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Ethiopian Jews Find Friendly Israeli Village

By Ben Barber, Journalist, editor, photographer, aid worker

Israela Tadela, daughter of Ethiopian Jews who fled on foot across the eastern Sahara to reach Israel in 1984, is the first Ethiopian-Israeli to become a producer at a top TV channel.

But it was not easy. The risky trek to Israel left three of her siblings dead as the family crossed international borders to reach Israeli airplanes landing at secret airstrips in Sudan.

After she was born in Israel, she and her family had to struggle to adapt to modern Israeli society — a far cry from traditional Ethiopia.



Tadela, 30, interviewed on a recent visit to the United States, might never have become so successful if not for a creative school and shelter village called [Yemin Orde](#) founded to help troubled teenagers overcome the cultural, family, racial, psychological, linguistic and other problems common to refugees and immigrants.

Now a firmly established school near Haifa, with about 500 students in residence, Yemin Orde helps teenagers grow intellectually and emotionally. After graduating from high school, the school helps them adjust to army life and helps them with tuition and expenses to attend college.

Many of the [students come alone](#) to Israel from the former Soviet Union. Others come from Ethiopian and other immigrant families wedded to traditions such as parental authoritarianism that might have served well over thousands of years living in developing countries but are not appropriate in modern Israel.

Israel does not want its immigrant children to cling to what are seen as negative aspects of the cultures of their ancestral lands. Rather it wants to help their children emerge as modern, confident and open individuals capable of contributing to the modern economy and serving in the army, a melting pot for diverse cultures.

Often, the parents find it hard to learn new languages and skills or to accept the modern ways of their assimilating children.

Jews from Eastern Europe and North Africa have adapted well to Israel but some groups have had a harder time. Yemenite Jews who were flown to Israel in 1950, found it hard to accept that their daughters wore short pants and lived on army bases during their military service. Over time these problems faded.

Now the Ethiopian Jews, clearly identifiable by their dark skin, are making contributions to Israel.

Tadela's parents came from a land of great underdevelopment. On a visit to Ethiopia 25 years ago I saw some Ethiopian Jews preparing to board a flight to Israel. Poverty was written on their shabby clothing and thin bodies. At the metal detectors, one man gave over his well-worn belt to be examined. I saw that it had been repaired in three places with steel staples.

Today the Ethiopian generation of the refugees, plus their descendants, totals 135,000.

The 1984 airlift was called Operation Moses.

Today, when one reads about refugees crossing deserts we think of people fleeing violence, persecution, tyranny and poverty in Somalia, Libya, Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan, and other mainly Muslim countries.

But few recall that after Israel became independent in 1948, some 700,000 Jews fled to the new Jewish state from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq.

Yemin Orde was founded in 1953 to care for troubled children from North Africa, Iran, India, Yemen and Eastern Europe, according to the village website. Today's residents are from Ethiopia, France, the former Soviet Union, Brazil and Israel. Most suffered trauma, loss, neglect, abandonment and extreme poverty.



Like many of the residents and graduates of Yemin Orde, the village "gave me peace and quiet I didn't find at home," said Tadela.

"The teenage years were a difficult time. My parents struggled with a new language [Hebrew] and a new culture. So I started to go places where there were children like me. ...I saw all kinds of children and cultures. I found my own ethnic identity."

After three years of struggling, Tadela got [a scholarship](#) and other help. Now she is traveling around the world to try and win funding support for the village that helped her.

Yemin Orde is named after the British military officer [Orde Wingate](#) who served in Palestine before World War II. Although not Jewish, he came to admire the Jewish settlers struggling to till the soil, drain swamps and build a modern state while fighting off Arab forces.

Wingate taught the Jews how to fight and defend their scattered settlements, building up the core of what would become the Israeli army.

His pro-Jewish policies irked the British foreign service officers in Palestine who were trying to placate Arabs as the winds of the coming world war blew ever more strongly.

Wingate was sent back to England where his superiors noted his brilliance in training foreign forces and fighting guerrilla war. He was sent to Burma where he organized the fight to repel Japanese troops. Wingate is buried in Arlington Cemetery.

The village for troubled Israel youth that is named for him applies a theory of education known as Derech Kfar – the way of the village. It teaches the students to help each other, work as a team to uplift spirit, encourage taking on challenges and understand other cultures.

“Research shows that the way of Yemin Orde is very good,” said Tabela. “Even after you finish, you have got values of volunteering, being a good student and good to your family.

“We have a lot of good kids who got jobs and give back. We are taught that nothing is free. You have to give back.” She said that educational officers from other countries such as Rwanda have come to visit Yemin Orde and see if it can be a model to help overcome culture clash and reconstruct after genocide.

Although Tabela got her job at Channel 2 news, many other Ethiopian Jews have had problems with police and can’t find suitable work. The Ethiopians lack a network to help them get good jobs. “You need to know someone who knows someone,” she said.

Yemin Orde is working to train Israeli police not to judge Ethiopians by their color. “The government will try now to teach policemen how to act and deal with people from other cultures.” She suggested that Yemin Orde could teach something about inter-cultural affairs to Americans.

“Orde is an immigrant population – Ethiopians, Russians all together. We teach that all culture is the same,” she said.

“When children learn that all cultures are the same, although they are unique, they then respect others. I can deal with people from every culture. First I see the person, not the culture.”

She says because she speaks fluent Hebrew, people who she speaks with on the phone are surprised that she is Ethiopian when they meet in person.

Her parents, who once made her so uncomfortable that she fled to Orde, “are now very proud of me and what I am doing,” she said. “I still speak Amharic with them and visit twice a month.

“Two years ago I went to Ethiopia for a roots trip and now I understand what they did. They struggled for Zionism and to give us a good life.”

Since its inception, Yemin Orde has graduated over 4,000 students.

They currently serve as leaders in various professions including:

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| -Law | -Health Care |
| -Military | -Politics |
| -Art | -Film |
| -Music | -Education |
| | -Technology |

For more information on Yemin Orde, visit www.yeminorde.org, email info@yeminorde.org or call 202-237-0286

Ben Barber is a DC-based freelance writer. His recent book — “GROUNDTRUTH: Work, Play and Conflict in the Third World — is available on Amazon.