

LYNN HAZAN

Telling Jews' stories

**In the land of plenty, there is poverty of spirit.
In the land of famine, there is richness of spirit.**

So begins a tale by Lynn Hazan, storyteller, motivational speaker, businesswoman and *tzedakah* maven.

This particular story happens to be true.

The “land of famine” Hazan speaks about is Ethiopia. She traveled there last November on a humanitarian mission with an organization known as NACOEJ (North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry) and met some of the 20,000 Ethiopian Jews who are waiting patiently to go to Israel.

She visited families in their homes—mud huts with mud floors and two beds for eight or 10 people. She shook the eagerly outstretched arms of children, some of them so malnourished that it is not uncommon for a child to faint from hunger in school and have to be carried outside and revived.

Despite their predicament, the Ethiopian Jews “were joyous, the children particularly, and so excited to meet us,” Hazan says. “Their hands were constantly outstretched in greeting — ‘Shalom! Shalom!’ I called them ‘the Shalomites.’”

Hazan returned from the trip determined to tell the stories of the Ethiopian Jews. She has been doing so ever since.

Her storytelling roots are intertwined with her own heritage as a Sephardic Jew. She grew up in Montreal, Quebec to a mother who is from Egypt and a father from Syria.

“As the daughter of immigrants, I’ve always had a sensitivity to the immigrant experience,” she says. “I feel a sense of kinship with Jews around the world. Rediscovering our Jewish roots, our histories, our stories is part and parcel of who we are as individuals.”

For the past 13 years, Hazan has told her stories to



both adults and children throughout the United States and in Mexico, Israel and the former Soviet Union. One of her stories is included in a collection, "Chosen Tales: Stories Told by Jewish Storytellers," and she has performed at every Greater Chicago Jewish Folk Arts Festival since 1990.

Professionally, Hazan, who is single, started out as a Hillel director but eventually turned toward the business world and now heads her own executive search firm. Being a headhunter, she says, fits neatly in to her personal ethic: "I really feel like I'm in the *mitzvah* business. I place people in jobs so they can become self-sufficient. I get a great deal of satisfaction from that."

Since her visit to Ethiopia, she has been using her storytelling talents to bring the plight of Ethiopian Jews to the attention of the American Jewish community. "Part of my life's mission as a storyteller is to be the eyes and ears of Jewish communities throughout the world. In a sense, it gives them a voice that they don't have," she says.

The Jews remaining in Ethiopia badly need a voice. While most of their countrymen and women were airlifted to Israel, the Jews living in remote villages were passed by. In the 1990s, they moved from those villages to Addis Ababa and Gondar, where they continue to practice their Judaism (though without any rabbis, who are all in Israel) and await the start of their new life in the Jewish state.

Their cause "has become a political football," Hazan says, and although the Israeli rabbinate has declared that they are entitled to become Israelis, more pressing political problems have overshadowed



their situation.

Hazan, meanwhile, is trying to help them not only by telling their story as often and as widely as she can, but by selling the beautiful, colorful embroidered pillow covers, challah covers, mezuzahs and tallit bags the Ethiopians—mostly men—create. Selling their embroidery is one of the few ways they have to become self-sufficient, she explains. There is little work for them in Ethiopia, and even men who are lucky enough to get jobs doing hard labor, earn no more than \$1 a day. She has also prepared a Passover Haggadah that incorporates many rituals, prayers and customs of Ethiopian Jews.

Hazan is hopeful that the remaining families will get to Israel eventually, but believes that it will take at least five years. Until then, she is dedicated to spreading one message: "It is our global responsibility as Jews to help each other out."