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# CHILDREN OF THE PLANE

EIGHT BABIES WERE BORN ON THE FLIGHT FROM ETHIOPIA TO ISRAEL IN OPERATION SOLOMON. 20 YEARS LATER, WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Last month, the state of Israel marked the twenty year anniversary of "Operation Solomon," that brought Ethiopian Jews to Israel. At the home of the Getta Family in Givat Olga, nobody noticed the date. Twenty years ago the family came to Israel from the village of Mache in the Gondar region. On the plane, en route to Israel, their youngest son, Eyal was born.

Eyal Getta was drafted to serve as a fighter in the Givati Brigade, but after four and a half months took his bag and "cut "home to help support his family. Now he is a *deserter*, a factory worker. "How did we celebrate his birthday?" asks his mother, Monaly Getto. She doesn't speak Hebrew, Monaly, only Amharic. "We didn't. We forgot his birthday and forgot about the Operation."

Eight babies were born during "Operation Solomon". Five boys and three girls. On most of their identity cards, in the section "Country of Birth" they have written "en route to Israel." Almost all were born pre-term. Their first names were given to them by medical staff on the plane.

Twenty years later, the journey for these eight, which was supposed to be exciting and beautiful, is revealing a story of a very difficult absorption. Today, of the eight, only one girl has completed high school matriculation. All of them joined the army, but four of them went AWOL last year. One just ended a 21 day confinement to the base, two weeks ago. One is serving a one month confinement now. Two are still at home.

Most of their parents are unemployed. Among the mothers who gave birth then, the majority still do not know Hebrew to this day. Communication with their children, most of whom do not speak Amharic, is extremely difficult.



From the great longing to come to Israel, what is left now is mostly frustration. Most of the parents miss Ethiopia, some of them wish they could return. They live in depressed neighborhoods. They have not moved, not advanced, not changed since the day they left the absorption centers and caravan sites. Three of them live in Hadera, on adjacent streets. Not one of them was a member of a youth movement, and they do not have a computers at home, nor air conditioning. Most of them have worked since the age of 12 at temporary jobs to help support their family. Some of them encounter racism.

What are their dreams? I asked each of them separately, at age 20. Work, school, family, a home, a trip after the army, to break the cycle of poverty, to leave the neighborhood? The answer was almost identical. For the eight children born "en route to Israel," in the belly of the plane that brought them from Ethiopia to Israel,

*they have no dreams.*

## EYAL GETTA, GIVAT OLGA

"The State has not done enough," says Eyal Getto. "As a kid here, they used to call me 'nigger'. Later on they didn't, but racism has not disappeared and it will not go away. On the bus, in the street. I walk past a boy and he crosses the street to the other side. It's scary. My sister got fired from work. They took a 'white girl' in her place. People prefer to hire Israelis over Ethiopians. That's Israel. There's no point in even talking about it."

Eyal Getta was born premature. They put Limor Tronch in the incubator with him, she was born on the same plane. No one imagined so many babies would be born en route to Israel, and they did not bring enough incubators to the airport. Then rumors spread that twins were born on the plane.

From the airport in Lod, they took Monaly Getta with baby Eyal to Assaf Harofeh Hospital. A few days later they went to

the absorption center in Kiryat Shmona. The Gettas lived for almost a year and a half at the caravan site in Haifa, and from there they moved to a small apartment in Givat Olga where they live to this day.

The father, Mamo, is a pensioner. The mother is sick. "Life is the Social Security pension. 3000-3500 shekels (\$1,000 dollars) a month," says Eyal. "They don't speak Hebrew. It's not possible to let them go out alone to the bank, HMO, Social Security office, or parents' meetings at school. We must translate everything for them. Speech is difficult, understanding difficult. When I'm in the army, they call me to translate for them on the phone."

Eyal studied at a yeshiva high school. He studied for 12 years, and yet did not achieve high school matriculation. All his childhood he dreamed of becoming a pilot. Yet from the beginning, he says, he didn't think he

would succeed, so he gave up the dream before even trying. Without support from home, he says, there's no chance. Eyal was supposed to enlist a year and a half ago, but pushed off his draft date to work and help his parents.

