Twenty years after “Operation Solomon”: In the Footsteps of the “Plane Babies”

June 18, 2011
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Last month, the State of Israel marked the 20th anniversary of ‘Operation Solomon’, in which Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel as new immigrants.

However, this event got no attention from members of the Gato family in Givat Olga. Twenty years ago, the family immigrated to Israel from the village of Macha in the province of Gonder. Eyal, the youngest son, was born in mid-flight. Eyal Gato was drafted as a combat soldier in the Givati infantry brigade but left his unit after four and a half months to go home and help with his family’s livelihood. Now he’s AWOL and working in a factory. “How did we celebrate his birthday?” asks Eyal’s mother, Monalee Gato. She doesn't speak any Hebrew - only Amharic. “We didn't,” she continues. “We forgot his birthday and we forgot the operation [Operation Solomon].”

Eight babies were born during ‘Operation Solomon’ - five boys and three girls. Most of them carry ID cards with “on the way to Israel” listed as the country of birth. Almost all were born premature.

They were named by the airborne medical staff. Twenty years later their story, hardly the emotional and beautiful tale one might expect, presents instead the poignant reality of an agonizing integration process. Out of eight children, only one girl matriculated fully from high school.
All eight were drafted into the IDF but four went AWOL or deserted within the first year. One has completed a 21-day confinement period at her base and another is currently being confined to his base for a full month. Two more are still at home. Most of their parents are unemployed and of those who became mothers twenty years ago, most still can't speak Hebrew.

Communication with the children, most of whom don't speak Amharic, is a challenge. The yearning they once felt to come to Israel has dissipated leaving behind mainly frustration. Many of the parents miss Ethiopia; some of them even want to return. They live in underdeveloped neighborhoods. They haven't moved into new homes. In fact, they haven't progressed at all since the day they left the absorption centers and caravan parks.

Three of them live in Hadera within several blocks of each other. None of them joined a youth movement and they don't have amenities such as computers or air conditioners. Most of them have been working odd jobs since they were twelve years old to supplement their family's incomes. Most have encountered racism.

Now 20 years old, I asked each one individually what their dreams were - work, family, a house, a post-army trip, breaking the cycle of poverty, or perhaps leaving their neighborhood. Their answers were almost identical. For these eight young adults born “on the way to Israel,” there were no dreams to speak of.

**Limor Tronach, Hadera**

Limor was named by the physician that delivered her on the plane. Her ID card also has “on the way to Israel” listed as her country of birth. She was born one hour before landing at Ben Gurion International Airport. “I was ashamed to say that I was pregnant,” explains her mother, Aviva, who was photographed crouching on board the plane. The photographs were displayed on television and in the newspapers and were received with mixed emotions.

On one hand, there was much excitement. On the other hand, this was a blatant invasion of privacy for a new mother. “My contractions had begun but I didn't want to say anything. People asked if something hurt me and I said no. I was afraid of being taken off of the plane. The person sitting next to me said 'I think she's pregnant.' There wasn't much time. We were about to land in Israel. I gave birth fast. The physician - I can't remember his name - paid us a visit when Limor was young. He said that Limor was like a daughter to him. He was invigorated, but we haven't seen him in over ten years. Maybe he's also tired of us. Everyone's tired of the Ethiopians.”

The Tronach family was sent to an absorption center in Kiryat Shmona and began studying Hebrew in an ulpan. Other women who were new mothers at the absorption center at that time describe Limor as a baby that cried a lot. She was always crying when they were in class and the teacher eventually refused to let Limor in.

Aviva Tronach said that if she couldn't participate in the classes with her baby at her side, none of the other mothers would be able to. She learned Hebrew later. Most of the other mothers still can't speak Hebrew. The classes at the ulpan proved to be a one-time opportunity.
The family lives in the Pe'er neighborhood of Hadera. The “plane babies,” as they refer to themselves, laugh every time they mention the name of the neighborhood. ‘Pe'er’, which means ‘splendor’ in Hebrew, is actually an underdeveloped neighborhood with an Ethiopian majority, indeed, the antithesis of splendor.

Not far from the Tronach family lives the Ihon family (whose story appears below). Baruch Ihon was also born on the plane. “They stuck all of the Ethiopians in one neighborhood,” says Limor Tronach. “We have lived here since we were young. Ethiopians with Ethiopians. It’s tough connecting to others.”

Limor dropped out of high school at the beginning of the eleventh grade and began working at the Hod Hefer chicken processing plant. She worked nine hours a day starting at six in the morning. “I chose the hard path,” she says. “I dropped out of school and went to work because that’s what I wanted. I was dumb. My parents couldn’t say a word to me about it.” A year and three months ago, she was drafted into the IDF. She served in the Southern Command eventually leaving that as well. She returned home and remained there for three weeks doing nothing.

