

NORTH  
AMERICAN  
CONFERENCE  
ON  
ETHIOPIAN  
JEWRY

# LIFELINE

SPECIAL EDITION / SPRING 2013

## An Urgent Message, A Secret Jewish Leader, Two Young American Jews A STORY OF EXODUS, LIFE AND DEATH

**T**his story begins many years ago, in the 1980's, when all Ethiopia was suffering under a brutal communist government (long gone now).

Poverty and disease were everywhere then. Famines came and went. Visiting foreigners were watched closely, and no Ethiopian was allowed to be alone with a foreigner. No one was allowed to leave the country on pain of prison or even death.

Nonetheless, courageous Jews were trying to reach Israel by escaping to neighboring Sudan. It was an Arab League country, but Israeli secret agents would try to pick them up there.

During those years, American Jews were joining NACOEJ missions to bring medicine, clothes, money, and hope to Ethiopian Jews still in their mud-hut villages in Ethiopia.

Two of the Americans who joined our missions were a couple of young men, coincidentally both named Ari (for convenience, we'll call them the two "Ari's"). They were good friends who shared a strong commitment to the clandestine aliyah from Ethiopia.

I was impressed with them on their first mission, and when they signed up for a second trip, which I couldn't join myself, I felt I could trust them with a difficult assignment.

I asked them if they would be willing to separate from the NACOEJ group, make their way to a town I named, and deliver an urgent message from Israel to a man called Shifero whose Jewish identity was hidden.

### WE ALL KNEW IT WAS A RISKY BUSINESS

We knew it would be dangerous. But the message had to be delivered. It was a matter of life and death. And Shifero would be able to spread it to many Jews in his area.

At that time, Jews who succeeded in crossing the border into Sudan were supposed to try to reach a certain place where the Israeli secret agents could find them and move them on to Israel. We called it "the bus stop".

The message was that "the bus stop" had just been discovered by Sudanese



*Shifero and Malka with their children in Ethiopia, as the two Ari's said goodbye.*

police. Any Jews who went there now would find only hostile Sudanese waiting for them, and the horrors of prison, torture, even death in Sudan could follow. The message told them, **"The bus stop is closed. Don't go now. Wait for new directions."**

The two Ari's agreed to take the message to Shifero.

Once in Ethiopia, they had no trouble getting into the town where Shifero lived, except for the swarming mosquitoes from a local lake. They tried to follow my vague directions to his house, but in a world without named streets or addresses it was almost impossible.

Surrounded by the usual crowd of children begging for candy and ballpoint pens, they were pointed to a little square hut. Inside, they found a few children

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2