Last November, he enlisted in a combat unit. After four and a half months, he went AWOL and returned home. "I ran away to help at home," he says. Since then, he works nights in a manufacturing plant. He has been a deserter for three and a half months already. He plans to return to the army "after the eco-

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the economic situation works out."

Eyal lives under the fear that the military police will catch him. "I thought if I became a fighter, they would help me out more," he says. "It didn't happen. They offered me some groceries from the army. I don't want it. I have my dignity. They should be the ones to decide what's missing from the fridge? I just want to work and make my own money".



## GIL TDISA, HADERA

From the plane, Aniis Tdisa was taken to Laniado Hospital in Netanya. Her husband, Angidau, was taken to an absorption center in Kiryat Shmona, and their five children taken to Nahariya. "There was confusion, a total mess", says Aniis. "but we were happy."

The Tdisa family also came by way of absorption center in Kiryat Shmona, the Neve Carmel site in Haifa, and then a permanent apartment in Hadera, just like the Tronches and Aiyahuns. Gil's older sister, Revital, ran the household. The older brothers help earn a livelihood. "My sister went to parent-teacher meetings," says Gil. "She did everything- homework, phone calls, shopping- and she still does today. The oldest siblings become like parents to the parents." Gil did not matriculate, he works at temporary jobs.

When he wanted to obtain an identity card, Gil went to the Ministry of the Interior. That's when he discovered he was born "en route to Israel." "I told the clerk, 'What kind of address is that? You decide, Ethiopia or Israel.' She said, 'That's a difficult question, I don't know'. She promised to check with management, but they never got back to me."





## LIMOR TRONCH, HADERA

The name Limor was given to Limor Tronch by the obstetrician that delivered her on the plane. Her identity card also says she was born "en route to Israel." She was born an hour before landing in Lod. "I was ashamed to say I was pregnant," says her mother Aviva Tronch, whose picture - moments after delivery on the plane - appeared on television and in newspapers was received with mixed feelings. On the one hand, there was great excitement. On the other hand, a real intrusion of privacy for a young mother.

"The contractions started but I didn't want

***"It's no good in Israel. There is racism. I'd go back to Ethiopia if I had the option. To OUR country. "***

to say anything. They asked if something was hurting, I said 'no'. I was afraid they would drop me from the flight. The person next to me said, 'I think she's pregnant.' There was not much time. We were close to Israel. I gave birth quickly. The doctor, I do not remember his name, visited us when Limor was small. He said enthusiastically, 'Limor is like my daughter.' Now, for ten years, we haven't seen him. Maybe he too has had enough. Everyone is sick of the Ethiopians."

The Tronch family was sent to the absorption center in Kiryat Shmona. They began studying in Ulpan. Limor Tronch, say the other mothers, was a crybaby. In the Ulpan classroom, she was always crying. The teacher forbade her to come to class. Aviva Tronch said that if she could not participate in the class with her infant daughter, then none of the mothers could.

She learned Hebrew later. Most of the other mothers still do not speak Hebrew.

They live in the "luxury" neighborhood of Hadera. The "Plane Babies," as they call themselves, laugh when they say the name of the neighborhood. In fact it's an impoverished neighborhood of mostly Ethiopians. The antithesis of luxury.

The Tronchs are neighbors to the Aiyahuns (story below). Baruch Aiyahun was also born on the plane. "They stuck all the Ethiopians in the same neighborhood," says Limor Tronch. "We live together from an early age. Ethiopians with Ethiopians. It's hard to connect with others."

Limor dropped out of high school at the beginning of her junior year. She worked at a poultry factory. "Nine hours a day, from six in the morning. "I chose the hard way," she says. she says. "I left school and went to work, that's what I wanted. I was stupid. My parents couldn't say anything to me."

Fifteen months ago she was drafted into the Israeli Army. She served in the Southern Command, until she left there too. She went AWOL, and sat home for three weeks doing nothing.