Limor returned to the army and was sentenced at a military trial to 21 days confinement on a base close to her home. “We go AWOL because of tough economic conditions at home,” she says. “I’m not some spoiled girl from the Tel Aviv suburbs. I need to help my family.” Her parents have been divorced for two years. Their economic situation was tough beforehand and has now gotten worse. Aviva was dismissed from her job as a kitchen hand. She has six children at home. “I don't know what to do,” she says. “Life isn't good in Israel. There’s racism. Even if I had money, I couldn't live where I want to. People in Ramat Aviv (a wealthy Tel Aviv suburb) would go on strike. I know these Israelis. If I could, I’d go back to Ethiopia, our homeland. There, they don't care about your skin color or your ethnicity. Here, we aren't welcome. We thought we would be but we made a mistake. I had Limor on the plane and I thought she'd have a good life here. Now we have no money, no school, no work. The children look at me as ask, “Why did you bring us here?” I tell them that I don't have an answer.
Eyal Gato, Givat Olga

“The country didn’t do enough,” says Eyal Gato with a dry gaze. He isn’t upset, he comments. He’s indifferent. “As a child they used to call me ‘Kushi’, but not any more. Still, the racism hasn’t disappeared. It won’t disappear. A Yeshiva student notices me on the street and crosses over to the other side. He’s afraid of me.”

“They fired my sister,” he continues. “They took a ‘white’ girl instead. They prefer taking Israelis over Ethiopians. That’s Israel for you. No point in even discussing it.” Eyal Gato was born premature, in an incubator. They put Limor Tronach, who was also born on the plane, in the same incubator. No one imagined that so many babies would be born on the way to Israel and not enough incubators were waiting at the airport. Later a rumor spread that twins had been born on the plane.

They took Monalee Gato and her baby to Asaf Harofeh hospital in an ambulance. Several days later, they drove to the absorption center in Kiryat Shmona. They lived in a caravan park in Haifa for almost one and a half years before moving into a tenement unit in Givat Olga, where they still live today. Mamo, his father, is retired and his mother is ill.

“We live off a government stipend from National Security,” says Eyal. “Between 3,000 NIS and 3,500 NIS per month. We don’t speak Hebrew. They can’t go out alone. The bank, the National Security office, parent-teacher conferences- they need translation for everything. It’s hard to speak and hard to understand. I’m in the army and they call me to translate for them over the telephone.”

Eyal studied in a Yeshiva high school. He studied for 12 years but still hasn’t matriculated. He dreamed of being a pilot when he was a child. He gave up on that dream before even trying. Without support from home, there’s no chance of succeeding in the course. He was supposed to be drafted a year and a half ago but pushed off his enlistment to work and help his parents.

He was drafted last November to the Givati Infantry Brigade. Four and a half months later he left and returned home. “I ran away to help at home,” he says. Since then, he’s been working at a factory. He’s been AWOL for three and a half months. He plans to return to the army “when our economic situation has worked itself out.”
He lives in fear of the day the military police find him. “I thought they’d help me more if I was in a combat unit,” he says. “That didn’t happen. They offered me groceries. I don’t want them. I have some dignity. Who are they to decide for us what we need in our refrigerator? I want to work and earn money.”

Gil Tadisa, Hadera

We are having a hard time tracking down all of the babies born “on the way to Israel”. Our initial search led us to two babies born mid-flight. Later, we found out that there were eight, so we’re looking for clues. MK Shlomo Mullah is helping us. He knows these people personally. If he weren’t part of the Ethiopian community he says, he’d find it even harder to help us.

In most cases, David Naga is our mouthpiece due to the language barrier. One family sends us to the next. The families haven’t been in contact for years. The last event they celebrated together was a bar mitzvah at the Western Wall, organized by the Jewish Agency or the JDC.

They haven’t had any contact with the medical staff on the plane or with the pilots. They don’t remember names. Each family received a video cassette capturing the moment they stepped off of the plane holding their tiny babies. Most of the families have lost their video cassette or have no VCR to watch it on.

“It’s too bad you can’t buy knowledge of Hebrew,” says Anish Tadisa, Gil Tadisa's mother. We went to her house to watch the video of the babies arriving at the airport for the first time. “Everything is fine and the baby is wonderful; what a historic moment,” says the doctor with Gil in his arms.

