



— Jerusalem U —

Mekonen

The Journey of an African Jew

PRESS KIT

ABOUT MEKONEN: THE JOURNEY OF AN AFRICAN JEW

Mekonen: The Journey of an African Jew is a mini-documentary from the creators of Netflix-featured *Beneath the Helmet* and PBS-featured *Israel Inside*. The film follows the backstory and personal journey of Mekonen Abebe, a young African-Israeli Jew, once a young shepherd in Ethiopia and now a commander in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Mekonen is one of many brave young men and women drafted into compulsory service in the IDF to defend their homeland and the liberal values of democracy, freedom and equality.

Born and raised in an Ethiopian village, Mekonen was a 12-year-old shepherd when his father died suddenly, less than a day before his family was to move to Israel. The film accompanies Mekonen back to Africa on an emotional journey, as he explores his roots, makes peace with his past and embraces his future in Israel.

After a difficult adjustment period in Israel, Mekonen was fortunate to attend the Hodayot Youth Village, which educates primarily immigrant children from difficult backgrounds and helps integrate them into Israeli society. Mekonen continues to be an inspiration to other youth at Hodayot and has become a decorated officer in the IDF, while staying true to his Ethiopian roots and culture.

Mekonen is an uplifting and inspiring film that will move audiences and show viewers that anything is possible with the right attitude, tools and support.

ABOUT THE MAIN CHARACTERS



FIRST LT. MEKONEN ABEBE

Mekonen Abebe is a 21-year-old officer in the Israel Defense Forces' 101st Paratrooper Brigade. As a child, Mekonen's family traveled from their rural village in Ethiopia to the Gondar province, and at age 12 he emigrated from Ethiopia to Israel. Shortly before his family planned to board the plane for Israel, his father passed away, hurling the family into a tumultuous period of grief and uncertainty. In Israel, Mekonen attended the Hodayot School in Northern Israel. After graduation, he enlisted in the paratroopers, where he is now a commander responsible for 42 recruits and three sergeants.



FIRST LT. (RES) EDEN ADLER

Eden was Mekonen's commander in the Israel Defense Forces' 101st Paratrooper Brigade basic training base. At the age of 21, he was directly responsible for the lives, safety and operational effectiveness of 42 recruits and three sergeants. Eden led his platoon during Operation Protective Edge in Gaza. He continues to serve as a Lieutenant in reserve duty. Eden grew up in the Western Galilee town of Kfar Vradim and now resides in Jerusalem, where he studies at the Hebrew University.



MELESA AVRAHAM

Melesah, now 49, was born in a village in the Gondar region. He grew up as a shepherd and only learned to read and write at 16, graduating high school at 30. He then became a teacher and headmaster in Gondar. In 1991, he immigrated to Israel in Operation Solomon with his new wife, Tehoneh. They were on the very last plane to leave Gondar, which broke the world record for plane occupancy, with 1,087 passengers in a Boeing 747. After immigrating to Israel he worked as an Amharic teacher in multiple institutions, including the Ministry of Education. He has been working at Hodayot Youth Village since 2001, teaching English and Amharic, among other subjects.



OFIR YERUSHALMI

Ofir Yerushalmi is an Israel Defense Forces Regiment Commander in the reserves. He has been in the field of education and teens at risk for the past 20 years, particularly in the Yemin Orde and Hodayot youth villages. He is 49, married and a father of five.



HODAYOT YOUTH VILLAGE

The Hodayot School is a religious boarding school and youth village. It was established in 1950 and is located in the Lower Galilee. The school currently has about 230 students from all over the country, many of whom are Ethiopian. The school offers four tracks designed to give students practical tools they need to succeed in the modern day workforce:

1. Law enforcement – police studies with classes in criminology, sociology and crime-solving
2. Life sciences and agriculture – featuring the “Maimonides Greenhouse” where they grow healing herbs
3. Education – focused on early childhood education
4. Shop – focused on auto-mechanics

Additionally, there is a new project combining physical education with lessons of Jewish identity and Zionism. This program is designed to prepare students for combat units in the army.

ABOUT THE CREW



RAPHAEL SHORE, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Raphael Shore is an accomplished filmmaker and Founder and CEO of Jerusalem U, a cutting-edge, film-based nonprofit organization created to transform Jewish and Israel education. Shore has produced several highly-acclaimed documentaries, including Netflix-featured *Beneath the Helmet: From High School to the Home Front* and PBS-featured *Israel Inside: How a Small Nation Makes a Big Difference*.



BARUCH GOLDBERS, EDITOR, WRITER

Baruch Goldberg was a writer on the acclaimed documentaries *Beneath the Helmet* and *Israel Inside* and a researcher for several other documentaries. Goldberg received his B.F.A. in Playwriting & Theatre Studies from The Theatre School at DePaul University and spent several years working in Chicago theatre.



REBECCA SHORE, PRODUCER, WRITER

Rebecca Shore was a writer and producer on the widely-viewed documentaries *Beneath the Helmet* and *Israel Inside* and is an artist, educator and international lecturer. Shore studied at Vassar College and received a degree in Psychology from the State University of New York.



OREN ROSENFELD, PRODUCER, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN ETHIOPIA

Born in Jerusalem, Rosenfeld has produced, directed and filmed documentaries and investigative reports with the BBC, National Geographic, the History Channel and many others. His recent credits include Filmmaker and Director of *Hummus! The Movie*.

ABOUT THE MUSIC



CAFÉ SHAHOR HAZAK

Café Shahor Hazak (Strong Black Coffee) is an Israeli hip-hop rap group comprised of Ethiopian-born Ilak Sahalu and Uri Alamo, whose song *Yihye B'Seder* (It Will be Fine) is featured in *Mekonen*. At 15, the two singers formed a professional group and began performing all over the country, going on three performance tours in the US and becoming a YouTube sensation. They chose hip-hop because they see it as the music of protest and a tool to spotlight the problems in the world around them. As they say, "Our dream isn't to be on the radio, it's to make music from the heart." You can see the music featured in *Mekonen* on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQp2a_yunmM



ABOUT JERUSALEM U

WHAT IS JERUSALEM U?

Jerusalem U creates and distributes innovative and dynamic films and film-based educational programs with the goal of making young Jews feel proud of being Jewish and emotionally connected to Israel.

Jerusalem U

- » Engages millions of people across the globe with our award-winning films.
- » Educates young Jews by providing exceptional educational programs that inspire a deeper connection to Israel and Judaism.
- » Empowers the best and brightest Millennials to advocate for Israel and to develop groundbreaking solutions for the needs of the Jewish People.

Founded in 2007 by its parent company, Imagination Productions, today Jerusalem U has offices in Jerusalem, New York and Philadelphia. The organization is headed by Founder and CEO Rabbi Raphael Shore.

Visit our web site at www.JerusalemU.org to learn more.

