

# Journey Beyond Imagination

*The Victorious  
Account of the  
Gedamu Family of Ethiopia*

Journey Beyond Imagination

# Journey Beyond Imagination

*The Victorious  
Account of the  
Gedamu Family of Ethiopia*

Kokeb Gedamu  
as told to Juanita Weiss

# The Victorious account of the Gedamu Family of Ethiopia

## PUBLISHING INFORMATION

© 2010 by Kokeb Gedamu (As told to Juanita Weiss) All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any way by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise—without prior permission of the copyright holder, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are taken from the New International Version of the Holy Bible.

# Journey Beyond Imagination



## **DEDICATION**

*For our three children who were part of this journey,*

Our first daughter **Ruhama**, the start of our blessing.

**Ebenezer**, the middle of our journey.

**Tsiona**, the goal of our journey to the Promised Land.

We love you!

You are the best gifts from the Lord in our life.

May God fulfill your every desire according to

His richness and will.

We are always here for you.

# The Victorious account of the Gedamu Family of Ethiopia

# Journey Beyond Imagination

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....  
Introduction.....  
Forward.....  
Preface.....

### Part I • Beyond Asking

1. Mo'ta Village, Ethiopia—June 19-20, 1966
2. Mo'ta Village, Ethiopia—Seven Days Later
3. Gondar City, Ethiopia—September 21, 1967
4. Mo'ta Village—Kokeb, Age 6
5. Debre Markos—Kokeb Age 10
6. Addis Ababa—Kokeb, Age 12
7. Mo'ta—Kokeb, Age 12

### Part II • Beyond Thinking

8. Metema—Menalu's Story
9. Tsadeku Yochanes School, Gondar—Middle School
10. Tsadeku Yochanes School, Gondar—High School
11. Addis Ababa—1984
12. Addis Ababa & Wonja Showa—The Sugar Factory, 1984
13. Wonja Showa—1985

### Part III • Beyond Imagination

14. Wonja Showa to Metema
15. Border Crossing into Sudan—April 1987
16. Khartoum, Sudan—May 1987
17. Cairo, Egypt—1993
18. Israel—July 1994
19. Toronto, Canada—1999

# The Victorious account of the Gedamu Family of Ethiopia

20. America-Philadelphia, PA—2001

Endnotes.....

Resources.....

Contact HIIM.....

About Juanita Weiss.....

# Journey Beyond Imagination

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*...from the Gedamus*

To every person, named and unnamed, who people this book. Thank you! For those who aided us in any way—from the remote village of Mo'ta, Ethiopia to the bustling cities of America—you were God's arm to us. We are here today because you were willing vessels. We will be eternally grateful to you.

For those who were our adversaries, iron sharpens iron, you gave us the impetus to move on and to be forged and fashioned in the furnace of affliction. Even though you may have meant it for evil, God meant it for good! We pray that our lives *have* and our story *will* touch you in some positive way!

We don't have the words to express our appreciation to our dear sister Juanita Weiss who has done an amazing job at bringing our family's history to life in this book. We are really grateful for all the long days and nights' efforts you put into this book without reservation. Juanita, you will always be remembered by our family as an instrument of God. Thank you very much for your kindness and faithfulness. We also extended our gratitude to your family; your husband David, your son Jonathan, and your mother, all of whom who have been an encouragement and source of love for you. Thank you and may God bless you abundantly from Zion.

To those who sacrificed their time and effort to read, to give counsel, and to promote this book, especially: Dr. Robert Winer - Philadelphia; Rabbi Frank Lowinger-Buffalo; Rabbi David Chernoff-Philadelphia; Rabbi Jeff Forman-Toronto; Rabbi Judah Hungerman-Florida; Rabbi Joseph Bell-Tennessee; Rabbi Dr. Joseph Rosenfarb-Chesapeake; Rabbi Branny Sigal-San Diego; Joel Chernoff; Jennifer Caplan-Israel; David & Porsha Scholl-Havertown; Solomon Ashagre Nancy White Vencil. Thank you very much for your kindness and love for us. May God bless you richly from Zion.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*...from Juanita Weiss*

To my husband David and son Jonathan, for all your support and understanding and for being great listeners.

