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ALIYA

'Yerus Goes to Jerusalem'

A prizewinning children's picture book about the Ethiopian aliya will soon be available in English

• By BARBARA BAMBERGER

More than 30 years after Operation Moses, the remarkable story of the Ethiopian aliya has been mostly – and surprisingly – absent from the wide selection of children's books. Until now, that is. Written in Hebrew by Bat-Ami Melnik with African-inspired illustrations by Moran Yogev, *Yerus Goes to Jerusalem* is a welcome addition to the bookshelf. It will soon be available in English.

Published in 2015 by Dror Lanefesh, *Yerus* won the Notepad magazine prize for children's books that year and was listed in the Education Ministry's "Parade of Notable Books" recommended reading for grades 1 to 3.

Melnik calls herself "a biographer of 'unfamous' people." With two degrees in social work, she volunteered with Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, recording video testimonies of witnesses to the Holocaust. She learned that everyone has a story.

"There's almost no one who doesn't come from somewhere," she says. "But people can't always speak in an interesting way; they hesitate over dates and facts. The videos can be boring to watch."

Today her work involves writing personal histories.

"My clients are mostly elderly; they want to leave something for their children," says Melnik.

She spends hours interviewing, writing and then going back and forth with the client to ensure their story is written accurately. The books aren't sold in bookstores; they are given out to family members, often with a copy placed in the archives of Yad Vashem.

"Someone I met from Dror Lanefesh asked if I would write a biography of Ethiopians who came to Israel. I thought I was the right person to do it, but I was wrong," Melnik says with a laugh. "They didn't always speak Hebrew, and I don't speak Amharic. I tried using a translator, but I just got a lot of yeses and nos."

Eventually she decided to try it as a children's book. Although the heroine is a composite of several children, the story is factual.

When Melnik speaks to children, she is often accompanied by friend and neighbor Yeshayahu Chana, who speaks about his own experience. He made aliya from Ethiopia in 1974 and later worked with the Mosad to facilitate the mass operations.

"Most children have no concept of what life in a third-world country can be like, but they really relate to Yerus's story," says Melnik. "Sometimes they imitate the reactions of Ethiopians who have finally arrived in Israel, by getting on their hands and knees to kiss the ground."

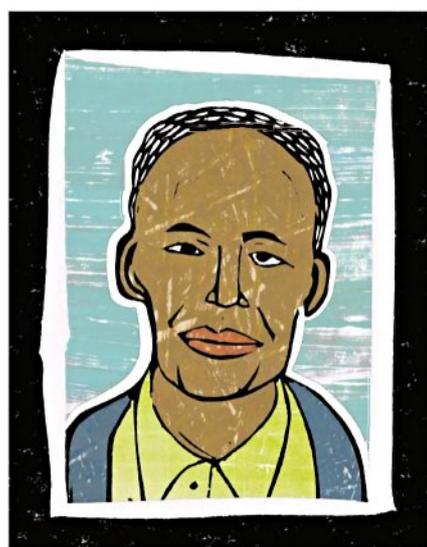
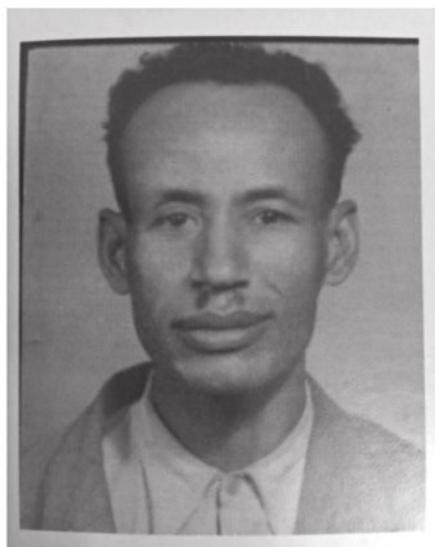
A school reading in Kiryat Gat was attended by the city's Deputy Mayor Shulamit Sahalo, who is Ethiopian. At the end Sahalo called on a reluctant Ethiopian

boy to join her on the stage.

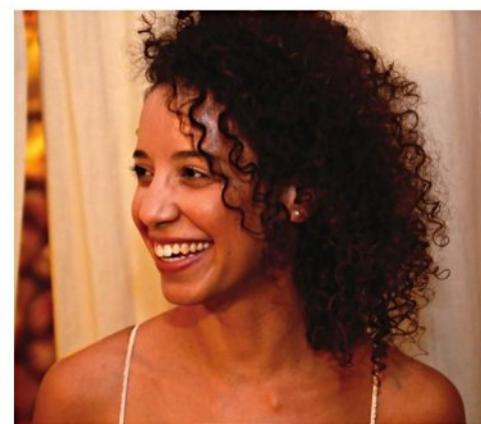
"This story is your story, too," she told him. "And we're proud of where we come from."