The medical staff called him Yisrael, says Anish. When he was three years old he decided that he didn’t like the name. Since he was born, everyone’s called him Dasali, meaning ‘happiness’ in Amharic. Later, his name became Gil, meaning ‘happiness’ in Hebrew.

“I’d show the Israelis who I am,” she says, in Amharic, referring to the language barrier. “But here, your mouth is nailed shut.”

She remembers everything about the delivery, how the doctors hugged her, and how they cut the umbilical cord. She also remembers Aviva Tronach and Ergo, Baruch Ihon’s mother. Both had given birth in
the same plane. Now, they live walking distance from each other but have no contact. Caught in the midst of a historic moment, the deliveries couldn't withstand the passing of time and didn't have the effect of a common destiny. The pains of integration have taken a toll on the uniqueness of their status.

They took Anish Tadisa to Laniado Hospital in Netanya. Her husband, Ingideo, was taken to an absorption center in Kiryat Shmonah, and the children (there were five at the time not including Gil; today there are eight) were taken to Nahariya. They found the children only after two weeks of searching. They had even broadcast an announcement on the radio during the 'seeking relatives' program. “Confusion and disorder,” says Anish, “but we were happy.”

They too started out in Kiryat Shmona, continuing to the caravan camp in Neveh Carmel in Haifa, and finally, to an apartment in Hadera. Gil's older sister, Revital, managed the household. The father is retired and the mother doesn't work. The older siblings help out with the family's income.

Incidentally, all of the children, including Gil, speak Amharic to prevent a disconnect with their parents. “My sister would go to parent-teacher conferences,” says Gil. “She did whatever was needed - homework, phone calls, shopping, until today. The older siblings have become our parents’ parents.”

Gil has been working as a car mechanic on the Shimshon army base in the North since last November, a vocation he learned in high school. He hasn't fully matriculated. “In Ethiopia parents didn't get involved in what the teachers were doing,” says Revital, his sister. “In Israel, they give teachers the authority they had in Ethiopia - authority to act as parents. That was a mistake. They push the children who were born here harder.”

Gil says that when he wanted to be issued an ID card and went to the Ministry of Interior office, that's when he discovered that he was born “on the way to Israel”. “I asked the clerk if such an address exists,” he says. “She responded, 'This is a tough question... I don't know.'” She promised to check with management but he is still waiting for an answer from her.

Yirosh is the only one of the “plane children” who has matriculated. She's now in the IDF completing an officers' training course. Yirosh is short for Yerushalayim (the Hebrew word for Jerusalem). “Recently, I introduced myself to my classmates,” she says. “I told them I was born on a plane during 'Operation Solomon'. Another cadet sitting next to me told me that his father was the pilot.”

She said that another baby was born on the same plane, a relative of hers named Elad (Weneda) Aisu, also a “plane baby” (his story appears below). They aren't in contact. Her parents, Bosena and Maharetto, came from Gondar province to Addis Ababa and immigrated from there to Israel. They lived at an absorption center in Hatzor and later moved to a neighborhood of Ashkelon that didn't have an Ethiopian majority.

Today, they have twelve children. Yirosh is the fourth child. Her father works two jobs, in maintenance and security. Her mother is a housewife. Both speak Hebrew. “They always managed the household,” says Yirosh. “No one did it for them. They went to parent-teacher conferences and helped us with our homework. Our father pushed us to excel.”
Yirosh already has a sister who’s a company commander in the IDF. Her sister deferred her service to study logistics at the Technion. Yirosh had thought of studying engineering but ultimately decided to be drafted first. Although she studied at a religious girl's school, she insisted on completing regular army service. She was drafted in March of 2010 after saving up money by working as a cashier. “I always wanted to be an officer,” she says. “My family encouraged me to reach as far as I could.”

Before starting her officers' course, while still an enlisted soldier, she worked. She can’t work now because of the pressures of the officers' course. “The army gives me an extra 120 NIS a month and I use it to buy whatever I need,” she says.

“I don’t take any money from my parents,” she says. “I’m big enough to raise myself.” She also hasn’t disregarded the difficulties of integration. “There is no such thing as someone who hasn’t found it hard to integrate,” she says. “My parents needed to learn how to operate a gas stove and cook rice - basic stuff.”

“When I was in high school I volunteered at an absorption center for Ethiopian immigrants to help new immigrants,” she continues. “Because we live in a mixed neighborhood and not in an Ethiopian stronghold, it was easier for us to blend in.”

At this point she wants to continue down the path of a military career. “At home, they taught me that when the going gets tough, we try harder,” she says. “‘It’s tough’ isn’t an excuse.”

