the Ethiopian lawyers who identify themselves with black America, I too enter Tebeka with the assumption that Ethiopian Israelis experienced discrimination solely because of their black skin. This assumption is fostered by the fact that as an American, the black history with which I am familiar is a story of discrimination based on race. Once I arrive at Tebeka, I hear stories of assimilation struggles that the Ethiopian lawyers faced and that clients continue to face. It become clear to me that my assumption is nonsensical: the foundation of the difficulties of the African-Americans and Ethiopian Israelis is not the same.

A Lesson in Time and Formalities

After I begin to learn that the struggles of the Ethiopian Israelis lie beneath the color of their skin, I discover deeper issues with regards to their assimilation that serve to keep them in a lower socioeconomic class. I make one of these discoveries as I accompany one of Tebeka’s Ethiopian lawyers, Batya, to court one day.

As the daughter and granddaughter of judges and as someone who had been in a courtroom more times than most law-abiding citizens, I am intrigued and excited to witness a trial in an Israeli courtroom.

I choose my most professional looking outfit and make sure to wake up early, with ample amounts of time to spare. I am never one to be late, but I am especially not about to be tardy on a day as important as court day. After three bus rides, I stepped onto a street busy with morning traffic in south Tel Aviv. Half an hour before the trial was to begin, I call Batya.

“Hi Judith,” she says in her accent, “I in the Aroma. You find it?”

“OK, I’ll be right there,” I answer.

I walk down to the Aroma, the Israeli version of Starbucks, expecting to find Batya and her client, whom she is supposed to meet at 8:30. Instead, I just find Batya, wearing a plain black skirt and white button-down shirt, sipping her cappuccino, and looking over her paperwork. I am surprised to see Batya look so relaxed without her client.

After the encouragement of Batya, I purchase a cappuccino for myself and sit down with her. At this point it is 8:35.

“Where is she?” I ask.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she glances at her watch. “I don’t have the number so I can’t call her.”

“Maybe you can call Yaffa?” I suggest. Yaffa is the director of the legal department at Tebeka.

“It is early, I don’t bother her,” Batya said.

“Maybe you can call Tebeka!” I desperately want to be helpful, but also try not to overstep my bounds.

“No, Tebeka don’t have the number.”

Batya appears nonchalant about her client being missing less than half an hour before the trial and without a number to reach her.

I inquire about the trial. Batya explains to me in haphazard English that her client had been fired from her job at the time that she was pregnant. Her client claimed that the pregnancy was the reason she was fired and was suing the employer for compensation.

8:45.

“Are you sure you don’t want to call Tebeka?”

“OK,” Batya acquiesces. She took out her hot pink phone to place the call.

Was I, the intern, really giving the lawyer instructions in the form of suggestions? Why was I more concerned about the situation than the lawyer herself? My calm voice and pacified facial expression hid the cacophonous drum session of my heart. Where was this client? It was fifteen minutes before her trial!

Sure enough, Batya reaches Tebeka’s secretary and receives the number of her client. She places the next call.

I listen to Batya speak rapidly in Hebrew, raising her voice in a reprimanding way. Hardy saying goodbye, she hangs up the phone and returns to her calm, almost aloof manner.

“She is driving. There is traffic,” Batya relays.

At 8:55 Batya suggests we go to the court. We pass through security and step into the elevator.

“There is no time in Ethiopia,” Batya states bluntly.

“There is no what?” I ask.

“Time.”

“What?”

“Time. In Ethiopia, you work in the fields or in the house. Everyone lives together. You do what you want. You don’t have to be anywhere. Ethiopians don’t know how to be ‘on time.’ They don’t know what it means.” Batya, Ethiopian herself, smiles.

Suddenly, my cultural relativism kicks into gear. Not only am I on time for appointments, but I am early. “To be early is to be on time, to be on time is to be late, and to be late is totally unacceptable.” This is the motto, imprinted onto me by my American society obsessed with formality, etiquette, and politeness. What must it be like not to know the meaning of time? To not feel the pressure of the clock ticking in your mind? I am no longer incredulous at the client for her impolite disregard of her meeting with Batya. Instead, I begin to understand how not being aware of the concept of time could be an extreme detriment to one attempting to land a job. The absence of time in Ethiopia is a striking insight into instances of assimilation that act as colossal obstacles to Ethiopians furthering themselves in their new country. This insight forces me to realize that my idealistic notion of working to shatter the discrimination and stereotypes surrounding the Ethiopian community is not the answer to the root of the Ethiopians’ struggles. Rather, the Ethiopian immigrant community

**The Ethiopian
immigrant
community needs
government and
social service
support of
their cultural
adaptation so that
they can more
easily become
contributing
members of Israeli
society.**

needs government and social service support of their cultural adaptation so that they can more easily become contributing members of Israeli society.

