A Conversation with Rebecca Avera

Rekindle
black jewish dialogue



Rebecca Avera is the Manager of Resilience and Emergency Programs at Bayit Latov, a national volunteer initiative of the Israel Association of Community Centers and the Ministry for Social Equality. She was born in Haifa to Ethiopian parents. She spoke at a Rekindle webinar on October 6, 2026. The conversation below has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Family, Identity, and Education

Tell us about your family's story.

I was born in Haifa, Israel. My parents came from Ethiopia. My father arrived in Israel in 1979 after 4 years in Sudan working with the Mossad. My mother came to Israel in 1984 with Operation Moses. She walked through Sudan.

They left because of their faith. They read the Torah and they walked to the unknown. They saw Jerusalem in their minds, and that gave them the energy to continue. When I was a child, their story was like a fairy tale to me.

Did your mother share her story with you?

Yes. Some people talk about their immigration and some people do not. My mother talks about it. She told her story all over the country through the Story of a Journey program for 10 years. She made me listen to it.

What was it like to grow up as an Ethiopian Israeli?

It was difficult. I was the only Black student in my class, and other children called me names because of my color. I was ashamed of my culture. I did not bring my friends to my home. I tried to look like the other children.

My generation learned Hebrew, but we did not learn Amharic, the main language of Ethiopia. Later, I learned it by myself.

When did that change?

My perspective changed when I joined the IDF [Israel Defense Forces]. There, I met other Ethiopian Israelis for the first time. I started to eat the food and listen to the music of my culture, and I felt proud. Since then, I asked my mother to forgive me for the years when I was not proud of my color and my culture.

How did you respond to the name-calling?

I decided that I would not let people push me down. I decided to be successful. I went to school and to university. Today, the children who called me names, comment on my posts. They are proud of me. For me, that is the win.

Why is it important to you to share your story?

I believe strongly in education. Our stories have much value. Sometimes people do not see them, but the person who walks next to you has a story too. When I was an emissary in the US for three years, I spoke at more than 30 campuses about my life as part of a first-generation Ethiopian Israeli family.

Memory, Tradition, and Arrival

You spoke one day before the third anniversary of October 7th. What does that day mean to you?

It was the most terrible day of my life, and of the whole nation. My cousin was a police officer. He was killed at the Sderot police station. Many of the people we lost were Ethiopian Israeli soldiers. They fought until the last minute.

Sometimes we experience discrimination from ignorant individuals, but not from institutions. At the end of the day, we are part of this country. We serve in the IDF. We die for this country. We are one people.

What Ethiopian Jewish tradition is most meaningful to you?

Sigd. I think it is the most beautiful holiday. It occurs 50 days after Yom Kippur. In the villages in Ethiopia, people fasted. They wore white clothes and climbed the highest mountain with the Kesim, our spiritual leaders. They prayed toward Jerusalem and said, *"Next year in Jerusalem."*

Now, the community goes to Jerusalem on Sigd to say thank you for being here. After the fast, there is a meal and traditional dancing. Every Ethiopian Israeli child remembers our mothers and grandmothers in their traditional clothes on that day.

I now fast on Sigd myself. It connects me to my mother and my community. If you visit Israel at that time, go and see it.

What was it like for your mother when she first arrived in Israel?

She went to Atlit first, and then to an absorption center in Tzfat. She stayed ina one apartment with her brother and his wife. For one week, they stayed in one room. They only went out to use the bathroom. They thought the apartment did not belong to them. They heard voices outside, and finally my mother went out slowly and saw people.

They did not know how to use the oven or the refrigerator. They put clothes in the refrigerator, because they thought it was a closet. In the village, they bathed in the river, ate on the floor, and cooked on the ground. Israel was the opposite. It was a shock.

Today, new immigrants get translators and other help. At that time, nobody helped them. Because of this, my mother worked with the Jewish Agency for 18 years. She taught new immigrants the things that nobody taught her. She took them to the doctor and showed them how to use the oven. For her, it was a way to close the circle.

Service, Connections, and the Next Generation

Did you experience racism in the IDF?

No. I can speak for myself. I had a great experience in the IDF. Before, I was always the only Ethiopian. In the army, the Ethiopian soldiers were together, and we supported each other. My siblings also did not experience racism in the IDF.

Do you see connections between Ethiopian Israelis and Black Americans?

Yes, there is a connection. We share some problems, for example racism, discrimination, and police brutality. But we are also different. We have the same problems, but we are not the same.

On US campuses, I saw Black Lives Matter groups support divestment from Israel. That shocked me. The students were also shocked when they learned that I am a Black Jewish Israeli. I asked them, "How can you say Israel is an apartheid state when you see me?" I think many people do not know enough about the population of Israel.

How do you pass Ethiopian traditions to the next generation?

I think food is the best way. It is good food and healthy food.

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