

# 'Torn between donkeys and Ferraris'

## Ethiopian-Israeli's one man show brings Amharic to Milwaukee

By Marisa Jacobson  
Special to The Chronicle

"The distance between Ethiopia and Israel is really great," Yossi Vassa repeated during his recent one-man show, "It Sounds Better in Amharic," at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

There's the geographic distance Vassa traveled from his home in Uzava, a remote Ethiopian village, to arrive at his current home in Israel at age 10. He and his family spent three months trekking almost 500 miles to a Sudanese refugee camp, walking and riding on donkeys at night, hiding from robbers and soldiers during the day.

They waited almost 12 months in the desert camp, lacking food and money, surrounded by disease and freshly dug graves (including those of Vassa's grandmother and two younger brothers), all the while yearning to arrive in Jerusalem.

"The ground in [the camp] was dry and filled with holes. Holes in the earth like wounds," Vassa said. He and his family were eventually airlifted to Israel in 1985 as part of Operation Moses, which rescued 15,000 Ethiopian Jews.

Vassa told his story to a rapt audience of about 150. The descriptions of death, disease and suffering were sandwiched between his humor and self-reflection.

With the show, Vassa sheds light on the immigrant experience of a sizable Israeli minority; there are now about 80,000 Ethiopian Jews in Israel, he said.

With humor, Vassa focused on the cultural gulf Ethiopian Jews faced when they arrived in Israel.

"The first time I entered a real Israeli home, I freaked out. It's completely different," he said, noting differences in the respect given to elders, dating culture and work.

And skin color. "When I first got to Israel, I saw so many white people, it freaked me out. I remember thinking, 'I gotta be sensitive to these whiteys. They're a rare breed. They're a minority.'"

On work, Vassa said, "I was a shepherd when I was seven. When I started my career, you were still playing with Lego. A three-year-old in Ethiopia who doesn't work is unemployed," he quipped.

Even the weather differences jolted Vassa. "As a child, I was used to the open spaces, the wild country," unlike crowded Israel, Vassa said. In Ethiopia, there are seasons; Vassa recalled spring and the seasonal greeting, "May spring be upon you every year." He contrasted that with Israel, where, he said, the weather is the same all the time.

"That's why Israelis are so uptight. They're so busy changing seasons," he said as the audi-

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ence roared with appreciation.

Vassa, an actor who has appeared in Israeli stand up clubs and on television, created the show with his co-director, Shai Ben Atta, who he met during his military service.

The show was originally conceived, he said, with Ethiopian-Israeli youth in mind, to help them appreciate their culture.

In an interview after the show, Vassa said that Ethiopian-Israelis "need to grow new leaders and to look inward" to realize the talent and contributions that they can offer to Israeli society.

To that end, he's performed the show — in English, Hebrew and Amharic — hundreds of times; in

Israel, Canada and the United States. With it, he hopes to reveal not only his specific immigrant experience but universal emotions, dilemmas and problems, he said.

Vassa told the Milwaukee audience that he is "torn between two cultures, between King Solomon and Queen Sheba, between and donkeys and Ferraris."

"It Sounds Better in Amharic" was sponsored by the Hillel Foundation of Milwaukee, the UWM Center for Jewish Studies, the African-American Jewish Task Force, the African Student Association, and the Campus Organization for Israel, and donations from the Helen Bader Foundation and the UWM Student Association.