Illustrator Yogev graduated from the Minshar School of Art with honors in recognition of her final project "One-Quarter Ethiopian," and she was named by *Haaretz's* "Gallery" section as one of the 10 most promising designers of 2013 in the field of visual communication.

Growing up on a kibbutz, Yogev never gave much thought to her background. Her maternal grandfather, Efraim Solomon, died before she was born. He came to Israel from Ethiopia by foot in 1947 and married a woman of Iraqi descent. Solomon never spoke about his past, and there is only one photograph of him. After high school Yogev tried, unsuccessfully, to find out more about her Ethiopian roots and began to



Moran Yogev's grandfather, Efraim Solomon.
(Moran Yogev)



Illustrator Moran Yogev (Yossi Isahar)



'Yerus Goes to Jerusalem' tells a story of Ethiopian Jews coming to Israel.
(Dror Lanefesh)

Author Bat-Ami Melnik and Yeshayahu Chana with his daughter and grandson.
(PR)

develop her distinctive artistic style.

The technique she used for the book's illustrations is similar to woodcutting.

"I carve blocks of linoleum with special knives. I make a print, scan it into my computer, and create a kind of collage using colored papers that I also print and scan," she explains.

The resulting art is wonderfully textured and naive. It plays a big part in the book's success.

"My four-year-old daughter loves it because of the drawings," says Moran Wietzner, director of Dror Lanefesh, a nonprofit Tel Aviv publishing house belonging to the Dror-Israel movement. "This book is something we're very proud of.

"Our goal is to offer literary and cultural works that speak to the central value of human equality. Our publications address issues of social justice, Zionism, the Holocaust and the uprising, and education," Wietzner explains. "We offer readers the opportunity to become acquainted with, and to connect to, these subjects."

Movement members working within the Ethiopian community had become aware that there was almost nothing written for children that told their story. And there seems to be a general, misleading impression that Ethiopians were somehow passive participants in the large migrations.

"They wanted to come to Israel. That's important to tell, to the Ethiopian community itself and to the Israeli community at large," Wietzner says. "People come to Israel from all over the world. It's a central, shared experience in our society – that people come here by choice, with the desire to build a country. It's important to emphasize."

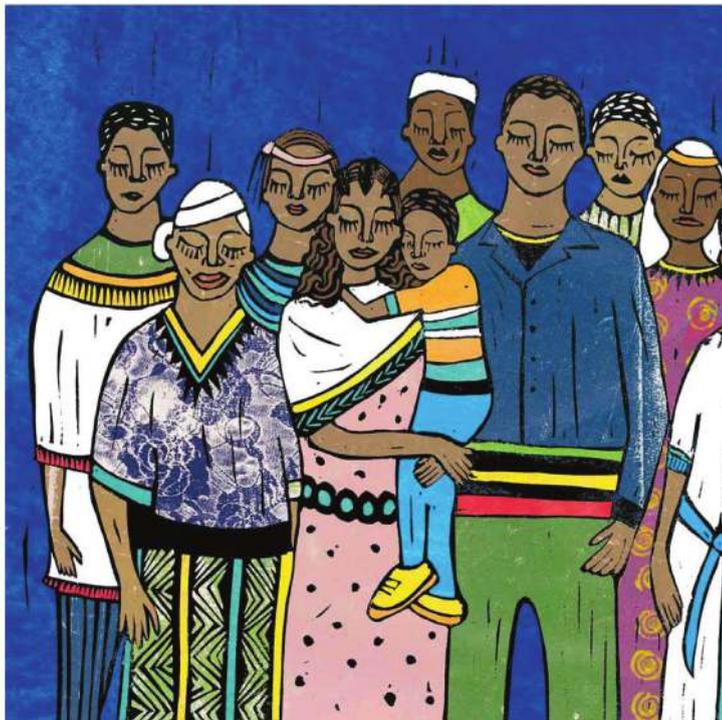
"Theirs is a story of Zionism, of the huge effort to make the journey to Israel, the brave choice people made to pack their things and come. It's about the longing for Israel, for Jerusalem," says Wietzner.

Yerus tells a story that inspires and resonates. Gilad Perry, Dror-Israel director of international partnerships, brings the book on his frequent travels to Jewish communities abroad.

"Even though it's in Hebrew, it produces strong, emotional reactions from adults and from children. It tells the story of our people and of Israel as our center. People outside of Israel don't know that we come in all colors; that we also come from Africa; that this story belongs to all of us," he says. "It's reminiscent of the Exodus from Egypt; this is a case where an entire community decided to make a significant change."

Perry is eagerly awaiting the English version.

Yerus Lanefesh is running a crowdfunding campaign through Jewcer to fund the English translation. More information: <https://www.jewcer.org/project/yerusgoestoyerusalem/>



Distinctive linoleum-block illustrations by Moran Yogev help the story to inspire and resonate. (Dror Lanefesh)