

Batya Shmueli's Story

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I am the daughter of Adego Mehari (Alena Teshuma) from the village of Kushshalit and Atcherigi, and of Arka Trella from the village of Debra in the Gondar region. Because the Jews in Gondar suffered from antisemitism and persecution, my father was orphaned when he was sixteen. After his village was attacked my father, who was among the young people who fought to defend themselves, was captured and taken prisoner. He endured severe abuse there, and because they thought he was dead, they left him, and he was miraculously saved. The wounds caused by the terrible beatings took many long months to heal, and they left many scars on his body. Because my father could not return to his village, he was forced to set out alone on an unknown journey and wander from village to village. After a long and exhausting journey, he reached the city of Bahir Dar. My mother also fled from her village to Bahir Dar when she was fourteen. After a few years, they met and married.

I was born in Bahir Dar, a beautiful city built between Lake Tana and the Blue Nile, and I had a magical childhood. We lived with 75 other families from Beta Israel. As a child I did not know we were Jewish; it was a secret. The Jews arranged jobs for one another in a textile factory and gave land to young couples so they could build their homes on it. My father worked as a firefighter, and my mother worked between maternity leaves in the textile factory. I was part of the first generation of children that went to kindergarten. My mother was a member of the women's movement "Heisma," which protected women's rights.

In 1991, suddenly, in the middle of the night, there was a knock at our door. Messengers told my father that the road to Jerusalem had opened. My father, who was then 81, fell to the ground when he heard the word Jerusalem, spread his hands toward God, and murmured something we could barely hear. Within a few days, my parents managed to sell the house, though not the land. A few days later, again in the middle of the night, there was a knock at the door, and my father signaled to my mother to keep the children close to her. Standing at the doorway was our neighbor, Kesa, who was not Jewish, and he said:

"We have been neighbors for 27 years. You are a good man; you always helped us. People are planning to accuse you of murdering their relatives and eating them, and they want to murder you because they think you are cannibals. I ordered a taxi for you; you need to leave now."

My father did not believe it, but we had no time. We took a few things and got into the taxi. That night the weather changed suddenly, and later that evening heavy hail began to fall. In the hotel, Father hugged us; he was worried and wanted us all to sleep together in the same room.

When we woke the next morning, Bahir Dar was covered entirely in white. My parents quickly left the hotel to buy us bus tickets to Addis Ababa and food for the road, while my older brother and I stayed behind alone. We were mischievous children; we looked at one another and decided to run back to our neighborhood to see what had happened to our house. When we arrived, we did not recognize the neighborhood. The grass and plants were covered with hail, and there was great destruction. Shocked, my brother and I began running back so that no one would know we had returned to say goodbye to the neighborhood we loved so much.

In November 1991, we were privileged to make aliyah to Israel. It is impossible to put into words the magnitude of the excitement and the providence that accompanied every single stage. I will never forget our first winter in Israel in 1992, when large amounts of snow fell, and it was so moving.

My journey toward discovering the strengths within me began in one of the youth villages where I arrived with 22 other Ethiopian boys and girls. At first, I spent a year in an ulpan, and soldier-teachers and wonderful counselors taught us. It was an amazing experience, but after a year that camp ended, and I began studying in a regular class. When I first met the native-born Israeli students, I was shocked. Coping with them, and especially with my peers, was not simple, and I experienced rejection. In the group of Ethiopian students there were many adolescent girls, but I was among the younger ones, an 11-year-old girl. I looked at the Sabra children my age and wanted to be like them and play with them, but they did not accept me. They judged me before they knew me. I had a lot of time alone, and that is how I discovered sports. Every time I felt bad or lonely, I went out running.

At a certain point in the boarding school, I decided to room with Sabra girls; I wanted to be Israeli. The Ethiopian girls laughed at me, but I had a goal: I wanted to break through the barrier. Thanks to the wonderful counselors, I felt I was not alone. My counselor, Uri Eldad, always looked at me with shining eyes and believed in me. He saw me, invested

in me, and pushed me forward. My mother, too, had been proud of me since childhood and always told me I was hardworking, talented, a good cook, and a good student. My mother's words, and her love and my father's love, always helped me and strengthened me.