Eventually she returned to the army. She was sentenced to confinement to the base for 21 days and was assigned to serve close to home. "I came home because of our economic situation. I'm not a girl from Ramat Aviv. I need to help my family."

Two years ago, the Tronchs divorced. The economic situation that was difficult before, became extreme. Aviva was fired from her job in the kitchen. She has six children at home. "I don't know what to do," she says. "It's no good in Israel. There is racism. I'd go back to Ethiopia if I had the option. To OUR country. There, they do not pay attention to color. Here, they didn't receive us properly. We thought they got us right, but we were wrong. Limor was born on the plane. I thought she'd have a better life here. Now there is no money, no school, no work. The children look at me, 'Why did they bring you here?', and I tell them 'I have no answer'."

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## BARUCH AIYAHUN, HADERA

The journey to Israel lasted more than two years for the Aiyahun family. They were in Sudan for 11 months after being caught at the border. Then they were brought back to Ethiopia to wait in Addis Ababa until the Operation. Baruch, born on the plane, is their third son (now they have seven children).

"I lay on the bed in the plane, I pushed and pushed," Argo Aiyahun describes the delivery in flight, "and suddenly, the child came. He comes out and I hear 'everyone clap hands, we've arrived in Jerusalem, we're already on the ground. "

She remembers that the ambulance took her to the hospital with Anis Tdisa and Aviva Tronch. They sat side by side, excited from the birth and immigration to Israel, having made a common journey from the absorption center in Kiryat Shmona,

the caravan site in Haifa, to their apartments in Hadera. Her husband worked as a gardener, but he has been unemployed for a long time. She works in cleaning to support the family.

Baruch studied in high school, but never completed his matriculation. He understands Amharic, but does not speak it. "For someone who comes from Ethiopia, it's more difficult," he says. "My dad always tells me, 'If I were you, I would study harder.' I love my parents. However, they are not people I can seek advice from."

Argo: "We paid a heavy price to come to Israel, the Holy Land. They promised us that everything here would go smoothly. But here, we are always dependent on someone else's handouts.

Every month just waiting for the welfare check. Children have homework, parent-teacher meetings. I used to go to the teachers and say, 'Sorry, I'm a new immigrant. I cannot read or write. I do not know what grades they got, or what kind of work you gave them to prepare. I want to help them, but I can't'. How does that look to the children?"

Baruch Aiyahun served one year and five months in the Golani Brigade. 13th Battalion. He enlisted in November 2009. He was, he said, "enchanted". Then he moved to another base. But his excitement dissolved with the difficulties of being in the force. For some time now, he's been home, another *deserter*.



"When I came home from the army," he says, "unlike a soldier with Israeli parents, I have no one to share with. You get 700 shekels a month, it was nothing. To get home, there are three stops on the way. You stop to buy food and drinks, there's a canteen on the base, and you have nothing left. So many times I left the house without a penny in my pocket because we just didn't have any."

That's why he decided, like Eyal Getta, to return home. Now he works temp jobs-painting, repairs, whatever he can get. They need his help at home. His mother worries, "All my life I only talked about my dreams for him," she says, "that he would study, and get a degree. Now I reach to my pocket to help him, but I have nothing to give."

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"The second generation from Ethiopia, born here, are in even deeper crisis than the generation who immigrated to Israel, they are falling through the cracks. They grow up in homes without role models," said Knesset Member Shlomo Molla, who emigrated from Ethiopia in Operation Moses.

"This is a collective failure of Israeli society," he continues. "A moment after the Operation ends, the immigrants are forgotten. How can we invest so much money in these immigrants, and still not succeed? The education system has failed. Only two weeks ago, I asked the Knesset's Education Committee how many Ethiopian students are in gifted tracks, they told me 'nine'. It's shocking."

"This is a red light. We need to make dramatic changes in the absorption system, in the social services policy for immigrants from Ethiopia. Take the budget we spent on them, throw out all the existing programs, and produce a new plan."

The story of the eight babies, says Mula, is not accidental- it's symbolic. "This is an indictment of Israeli society. After twenty years, this is the result of a failure of absorption of second-generation Ethiopian-Israelis. That's the reality."