To my mother, Corine Tyler, who encouraged me to write even though "life" happened.

To my friends Beverly Howell and Danene Washington, my YA Ya's who always believed that I had talent and support me in every endeavor.

*The Victorious Account of the Gedamu Family of Ethiopia*

To my niece Nia, thanks for applauding all that I do.

To my sister Barbara Davis, the first to read a portion of my manuscript and give me advice.

My sister-in-law Beth Forrester, her husband Chris and their daughter Esther, whom I accosted at Thanksgiving to read a few chapters. You encouraged me and offered great suggestions. Thank you!

To Duke White, my son in the Gospel, thanks for your passion for Him and for seeing the call of God upon my life.

To my friend Amy Beccerra, who wielded a mean red pen and gave many helpful suggestions, thank you.

To my reading group (Katie Davis, Rebecca Kurtz, and Gailon Totheroh), thank you for the hours you spent with me, for your expertise, your insight and wisdom.

To Dr. Zemedkun and Aster Wold for being my eyes and ears to Ethiopia, for providing me with some of its local color, and allowing me to invade the serenity of your beautiful home.

To my TBT family, you always believed in me, supported me, encouraged me, and sowed seeds into my life and ministry. Thank you. I will always love you.

To Rabbi Joseph Rosenfarb and my Beth Messiah Synagogue family, especially the Intercessory Prayer and Empowerment at Lunchtime groups, for your *kesher*, prayers, and encouragement. You are so important to me.

To the Gedamu family for opening your home to me and allowing me to observe your lives. I hope I have adequately portrayed your “miracle lives” and done justice to your incredible journey of hope.

To all those who read this book, thank you, and may your life be enriched by the testimony of God’s hand upon the Gedamus!

And to Adonai Yeshua, the giver of all creativity and inspiration. You are Magnificent! I am loving getting to know You! Thank You for Your patience and Gift.

# Journey Beyond Imagination

## INTRODUCTION

The story of the Ethiopian Jewish community is one that is steeped in history and intrigue. For hundreds, if not thousands of years, the God of Israel has been watching over his ancient people to bring them back home to Zion. Their sudden return which began in the early 1980's with "Operation Moses" was dramatic. It made the newspapers of the time, and the history books of today. Many would call it a modern-day miracle. Yet few of us have heard the individual stories of the journey and the struggle of those who returned.

Here is one such story that will deeply touch your heart and show God's faithfulness to fulfill his call in the lives of Kokeb and Menalu Gedamu. It is a love story, a dramatic escape through war-torn Africa, and a spiritual journey of discovering God's amazing protection, guidance and faithfulness. In pursuit of God's call to be a "Levite," Kokeb faces the refining fire of unimaginable difficulties, obstacles, opposition, and apparent closed doors. In the end, these are the exact ingredients for multiple miracles from God's hand.

I first met Kokeb and his family in Israel in 1995. He was a charismatic leader with a big vision to impact the rest of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel. This indomitable spirit has characterized his life since childhood and has been the success to his survival in many different situations. It has set him apart from others, and perhaps made him ahead of his time in his pursuits in Israel. However, God makes no mistakes, and when one door closes, an even greater door opens. This has been the story of Kokeb's life and today he still carries a deep burden for his home in Israel and for his own people.

I am sure that Kokeb would agree with me that the real key to success is trust in the God of Israel, no matter what the status of our birth or the challenges that life presents. This is a real-life story of destiny that will inspire and challenge every reader.

And the story continues...

Jennifer Kaplan, Israel

## FORWARD

As a retired lawyer, one of my projects is to read Pulitzer Prize winning novels, the themes of most of which express varied cultures in America. My wife and I came to know Kokeb and Menalu Gedamu and their children through Beth Yeshua Synagogue in Philadelphia. We know them as joyous, gentle, gracious, and yet determined people. We have marveled at the beauty and intellectual accomplishments of their daughter Ruhama, and observed the athleticism of their son Ebenezer, and the promise of stunning beauty of their younger daughter Tsiona. We knew some of their story, but not its entirety until we read the remarkable story of their lives set forth in this book.