**Baruch Ihon, Hadera**

The Ihon family’s journey to Israel lasted more than two years. They spent eleven months in Sudan after being caught at the border and were deported back to Ethiopia. They waited in Addis Ababa until ‘Operation Solomon’ began. Baruch is the family’s third child out of seven.

“I lay on the bed in the plane and pushed and pushed,” says Argo Ihon recalling her mid-flight delivery. “And then he came out. He came out and I heard them say ‘clap your hands’, ‘we’re here, we’ve arrived in Jerusalem’, ‘clap your hands, clap your hands!’ and ‘look, the plane’s landing, we’re already on the ground!’”
She remembers the ambulance that took her to the hospital and she remembers Anish Tadisa and Aviva Tronach. They sat next to each other and were overwhelmed with emotion after the deliveries, having just arrived in Israel. They shared a common journey, first to an absorption center in Kiryat Shmona, then to a caravan park, and finally, to an apartment in the same neighborhood in Hadera. Her father worked in gardening but has been unemployed for a long time and is now working as a janitor.

Baruch, her son, studied in high school but never matriculated. He understands Amharic but can't speak it. “It's harder for those who come from Ethiopia,” he says. “My father always tells me that if he were in my place, he'd apply himself so much. I love my parents, but they aren't people who I can depend on for advice.”

“We paid a heavy price to reach the Holy Land,” says Ergo. “They promised that everything here will go smoothly, but we're always dependent on someone else here. Every month we wait for the 28th of the month when we get our allowance from National Insurance. The children have homework and we have parent-teacher conferences.”

“I'd go to Baruch's teacher and say, 'Excuse me, I'm a new immigrant and I don't know how to read or write. I don't know what marks they've received or what they need to prepare. I want to help them but I can't.' How do my children perceive this?”

Baruch Ihon served in the Golani infantry brigade, in Battalion 13, for five and a half months. He enlisted in November 2009. He says that he was “psyched” about his army service. He was a sergeant and a combat soldier in the combat support company and was later transferred to headquarters. His enthusiasm dissipated when the going got tough. He's been at home, AWOL, for quite some time.

“When I came home from the army,” he recalls, “I had no one to talk to about it, unlike those who have Israeli parents. You get 700 NIS a month which is nothing. You drive to Kiryat Shmona and there are three stops on the way. You stop, buy a drink, eat, there's a canteen on the base, and that's it - there's nothing left. I've left the house a few times without a penny on me because I was broke.”
This is why Baruch, like Eyal Gato, decided to return home. Now he's working odd jobs painting and fixing things. He takes whatever he can get because they need his help at home. His mother, Ergo, worries. “All my life I've talked about what I want for him,” she says. “I wanted him to finish studying, to graduate. Now, I'm digging in my pockets for something to help him with but there's nothing for me to give.”

**Perach Tzahay, Yokneam**

Perach's father, the late Derso Tzahay, was the godfather at Eyal Gato's circumcision. These two families aren't in contact anymore. Perach was born during takeoff from Addis Ababa. Her ID card originally listed Israel as her place of birth, but they've now changed it to Ethiopia. The doctor on the plane named her. “He asked my parents what they wanted to call me,” she says. “They couldn't answer so the doctor said ‘Fine, we'll call her Perach’.”

Perach's father passed away seven years ago. There are now eight more children in their house in Yokneam that her mother is raising alone. Perach helps with the family income. “There's no communication,” says Perach, referring to the immigrants and their children. “It's missing. I used to come home from school when I was young and say that I was having a test. No one understood because there's no support from home. There's no one to turn to. On the outside there was racism. We were discriminated against in primary school and in high school and there was no connection between us as Israelis.”

“We were always the 'Ethiopians' or the 'Kushim', derogatory terms, which hurt. At twelve years old, I had already entered the work force. My parents would say to me 'At your age, we were already working. Don't be spoiled - you need to work too'. I'll make sure my children work at a young age as well. I have Israeli friends who are spoiled and it really disgusts me. I'd buy clothes - undershirts for example - at the market while they'd buy them at Castro. They thought their clothes were better than mine because they cost more. It's indulgence, it's part of their upbringing, and it's not good.”

She completed her twelve years of schooling but hasn't graduated. She could have done National Service but chose to enlist instead. Today she's serving in the IDF, at the Jalame base near her house, as a recruitment and reserve call-up NCO. After finishing her workday in the IDF, she goes to work as a waitress.

“I come home, cook for myself, serve myself,
put my clothes in the laundry, and tidy up,” she says. “I wouldn’t let my mother do my laundry and I’d never take money from her. Those are Israeli indulgences and I think they’re bad.”