Eventually things improved. I had many friends, I could breathe a little, and I continued with sports, especially running. At the end of ninth grade, they gathered all of us Ethiopian children in the boarding school and told us: "You have only been in the country a few years; you will not be able to take matriculation exams. Learn a trade." I had just turned 14, and I was very upset. Their lack of belief in us angered me, but because of it I discovered the strengths within me. I looked for a boarding school where I could complete matriculation. It was clear to me that I wanted to study at university.

I set out on an unknown journey to a new boarding school. At first, I had many moments there of loneliness. That year I met friends who had come from all kinds of places around the world. We were a group of girls and called ourselves "Colorful," because we had made aliyah from Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, and the United States, and we bonded immediately. Only one friend was native-born Israeli; all the rest were new immigrants. Whenever I encountered moments of loneliness, I ran. No one explained to us what to expect during adolescence, so whenever an unpleasant feeling crept in — sadness, loneliness, longing for my parents — I immediately put on sneakers and ran. Running helped me unload everything that weighed on me.

When I reached 12th grade, my father was coping with kidney disease and was hospitalized many times. He had an extraordinary sense of humor that helped ease our worries. My mother, a village girl from the mountains, was very innocent compared with my cosmopolitan father, who had wandered since the age of 16. He had an interesting approach to life, which helped us keep things in perspective.

One day Father was taken by ambulance to the hospital, and Mother and I rode with him. In the emergency room, they could not find a vein, and they pricked him again and again. I could see he was in pain, but he held it in. When he arrived at the ward, Mother wanted to go home to my younger siblings. There was an age gap of almost 40 years between Mother and Father. My mother asked him: "You remember the home phone number, right?" and then recited the number aloud. Father looked at her. She asked, "Mandanaw, what is it?" and my father answered in a whisper, "Close the curtain." Mother closed the curtain worriedly; she wanted to hear what he was about to tell her. She came closer, leaned toward him, and asked, "Mandanaw, what happened?" And my father said: "Now tell me the phone number again, so the numbers won't run away." She looked at him, and they both burst into loud laughter, and so did I. This was the home I grew up in: it

was full of joy for life, a sense of humor that later helped me be grateful for even the smallest things.

As I approached the end of 12th grade, Father's medical condition deteriorated. I did not know much because my parents did not want the situation to affect me or hurt my studies. At my graduation party, everyone was in intensive care; no one came to the party. I knew that if they could have come, they would have. The parents of my friends from abroad did not come either, so I was not different. When I saw Israeli parents hugging their children, I did not let it upset me; that was probably a skill I had developed as a boarding-school child.

After I finished high school, my father passed away. It was a very great crisis because he was everything to us. My father was a respected man, and every Shabbat people came to our home as if on pilgrimage. Father, who taught us that in our hearts there is room only for love and that it is forbidden to judge, gossip, or slander, left a great hole in all of our hearts. Within seven years of my father's passing, we lost my sister, my maternal grandfather, and my uncle. Those were seven difficult years. All the time, we tried to see the good, to find God's kindness in every situation. In my approach to life, I always say: no one owes me anything; everything is a gift.

It pains me that my mother was widowed at such a young age. The community's attitude toward young widows was not simple. Our home had been full of guests every Shabbat, but from the moment Father passed away, the house grew emptier and emptier, and slowly everyone disappeared, except for one family relative. We called him Uncle Masagnaw Lemma. He had sworn to my father that he would look after us and marry us off. He was an important teacher in my life.

Like most members of the community, my parents bought a home in one of the disadvantaged neighborhoods. I always aspired to move somewhere better. Sometimes people thought I was snobbish.

When I encountered prejudice and obtuseness, when people said things out of ignorance, I did not take it personally, but took it as a challenge. For example, in high school no one prepared us for the first army summons; no one explained the meaning of the tests and interviews. When I reached the computer portion at the first summons, I simply pressed "Enter, Enter," and did not answer the questions. I did not have the emotional availability for it, and therefore they almost did not draft me into the IDF. Later, when I understood what I had done, I did not give up. I wrote letters, asked people to write recommendation letters for me, and pestered the army until they understood and drafted me.

I served in Shayetet 13 on the Matal Team, the Technical Warfare Headquarters. It was a very meaningful period that shaped my Israeli identity. Because my father was dead, the army allowed me to work. I worked at the Picasso restaurant in Herzliya Pituach with wonderful people. I earned good money—sometimes I received as much as 600 shekels in tips, plus a percentage of the sales. It was truly a good period in my life. I had a lot of peace in my heart, in my soul, and at home.

