

## **Journey to Ethiopia**

*In the fall of 2016, a select group of Oranim students and faculty participated in a transformative journey to Ethiopia. Students from the Ethiopian community explored their roots and gained pride in their heritage, while non-Ethiopian students discovered the beauty and richness of Ethiopian history and culture.*



35 Oranim students and 15 Oranim faculty members participated in a nine-day journey in Ethiopia this past fall. The group visited villages where the Ethiopian Jewish community lived before coming to Israel, important historical and cultural sites of Ethiopia, a beautiful nature preserve, the University of Gondar, and more. In the words of one faculty member, “[we experienced] connection through [our] legs, ears, eyes, and most importantly, heart.”

### **A Dream Fulfilled**

Yaron Dasta, Coordinator of the Michael Program for Students from the Ethiopian Community at Oranim, dreamed of building a trip to Ethiopia for Oranim students and faculty since the Michael Program began nine years ago. The Michael Program prepares students of Ethiopian origin for careers in education in Israel, by giving them academic and social support.

Dasta envisioned a trip that included not only students of Ethiopian origin, but also students and faculty who are not from Ethiopia. For Ethiopian students, the trip would be an opportunity to get to know a place that many of them had never been to or had left as young children, but to which they are nevertheless seen as belonging because of their physical appearance. For non-Ethiopian students, the trip would enable them to learn more about Ethiopian society, history, and culture, and understand better the experience of the Ethiopian community in Israel.

## **Past and Present**

This year, Dasta's dream was finally fulfilled, when 20 non-Ethiopian students, 15 Ethiopian students, and 15 faculty members travelled together to Ethiopia. The trip explored not only the roots of the Ethiopian Jewish community, but also the vibrant cultural life and strong educational institutions of Ethiopia today.

The group explored the villages around Gondar where most of the Ethiopian Jewish community lived before making aliyah to Israel during Operation Moses (1984) and Operation Solomon (1991). They prayed and sang Israeli songs in a synagogue that was renovated by descendants of the village's Jewish community now living in Israel. Ethiopian Jews had gathered in this village for many years to celebrate the traditional Sigd festival of the Ethiopian Jewish community. Visiting these villages enabled Oranim participants from the Ethiopian community to better understand the stories of their parents' generation of life in Ethiopia.

In addition, the Oranim group visited a local school and the University of Gondar. The visit to the university was one of the highlights of the trip. The group toured the campus, where 44,000 students study, and met with the university's president and rector. The president and rector spoke to the group in Amharic, and Ethiopian students translated for the group. Since it was the opening of the semester, at the end of the visit, the Oranim students (of all backgrounds) descended to the plaza to join in the with the Gondar University population – students, professors and president alike - for festive Ethiopian dancing.

This visit was inspiring to the Oranim students, and particularly those of Ethiopian origin, who do not see Ethiopian presidents and CEOs in Israel. The visit also showed the non-Ethiopian students what it is like to be a minority and not to speak the language, giving them a hint of what the Ethiopian immigrants to Israel felt.

## **Back at Home**

The trip gave Ethiopian students pride in their parents and in their heritage, and motivated them to give back to the Ethiopian community. Non-Ethiopian students also learned to appreciate Ethiopian heritage. In the words of one student: "I want to open the eyes of others and show them how unique your [the Ethiopian Jewish community's] values are and how much our entire society can gain from the amazing culture that you have. I believe that only through getting to know the other can we create a just and equal society."

Dr. Roberta Bell-Kligler, Director of the Oranim International School, participated in the trip. She shares: "I was moved and inspired not only by the human, natural, and cultural panoramas and vistas I saw in Ethiopia, but also by the thought of the many connections and projects that we at Oranim can promote with Ethiopia when we return home. The Ethiopian students at Oranim could be a real asset in this regard."

When the group returned to Oranim, all of the participants were involved in planning and facilitating the Sigd celebration on campus. 50% of the people who planned and facilitated the special day were non-Ethiopians. In Dasta's view, this was the purpose of the trip – to reach a point where the Sigd festival is a

national festival, not just a festival of the Ethiopian Jewish community. The Sigd festival is all about togetherness, so it is fitting that Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians come together to celebrate the festival and Ethiopian Jewish heritage.