



# United Jewish Fund and Council

THE JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER ST. PAUL

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **Plight of Ethiopian Jews sparks action**

Living in Ethiopia in dirt hovels in a primitive agrarian society, with no concept of plumbing, electricity or other first world concepts, Ethiopia's last 17,000 Jews wish to immigrate to Israel. And Israel hopes to complete the process within a couple of years.

With the help of funding from the United Jewish Fund and Council and the Jewish federation system across the United States, the Israeli government is now allowing hundreds to arrive in Israel each month. Most converted to Christianity at some point in the past for their safety, and they will be converted back to Judaism upon their arrival in Israel, said former Israeli Ambassador Asher Naim during a visit to St. Paul last week.

Ambassador Naim was in St. Paul for the United Jewish Fund and Council's Men's Breakfast Series, and he met with numerous groups over two days to tell the story of Ethiopian Jewry today.

"The big problem now is not immigration, but rather absorption," Naim said. "Only through education can we absorb them completely into society." Successful absorption is a critical funding priority of the United Jewish Fund and Council and the Jewish federation system.

As ambassador to Ethiopia in the 1990s, Naim helped bring thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel during Operation Solomon in 1991. He literally bargained for Jewish lives, negotiating millions of dollars for their freedom.

Today 105,000 Ethiopians live in Israel, but the transition to life in a first world country has not been easy. "In a four-hour flight, they were transferred from a Medieval, barter economy to 'dot-com' high technology," Naim said. "It takes three times as much to absorb an Ethiopian Jew as it does anyone else."

The key, Naim said, is education. Tremendous resources are needed to bring Ethiopian youth up to the level of their peers and provide them the support they need to succeed through high school and college, Naim said. "We must finish the immigration business we started. And to finish, we have to educate them," he said.

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## **MISSION**

The United Jewish Fund and Council unites, sustains and enhances the St. Paul area Jewish community and strengthens bonds with Jewish communities in Israel and around the world. The UJFC fulfills this mission through financial resource development and planning, and by working in partnership with social service agencies, educational institutions and synagogues.