One time, the famous singer Shlomo Artzi and his wife were seated in the section I was serving. Shlomo asked me again and again about immigration from Ethiopia, and I was so excited because I had listened to his songs as a teenager. I admired him — his humility, and of course his music.

One day, after I had earned particularly generous tips, one of the waiters — a man who had served in an elite military unit — was fired. He was jealous and liked to make cutting remarks. At the end of the shift, in front of everyone, he turned to me and said, “You know, you get a lot of tips not because you’re a better server than the rest of us, but because people feel sorry for you because you’re Ethiopian.”

I burst out laughing. I simply could not stop laughing. Everyone else stared at him in shock. I didn’t get drawn into unnecessary drama. I knew who I was, and I understood the place from which people say things like that. It was a lesson. Sometimes people are envious and resentful. That is why I train myself to develop emotional resilience. I constantly examine who I am and engage in inner dialogue with myself. I acknowledge both my weaknesses and my sensitivities in order to know myself better and not think that those traits define me. They exist so that we can do inner work, better understand the world, and develop compassion for others. We are divine creations, each carrying a divine soul. All of these milestones have helped me overcome obstacles and not be afraid to dream. Fear does not run my life. I try to see the good within myself, look at others with a positive eye, and choose a positive environment.

After completing my military service and working for a while, I flew to the United States and lived in Los Angeles for a year. I wanted to embark on a journey without friends, to be alone with myself. The beginning was not easy. I couldn’t find work, but every morning I went out looking for a job in the Jewish neighborhood. When I reached a restaurant called “Haifa Glatt Kosher,” I saw a small sign in Hebrew saying that waitresses were needed. The restaurant was closed, so I kept walking around the neighborhood. Around 11 o’clock I returned and greeted them in Hebrew. The owner was sitting there. He looked tired and answered without much enthusiasm.

“I’m looking for a job as a waitress. I saw the sign that says you’re hiring,” I told him.

He looked at me and replied sourly, “We don’t need anyone.”

When I left the restaurant, I felt a little sad and homesick, but I immediately continued searching. I spent entire weekends looking for work, from morning until afternoon. A week later I passed by the Haifa restaurant and saw the sign again. The owner was sitting in the same way, slumped in his chair as though he barely had the energy to hold up his head.

"Hello, I'm Batya. I'm looking for work," I said.

"You were here already, weren't you? I told you we don't need anyone," he answered.

"I worked at the prestigious Picasso restaurant in Herzliya Pituach. I made incredible sales. Take me on for free," I offered. "See what I'm capable of."

He straightened up, smiled faintly, and said, "All right, start tomorrow."

"Excellent," I said, extending my hand. He smiled again and shook my hand with little energy and complete indifference. I shook his hand wholeheartedly and left.

When I got back to my apartment, I skipped with excitement. Then I remembered that I was no longer a child and smiled from ear to ear. That day I treated myself to injera and vegan dishes at an Ethiopian restaurant. The next morning, I woke up early, arrived at work along with the cooks, and began cleaning the chairs, tables, and windows. I was full of motivation. By the time the owner and the waitresses arrived, everything was spotless and organized.

The owner looked at me with half a smile, and I started going through the menus, cleaning them as well because they were greasy. The owner told one of the waitresses that I was in training and asked her to teach me everything. She was kind to me, but another waitress was sour and never spoke to me.

At lunchtime the restaurant became very busy. The waitress who refused to talk to me simply gave orders: "Go clear that table. Clean it."

I did everything wholeheartedly. After a few days, I began taking orders. I learned the menu thoroughly, especially the main dishes and the expensive ones. My loyalty was always first and foremost to the customer, so I recommended not just what was costly, but what I genuinely knew was delicious. I told customers about side dishes, appetizers, and desserts.

Among American Jews, I attracted curiosity. I was an Ethiopian Jewish woman from Israel who had arrived after completing military service. They were fascinated and asked me many questions. Some even invited me to stay in their homes. The love I

experienced from American Jews allowed me to get to know Diaspora Jewry up close — the mutual responsibility they felt for one another, and the ways they had worked and contributed financially to help bring us to Israel. It greatly broadened my worldview, and my heart went out to them.

On Fridays, fewer people came to eat in the restaurant and more came to buy prepared food for Shabbat. The owner called me over and said, “Here is your pay for this week.”

“You don’t need to pay me,” I replied.

