

Embroidering dreams

Ethiopian Community Center provides work and preserves pride in tradition

By Judith Sudilovsky

THE UMPTEENTH time Zion Getahun heard a “white” Israeli grumble about seeing the older Ethiopian men always sitting outside an absorption center in Mevaseret Zion was just one time too many.

Then and there, while crossing the street near the absorption center where he worked, and before he made it to the other side, Getahun – now director of the Ethiopian Community Center in the Talpiot neighborhood in Jerusalem – vowed to develop a place that would be welcoming for these men and make them feel productive again.

Many of the men, most of them in their 50s, 60s or older, had made the arduous trip from Ethiopia to Israel only to find themselves feeling like strangers not only in the country, but also among their own communities as both the younger generation and women of the community were learning to adapt to their new reality through school and various absorption programs. But few programs actually took into account the social and culture reality of this segment of the population of Ethiopian immigrants.

“In Ethiopia everyone had respect for them, but then everything changed when they came here. They didn’t have the language, they didn’t have a place. With all their desire to fit in, they didn’t know how to do that,” says Getahun.

Coming to Israel caused an upheaval for them with the lack of language skills and a defined social role leaving the older men feeling disoriented, he says. Women – both young and old – were more likely to venture out into the larger Israeli community than the older men, whose position in the community experienced the most drastic change.

“The programs did not get the men involved. I did it in a different way. I went to the men and asked them what kind of program they would like to build. Suddenly there was a conversation. One person came to join us, then another, and I listened and tried to understand,” says Getahun, who came to Israel in 1984 as



Founded by Zion Getahun, now director of the Ethiopian Community Center in the Talpiot neighborhood in Jerusalem, Embroidering Dreams has helped a group of older Ethiopian men regain their sense of self-worth and pride in their embroidery tradition

a 14-year-old following a two month journey from Ethiopia to Sudan. “Many were missing children they left in Ethiopia, suffering from medical conditions such as high blood pressure and depression.”

What came out of his conversations with the elders was something so simple, yet something which for many of the men made a significant change in their lives. Getahun discovered that most of them, while waiting to come to Israel in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, had taken up tailoring work in order to support their families. Though normally embroidery is considered women’s work, the men said they had needed work and people in the city needed embroidery for their traditional clothes and other textiles, and mending of their daily clothes, so that is what they did: traditional Ethiopian embroidery.

Initially taking the most skilled men and following their instructions and going to Jerusalem’s Old City to get what they needed in

terms of material and thread with NIS 3,000 out of his own pocket, Getahun organized the first embroidery group for Ethiopian men at the community center in the Kiryat Menachem Jerusalem neighborhood. “After that, any man who came to the community center I gave a needle and thread,” says Getahun. But he also created a friendly sense of competition among the men to see who could do the better job to keep things interesting for them and to give them the impetus to put effort into their work.

“Each one has their own style,” he says. Some do just the embroidery on designs created by others, while others also make their own designs.

They started out with about 30 men in the group and since the group moved to the Ethiopian Community Center in the Talpiot neighborhood, they have become a core group of about 12 men ranging in age from 40 to 85 years old who continue participating in the Embroidering Dreams project,



Belay Alemayahu, a member of Embroidering Dreams, gives pointers to a participant in a pre-COVID-19 workshop

with some women also becoming involved. Now during the COVID-19 outbreak, they are embroidering from home and also making masks for the community.

The community center was built seven years ago with the aid of the International Fellowship of Christian and Jews and the Jerusalem municipality, and pre-Covid-19 the center offered other activities for the community including twice-weekly Hebrew-language ulpan classes, leadership workshops, and a senior citizen club.

For 65-year-old Belay Alemayahu, who came to Israel in 2005 after having been in the Ethiopian army for 28 years and serving a term in jail – something which he does not want to discuss in detail – the embroidery group has also been a form of therapy. While in jail he learned how to sew and do traditional embroidery, and today those skills are helping him overcome the trauma he still sometimes feels from his imprisonment.