Her Smile

Her smile is truly striking. It consumes her entire face – her eyes glint, her nose scrunches, and her large lips reveal shining white teeth, perfectly aligned. The light that emanates from her face offsets her darker-than-midnight skin. Her tight-knit curls dance in the air, even as she turns her head slightly. Gaudy gold bangles clang on her wrist and flashy hoop earrings swoop down from her ears. The colorful lightweight skirt that she pulls up over her skin-tight pants every day before she walks into the office marks her as a *Bat-sherut*.

A *bat-sherut* is an Israeli girl completing her *Sherut Leumi*, or national service. *Sherut Leumi* is an alternative to army service for religious girls. Instead of joining the army upon high school graduation as most Israelis are mandated, religious girls can spend a year volunteering at an organization or in a community helping to create a better Israel. Since *Sherut Leumi* is supposed to represent religious girls, any *bat sherut* is required to wear skirts to work every day.

Therefore, she put on a skirt. She dreads it, clearly. It is put on and taken off in the elevator. Perhaps she does not want the outside world to perceive her as religious, for religious people are highly stereotyped in Israeli society. But the skirt gets her out of army service, and for that, it is worth it.

We walk next door to the falafel stand to get lunch on my first day of work. The grease of the falafel and *schwarma* permeate the air and the owner greets us with a huge smile, a few jokes, and extra chips.

Our conversation is stifled by a language barrier as great as the cultural barrier Ethiopians faced after moving to Israel. Yet, despite the heavy accents, the stuttering, the incorrect grammar, and the misused words, a non-verbal bond draws us together. We are each able to communicate how happy we are to have another person our own age working in the office.

Back in the office, we sit behind closed doors eating our lunch.

“Why you here?”

My Hebrew is not sufficient to answer that loaded question. With a great deal of word fumbling and gesticulation, I manage to get a few sentences out. I talk about my personal struggle with my feelings for Israel and my passion for racial equality. My white skin sears from its own whiteness.

Do I sound like an imperialistic American marching into a foreign country hoping to change the world? Do I look like a naive white girl who knows nothing about racism and discrimination?

“Is that OK?” I ask, “What do you think?” I don’t know what makes me feel the need to hear a black girl justify my reasons for volunteering at Tebeka this summer.

“Yes,” she smiles that radiant smile. “Even better because you white.”

That was it. I am accepted. We are on the same team. We are friends.

That afternoon, I ask how to get to the central bus station from work so I can pick up a monthly bus pass.

“I take you,” my new friend offers readily.

She whips off her skirt and we are out the door onto a smoggy street crowded with pedestrians and buses. We jump onto a bus and after only a ten-minute ride push our way out and stand in the security line.

The Tel Aviv Central Bus Station is a dingy seven-story metropolis that houses clothing stores, electronic stores, food stands, and even a religious supermarket. We push our way through the crowds over to an ice cream stand where we get free cones from the Ethiopian girl working behind the counter.

She knows every single Ethiopian in the bus station. Laughing and smiling, we make our way from one floor to another, stopping in clothes stores, shoes stores, and the Ethiopian store where the workers greet her like family. I am amazed at how many people she knows. I am taken with her effervescent personality, the freedom of her spirit, her stunning smile. I selfishly think, she is my “in” into the Ethiopian community. With her as my friend, I cannot only be an observer, but I can also be a participant in the Ethiopian community.

Then, we stop at the ATM so that I can get cash to purchase my bus ticket. She stands close by like a good friend would.

Every day, she saunters in anywhere from one to two hours late. She also purchases a falafel and a cola for seventeen shekels every day. I often accompany her, getting a smile and free chips from the owner though I never buy anything. Instead, true to my frugal personality, I bring my own lunch, which is much healthier and less expensive.

We chat on the way to the falafel stand.

“When you come dancing with me?” she asks as she shakes her hips.

“Soon,” I laugh. I honestly don’t know if the Tel Aviv club scene would be in my comfort zone.

One day she tells me she got in a fight with her mom. She moved out and was living with one of her fifteen siblings in a different town. Every day I ask her if she is OK. She breaks into that smile of hers and brushes the air with her hand, motioning that everything is fine. She stays with her brother for two weeks.

Then something odd happens.