“No one works for free here,” he said. “Take whatever food you want for Shabbat. Sunday is a busy day. See you then.” I looked at him and smiled. I was as excited as I had been in my teenage years. Shabbat was almost beginning. I had met some young Jewish and Israeli friends and invited them for dinner. I quickly went to the supermarket, bought challah and salmon, and returned home with great joy. I cleaned the apartment and prepared fish, side dishes, and salad.

My apartment took on the sacred atmosphere of Shabbat. I showered, spread a white tablecloth on the table, and lit candles. When the guests arrived that evening, everything happened naturally. I recited Kiddush with my Israeli friends and began a process of reconnecting with the Creator and with my divine soul.

Back in Israel, I pursued my bachelor’s degree at the University of Haifa and dreamed of becoming a teacher of Jewish history. During my internship, I realized my dream was something else, though I still didn’t know what. I continued my studies, and by the time I finished my degree, I was already the mother of a sweet baby boy. I will never forget the wonderful professors who showed me such compassion during my pregnancy. The birth was complicated, and by a miracle I survived. Nevertheless, I returned to the university with my baby after only a month.

When my son cried during class, I panicked, but one of my professors, Dr. Paul, signaled that everything was fine.

“We were all babies once,” he said with a wink, and the whole class laughed. After I nursed the baby, he asked, “Has he finished eating?” When I said yes, he said, “Bring him over here for a bit, would you?”

I was stunned. While lecturing, he held my baby close, supporting his head and neck. It was an incredibly moving experience. The support and empathy shown by my professors was truly inspiring.

When I finished my studies, I heard they were looking for supervisors for informal educational programs. I was hired and worked with a woman who influenced me deeply: Dr. Negist Mengesha. I learned a great deal from her. She was the CEO of the National Project for Ethiopian Immigrants. A few years later, I founded a business called The Ethiopian Magic Experience. I realized that people did not really know the story of Ethiopian Jews or our culture, so I created a traveling cultural experience. It included Ethiopian cooks, dancers, lectures, and events for international delegations and organizations.

Later, a friend told me about a position at Yemin Orde Youth Village. It was originally temporary—they were seeking someone to fill in during a maternity leave. The work involved donors, leadership programs, and extraordinary educational initiatives. I was privileged to work at Yemin Orde for 11 years. For three of those years, I directed Israeli fundraising.

Then I felt it was time to fulfill an old dream: to serve as an emissary in South Africa and give back to Jewish communities. In the midst of the Covid pandemic, my husband, our three children, and I embarked on a communal mission. Two of our children were teenagers. I served as an emissary for aliyah and community affairs, while my husband served as an Israel education emissary.

We worked with a Jewish community of 12,000 people, alongside Jewish organizations, schools, and synagogues. We would never have left our mothers, both over 70 years old, or taken our children out of their established routines unless the mission was immensely meaningful. We worked all week long. Because we observe Shabbat, every Shabbat we were in a different community.

Alongside the successes, there were challenges. A small minority struggled to accept us as emissaries. The easiest thing would be to call them racist. Often, however, it was more complicated. I witnessed firsthand how people who were not emotionally healthy could make racist and terrible remarks.

It was a tremendous privilege to work with the Cape Town community and with Diaspora Jewry. Serving as an aliyah and community emissary felt like giving back to the Jewish communities abroad, which have contributed so much since Israel's founding. They have helped immigrants through every challenge and supported Israel through wars and crises, and we do not always thank them enough.

The final message I would very much like to convey to women and girls is this:

Most people operate within rigid frameworks. They take a person who has divine potential and try to reduce and define who she is. People thought I was different from the definition they had created. Some had preconceived notions because of my Ethiopian heritage. Others were disturbed by the fact that I am religious and said to me, "Take off your head covering."

I thank God for all the goodness in my life. Every day I choose to notice the Creator's kindness. I do not wait for anyone's approval. I continue striving to do good, to have compassion, to examine my conscience daily, to admit when I am wrong, and to continue my inner work.

I choose to live freely, without labels or boxes, free from negative emotions. I choose to love and to give thanks each day—not only for the good, but also for the trials that come to teach me. Our country is filled with so much goodness.

These days I am finishing a book about my family's journey and my personal story, including all of the memorable experiences and adventures we had in South Africa while serving as emissaries for the Jewish Agency.

Never stop dreaming and never wait for anyone's permission. You are a magnificent creation. You possess all the abilities needed to grow, fulfill your potential, make an impact, and build a better world.