Her mother’s family has stayed behind in Ethiopia. “My mother would go back,” she says. “Here, she feels alone. ‘I prefer to go back to Ethiopia’, she says, and I understand her.”

Elad (Weneda) Ayeso, Netivot

He has two names: Elad, because he was born on an El-Al plane, and Solomon, the name of the airlift operation. He got his names from his godfathers. A French family from Netanya had read about the birth of an Ethiopian baby during the airlift and rushed to the absorption center to adopt him. His mother feared they would kidnap her baby, but ultimately, acquiesced. Until today, says Elad, they maintain contact with him. They even gave him money as a gift for his 20th birthday.

He's the Ayeso's youngest child, preceded by nine others. The family lives in Netivot. “There's a gap between me and my parents,” he says. “I can only scratch out a few words in Amharic and they don't understand Hebrew. They came here because they thought it would be paradise. They dreamed of reaching Jerusalem. They were told that they'd have a good life here. They never imagined it would be like this twenty years later.”

From the time he was young he dreamed of enlisting as a combat soldier. In November of 2009 he was drafted into a combat engineering unit. With Elad in the army, his brothers helped out with the family’s income. He works during his vacations from the army. “I've been working since I was thirteen years old,” he says. “It's not just money that’s lacking. What's lacking most is support. We have to face difficult issues and we have no one to share that with.”

“For example, someone like me needs more motivation to matriculate. I need to be motivated by desire. If I was pushed more I’d have graduated, but there was nobody there to do that. I meet my army buddies and I realize that it's easier for me now than for them. A soldier needs
his parents' support. I'm used to getting by without that. I don't have a problem sleeping outside but they need a sleeping bag, a mattress, and sheets from home."

He plans to stay in the army and perhaps, he says, he'll move to a kibbutz in a few years. “When I was a kid they called me 'Kushi'. I didn't pay any attention. I was born in the air and I don't have a place of birth listed on my ID card but I decided that I was Israeli. That's what my heart and soul tells me. That's why I want to stay on as a combat soldier and move to a kibbutz. It's part of my desire to finally become a part of society.”

The Generation Gap

“I'm not surprised,” says Member of Knesset Shlomo Mullah, from the Kadima party. Mullah immigrated to Israel during 'Operation Moses'. By the time 'Operation Solomon' took place, Mullah was already managing an absorption center. “The second generation of Ethiopian immigrants,” he says, “those who were born here, are undergoing a deeper crisis than those who immigrated. To put it simply, we can say that they are in dire straits.”

“First generation Ethiopians could take comfort in having a dream to make Aliyah but the second generation doesn't even have that. These children are alone; they feel ostracized and distanced. They grow up in homes without proper role models. They say that the third generation will be the one to exit the hardship - but how will they do that when the second generation is having such a rough time?”

“This is about the collective failure of Israeli society,” he continues. “Israel is great at executing 'operations' and priding itself in them. However, the immigrants are forgotten moments after the operation. They left an open field and never looked back. It's only symbolic that none of the children who were born mid-flight were sponsored. Not by El-Al and not by the air force. They never fostered relationship-building between the “airlifted” and “airlifters”. No one bothered to find out where these children are today and what happened to them.”

“Those who received Ethiopians - the state, local government authorities, social organizations, they all need to do some deep soul-searching. How can you invest so much
money to help people immigrate when it turns out to be so unsuccessful? The education system failed. It should have helped immigrant children attain higher achievements and this didn't happen."

“Only forty-one percent of Ethiopian children graduate compared to the rest of the Jewish population. Two weeks ago we convened a session of the Knesset's Education Committee to find out how many gifted children the Education Ministry had located from within the Ethiopian community. They told me there were nine. That's awful."

“There's a certain unaccountability when it comes to Ethiopians,” says Mullah. “There are even those who said 'We did them a favor by bringing them here'. We have to pound on the table. We have to take dramatic steps and shake up the absorption system. I'm a big proponent of popular struggles but only those that have a chance of succeeding. If we could re-enact the events at Tahrir Square, I would encourage the immigrants to do the same tomorrow morning. Go, wake up, shout, and take control of your destiny.”

“There's writing on the wall that we need to see. We have to shift our social policy vis-a-vis the Ethiopians. We have to take the budget that we've invested in them, throw out any programs that are running today, and create a new program. You can't regard all of the Ethiopians as a uniform group. You need a modular plan.”

The story of the eight babies, says Mullah, isn't incidental - it's symbolic. “This is a failing grade for Israeli society. Twenty years after their immigration, this is the result of the integration of second-generation Ethiopians. This is reality.”