

Quickly Employed And Quickly Absorbed
by Ginni Walsh
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JERUSALEM -- Facile Eshkol, 28, clasps his sturdy hands, lifts searing black eyes, and says, "I have little to worry about. It's the others I have concern for." The well-built Eshkol, who is dressed casually, wearing what looks like a ski sweater, is referring to other Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. For him, the adjustment to Israel has been a mild transition.

Eshkol is among what he estimates to be five percent of the new Ethiopian immigrants who are well-educated, multi-lingual, and generally well prepared for Western culture. He was raised in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, and received a university scholarship to study in the former Soviet Union. With the assistance of the Jewish Agency, he arrived in Israel in 1989, before the dramatic airlift which rescued more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews.

American Jews supported the rescue and absorption of Ethiopian Jews, as well as the ongoing immigration and absorption of hundreds of thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union, through their contributions to the UJA/Federation Annual and Operation

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Exodus Campaigns. For Eshkol, immigration to Israel has meant a reunification with most of his family, who started arriving in Israel 15 years ago.

Thirteen years ago, Eshkol's father and five of his children, trekked through the Sudan, where they were helped by the Jewish Agency to get to Israel. The elder Eshkol, who was accused in Ethiopia of agitating other Jews to move to Israel, had little choice about his departure. A Hebrew teacher who maintained a strict religious home, he had already been persecuted and incarcerated. If he didn't leave, he knew that worse could be in store for him.

Fortunately for the younger Eshkol, he did not experience the wrath endured by his father. Looking bemused, Eshkol says, "When I applied for the scholarship no one asked me if I was Jewish and I didn't volunteer the information." He adds, "Jews were hated in Ethiopia."

It seems that they didn't fare much better in the former Soviet Union. Eshkol says, "It never occurred to Soviet students that I could be Jewish, so they spoke to me very openly about their feelings toward Jews. They'd say things like: '...they're bad, cheap, we hate them, they're not even people.' Some asked why I even wanted to talk about Jews."

By chance, Eshkol developed another life, unbeknownst to his Ethiopian or Soviet classmates. He explains, "I was at the post office and another student happened to notice a letter I had just

(more)

received. The letter was from my mother and it had an Israeli stamp." When the stamp was noticed Eshkol's mind started racing to think of a clever explanation. He didn't need one. His soon-to-be friend acknowledged that he was also Jewish. Through this friendship, Eshkol became linked to the Soviet-Jewish world."

A degree of chance seems to be Eshkol's companion. He's currently employed by the Israel Free Loan Association, a group that provides loans for immigrants and for Israelis with large families. The non-profit group was started over three years ago by Dr. Eliezar Jaffe, a Hebrew University professor.

Eshkol was at the Association applying for a loan, when the manager laughingly said that what he needed in the office was someone fluent in Russian, Amharic, and English. Eshkol responded, "What's the problem? Here I am." After Eshkol convinced the bewildered manager that he wasn't joking, he was instantly hired.

Eshkol is well aware that most other Ethiopian immigrants have had a more difficult road to travel. He says, "Most people have gone through a terrible cultural shock. And even when they get homes and jobs, there are still the psychological adjustments to deal with." Eshkol stresses the importance of social programs and also emphasizes the significance of time. He says, "It will happen slowly, but when immigrants feel that this is their culture, when they start thinking like Israelis, that's when it will be all right."