When Alemayahu discovered the existence of Getahun's embroidery group he started coming regularly and became one of the more

active members of the group. He has led embroidery workshops to visiting Israeli and international groups and together with other members of the embroidery group worked with design students to create jewelry and Judaica pieces incorporating traditional Ethiopian embroidery designs.

"When I started there were a lot of memories. I remembered things, (though) I thought I had gotten over the trauma. This has healed my wounds. The embroidery helps me focus and not think of other things. I am involved in my work – so much so that sometimes I forget to eat. I pass the time and all I do is work and sew. It surprises me. My work gives me satisfaction," says Alemayahu in Amharic as Getahun translates for him. "It is hard work; you have to work with the eye and the brain."

Alemayahu says his four grown children, the youngest still in high school, tell him his work is "nice," but they are "more modern" and don't really understand the importance of maintaining the tradition.

Many of the embroidery designs depict the desire to reach Israel and the longing for Je-



rusalem. Getahun has sold some of the pieces the men make at different art and craft fair locations, with the proceeds going to each individual artist, but he is still working on creating a place to sell their work on a larger scale.

Alemayahu has also been privately commissioned to do embroidery pieces, including one large one with Ethiopian Christian motifs by an American tourist. "It took me a month to complete and when she came and took the work I was very proud. It gave me satisfaction to see what I had done," he says. "It helps me to reach for as far as I can."

"This is an important model that (highlights) what the grandfather can do," says Tadela Ysia, now director of community and social welfare projects of the Jerusalem Foundation but who previously worked with Getahun on a private "Open Holidays" project which brought people to private homes and tours to celebrate different holidays including Sigd, Christmas, and Novigod, the Russian new year celebration. "Suddenly the grandson can bring his grandfather to school: 'Though he came from Ethiopia and is illiterate, see what he knows how to do.



ZION GETAHUN



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Look at his embroidery. There is pride in the grandfather. Suddenly everybody is lifted up by this system."

Atalo, one of the leaders of the embroidery group, says that after being unable to find long-term employment because of his lack of Hebrew, the venture has given him back his feeling of self-worth.

"Thanks to 'Embroidering Dreams' more people understand the frustration created within us. We thought that no one would understand us and that because we did not understand the language well enough, we would never be able to integrate into work in Israel," he says. "Since beginning this project I feel healthy in my mind and body, every morning I have something to get up for... My wife feels I am going to work and is accepting me better. My kids take pride in the work I do. I sleep well and most importantly, suddenly there is peace in the house."

Jerusalem Foundation food distribution

Though the Jerusalem Foundation is not a part of the Embroidering Dreams project, yet, over the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak Tadelä Ysia, now director of community and social welfare projects of the Jerusalem Foundation reached out once again to Zion Getahun, director of the Ethiopian Community Center, when she began putting together food baskets and asked for help to identify needy families.

But rather than prepare a generic basket which would contain food like tuna and canned foods, which the Ethiopian community does not eat, she decided to include foods which would actually be eaten by the recipients.

Going to Ethiopian stores in Mahaneh Yehuda, she purchased teff flour, used to prepare the traditional fermented injera flat-bread, green coffee beans, red lentils, dried garbanzo beans, and spices

used in Ethiopian cooking.

Coming to the realization that not everybody eats the same foods, Ysia created other specialized food baskets at well. On Ramadan, Ysia coordinated with East Jerusalem Coordinator of the Jerusalem Foundation Mira Mahfouz to make similar baskets for the Muslim community which included freekeh – roasted young green wheat kernels – tehina, and thin noodles. She also put together specialized baskets for Holocaust survivors with more healthy offerings.

"We usually are not involved in preparing food baskets but with the coronavirus there was a need for this," says Ysia. "Those who received the baskets suddenly had the feeling that they were seen. They felt: 'They see me for who I am, and not just as a problem. They know I am Ethiopian.'"

J.S.