I am struck by the fact that my own accomplishments in the face of what I considered obstacles pale significantly in comparison to what you will read here. I am also struck by the fact that their story is more memorable and expresses greater courage than those in many of the Pulitzer Prize winning novels. Their story of accomplishments in living their lives as Ethiopian Jews and sharing with others their exotic heritage reveals a culture which has not yet been explored by any Pulitzer Prize work to date.

And, most notable of all is the fact that this story is not a novel, but a true story, and these people walk among us today!

Enjoy!

David Scholl, Philadelphia

# Journey Beyond Imagination

## PREFACE

“Once they were kings. A half million strong, they matched their faith with fervor and out-matched the Moslem and Christian tribesmen around them to rule the mountain highlands around Lake Tanna. They called themselves *Beta Yisrael*—the House of Israel—and used the Torah to guide their prayers and memories of the heights of Jerusalem as they lived in their thatched huts in Ethiopia. But their neighbors called them Falashas—the alien ones, the invaders. (“Falashas: The Forgotten Jews,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 9 November 1979).

In the early 1980's, Ethiopia forbade the practice of Judaism and the teaching of Hebrew. Numerous members of the *Beta Yisrael* were imprisoned on fabricated charges of being “Zionist spies,” and Jewish religious leaders, *Kesim* (sometimes spelled *Qesim*), (sing. *Kes* or *Qess*) were harassed and monitored by the government.

Ethiopian Jews have been the targets of missionaries for many decades. When the missionary activity intensified at the end of the 19th century, large numbers of the Beta Israel community converted. From approximately that time until Israel began to actively help the Jews immigrate, members of the Beta Israel community have abandoned their faith. Some did so because they were pressured or persuaded by the missionaries; others responded to social pressure, and some may have viewed conversion as a way to improve their economic condition (for example, they could then own land). These people who had once been Jews, or, more often, whose ancestors had been Jews, are referred to as the *Falash Mura*. The *Falash Mura*, however, did not refer to themselves as *Beta Israel* until after the Jews had begun to immigrate to Israel.

Most Jews who converted to Christianity joined the Coptic Orthodox church. The Ethiopian Church was part of the Coptic Orthodox Church until 1959. One of the few pre-colonial Christian churches of Sub-Saharan Africa, it has a membership of about 40 million people and is thus the largest of all Oriental Orthodox churches. The faith and practice of most

## The Victorious account of the Gedamu Family of Ethiopia

Orthodox Ethiopian Christians reflects Jewish and Christian influences. For

example, their churches consist of three main parts, with the Holy of Holies as its center, just like the Jewish Tabernacle, and their priests, called *Kesim* or *Quesim*, are considered Levites, *kohanim*.

The historical data concerning how a Jewish population first came to settle in Ethiopia is scant due to the lack of written records and the regional prevalence of oral traditions. There are however many theories, of which three are the most widely accepted:

1. The Ethiopian Jews are the descendants of the lost ancient Israelite tribe of Dan.
2. They may be the descendants of Menelik I, the fabled son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, as set down in the folkloric, biblical and aggadic Ethiopian Kebra Negast.
3. They might be descendants of Jews who left Israel for Egypt following the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE.

Regardless, for thousands of years, Jews in Ethiopia maintained a strict pre-Talmudic biblical Judaism. They kept *Kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws), the laws of ritual cleanliness, and observed the Jewish Sabbath and festivals. The *Kesim* (religious leaders) were respected as the rabbis of each community and presided over festival services in the ancient liturgical language of *Ge'ez*. They passed down Jewish tradition orally and maintained the Jewish books and torah scrolls that some communities had preserved in *Ge'ez*.<sup>1</sup>

Here is the story of one of them.

## Journey Beyond Imagination

### *Ephesians 3:20-21*

*Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we **ask** or **think**, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*  
(KJV, boldface added)

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we **ask** or **imagine**, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*  
(NIV, boldface added)

*Now to him who by his power working in us is able to do far beyond anything we can **ask** or **imagine**, to him be glory in the Messianic Community and in Messiah Yeshua from generation to generation forever. Amen.* (CJB, boldface added)

# The Victorious account of the Gedamu Family of Ethiopia



<http://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/tourism/contents/Map%20of%20Ethiopia.htm> (LOCATION OF THE MAP OF ETHIOPIA)