One day I notice on my online banking account that there have been three unauthorized transactions on two separate bank accounts. Unsettled and frustrated, I cancel both accounts and begin to take my purse everywhere with me, even to the bathroom. All three transactions were made at the ATM on the street on which I work, at times during which I am in the office. I have never been to that ATM.

My parents question me incessantly. Has anyone ever been to the ATM with you? I lie. There is no way she could have seen my PIN as I entered it in the central bus station amidst hordes of people. I try to not think of the time she asked me what an American credit card looks like. As I enter the office every day, I pushed my suspicions aside and embraced her with my soul.

“I am in 5,000 shekel minus. I no have money for the bus. You have money?”

My mind explodes. I can no longer push my suspicions aside when she pulls me aside into the office kitchen. Was she the one who had taken money from me? No – she is too kind, I tell myself. She needs help! I reassure myself. I am not the rich American she may think I am – I am only in Israel because I received a fellowship and am living off a budget. Still, the question nags me.

I give her the twenty shekels that is in my wallet because I do not *want* to believe that she is a thief and I cannot turn down someone in need.

“I’m sorry I don’t have more,” I say in Hebrew.

During that same time period, three other people in the office report stolen money from their wallets. I calculate the withdrawals that I had made during the summer and match them to all of the expenses of which I have kept a close record. I come up 500 shekels, about \$130, short.

The following week, she comes in crying. Like always, she closes the door behind her so that we are left in the cramped conference room alone.

“I can’t do it. It’s too hard.” She uses the roll of toilet paper in her purse to wipe away her tears.

With her tears comes her story; her father is not in the picture. Her mother works as a cleaning lady but does not make enough to support the sixteen children, a slightly larger-than-typical family size in an Ethiopian home. She often has to care for her younger siblings, which makes her late to work. She doesn’t get along with her mother and wants to move out of the house, but she doesn’t have enough money to rent an apartment. She has promised a friend that they would rent an apartment together and the friend has already put down a down payment. If she didn’t come through with more money, the friend would lose the deposit. It was like an avalanche of soap opera tales.

Instinctively, I hug her. And yet, more than ever, I think it is she who had taken my credit card during the work day, walked down to the ATM, punched in my PIN, withdrawn my money, and returned my card to my purse. This thought, however, is overwhelmed by my compassion for her, the sorrow I feel for her, the disbelief at what she had been hiding behind that glowing smile.

I plead with her to tell one of the lawyers – perhaps they can help. She refuses. She does not trust them.

Instead, I report everything to one of the lawyers. Everything spills from my lips, our trip to the ATM together on my first day, her fight with her mom, her request for my money, my unauthorized transactions, and her most recent tears. I learn that Tebeka has been having problems with her. She is living at home, an hour commute from Tebeka, because she has been kicked out of the *Sherut Leumi* housing in Tel Aviv.

The pain in my stomach conquers my entire body and soul. My heart weeps, my hands shake.

Later that day, she is brought into the lawyer’s office to be questioned about my money.

“*Chas v'chalila!* (Heaven forbid!),” she exclaims. She looks at me, her tears dry by now, her mouth widening into her smile that I now know hides so much.

“You no think I take your money?” she smiles innocently.

“No.” I answer with deep guilt and shame. I cannot get myself to confront her about my suspicion. I do not want her to feel like she cannot trust me and I know she needs someone in her life who will listen to her.

I looked at her smile and felt her pain. That beautiful, beautiful smile, a peek into her beautiful soul, wrestling to break out of the ugly circumstances into which she had been born.

Confounded and in shock by the whole situation, I decide to speak about my feelings with Liat, a native Israeli who heads a program that helps place Ethiopian-Israeli law students in firms for internships upon graduation. Liat confirms my feelings of frustration and sadness by telling me how difficult it is for her to work with many Ethiopian law students who are dealing with home situations that prevent them from arriving at meetings or interviews on time or even at all. Liat commiserates by telling me, “I find it really difficult not to get mad and upset at people... and then I find out these huge stories and I don't know how to cope with them.” My conversation with Liat allows me to see that my friend is not alone. Although Liat does not relay any stories about thieveries, I see that it is common for Ethiopian Israelis to be faced with difficult home lives. These home lives, affected by difficulties in assimilation, often preclude them from achieving their greatest potential in the professional sector and furthering themselves in Israeli society.

Never before have I seen the cycle of poverty unravel in the life of someone so close to me. Realizing that I am betrayed by someone I trusted saddens me. Even more so, contemplating the future prospects for my friend disheartens me. I am not angry with her; I am just sad for her. My idealistic sentiment of working to remove the stereotypes of

the Ethiopian community has been dampened as I try to swallow that my friend, an Ethiopian girl from a poor family who feels the need to steal from others in order to survive, is living a stereotype. Of course, there is no hard evidence that it is in fact my friend who stole my money. There would need to be a thorough investigation into the situation in order to corroborate my suspicions.

**Never before have
I seen the cycle of
poverty unravel
in the life of
someone so close
to me.**

Although dampened, my idealism is not squelched. All I need to do is to look around the office at Tebeka at the three young, successful Ethiopian-Israeli lawyers, the intelligent and engaging Ethiopian-Israeli law students who volunteer in the office, and listen to the stories about Itzik, the first Ethiopian Israeli to receive a law degree in Israel and the founder and director of Tebeka. All of these individuals inspire me and instill hope in me that it is possible to assimilate into Israeli society and further oneself economically and professionally despite the overwhelming obstacles of assimilation. Even more inspiring is the fact that they are all working to help the rest of their community do the same.

“Live and Become”

It's not like racism does not exist in Israel, because it does. A dear friend, Tomer, one of the Ethiopian lawyers at Tebeka, told me a story about a time he was working in a chicken plant.

One customer went up to the manager and indignantly said, “I don't want a black man touching my meat.”

This is a pitiful comment made out of hatred and ignorance, and I was sadly expecting to hear more stories like this when coming to Israel. After my childhood pride in Israel for rescuing thousands of Ethiopian Jews in Operation Moses and Operation Solomon in 1984 and 1991 respectively was smothered by the movie “Live and Become,” I decided to come to Israel to help fight discrimination towards Ethiopian Israelis. Because the racism in my own country toward black-skinned people is baseless, I was pessimistically expecting the same situation in Israel.

What I was not expecting to hear, or what I neglected to think about, were the extraordinary difficulties Ethiopians face once having moved to Israel and the negative ramifications of these obstacles.

I did not expect to hear from Yaffa, the director of the Legal Department at Tebeka, that 25 percent of all murders of wives committed by husbands in Israel were committed by Ethiopian men, even though Ethiopians only make up 15 percent of the Israeli population. Yaffa's blonde hair tossed slightly as she shook her head in heartache. She explained to me that this was because Ethiopia was a patriarchal society where men worked in the fields and women stayed at home in the one-room hut. Other discussions I had with Ethiopian Israelis confirmed this. All of the Ethiopians to whom I spoke had mothers who stayed home back in Ethiopia. After arriving in Israel, Ethiopian men quickly formed a complex about sending their wives to work to support the family.

This jarring statistic is poignant when understanding the types of factors that have prevented the Ethiopian community from successfully integrating into Israeli society. Gadi Ben-Ezer, psychologist and expert on the Ethiopian-Israeli community, notes that “[S]ince 95 percent came from agricultural backgrounds, few had a profession which they could immediately exercise; hence they found themselves very quickly with unskilled work, typically, in low status and underpaid jobs” (112). Clearly, if Ethiopians struggle to land well-paying jobs in Israel, they are going to be relegated to living in low-class neighborhoods. Often, there are high crime rates in these neighborhoods, like one Ethiopian “ghetto” (as referred to by my Ethiopian friend) I visited in the city of Netanya. It is known as a ghetto among the Ethiopian Israelis since only they occupy the streets. The decrepit apartment buildings and abandoned strip malls I witnessed gave me the feeling of the American “ghettos” I’ve seen in New York or Philadelphia. The director of the community center told me that it was not safe at night there. There is a lot of violence among teen boys, with many of them possessing knives.

It now seems so clear, so simple, how one drastic difference in culture can make assimilation so difficult, which can lead to a low-income life, a life with so many negative implications. As the Ethiopian-Israeli story becomes more transparent to me, I begin to think about immigrants in my own country. In today’s globalized world, people are constantly moving to more developed countries in search of a better life. As much as these new immigrants need to “work hard and improve [them]self and improve their family,” as my friend Tomer says, it is also important for these immigrants to be supported by their new country. I now understand how an unsuccessful assimilation can lead to a perpetuating cycle of regretful life circumstances. I want to learn how that can be avoided, how an immigrant can move to a new country and successfully “live and become.”

Works Cited

Ben-Ezer, Gadi, “Ethiopian Jews Encounter Israel: Narratives of Migration and Problems of Identity,” in *Migration and Identity: Volume III: Migration and Identity*. Ed. Benmayor, Rina and Skotnes, Andor. Oxford University Press, New York: 1994.