The Life and Times of Rick Hodes

The Worlds of Medicine and Faith Converge in Ethiopia.

By Wyatt Orme ’12
Photographs by Malin Fezehai
A memory Rick Hodes ’75 has from early in his career doesn’t arise often, but when it does, it returns in the same vivid detail. It’s 1985, and he’s standing among hundreds of gaunt, emaciated people who have hardly eaten in weeks. Hours before, they were dirty, but now they’re clean, and their heads have been shaved. Some wear oversized blue jeans and T-shirts; others are in handsome tuxedos and slinky evening gowns. The irony of the clothing isn’t lost on them—they’re laughing about it, and Hodes is laughing with them.

At the time, he was a medical resident at Johns Hopkins University spending his vacation volunteering in Ethiopia, where one of the 20th-century’s worst famines was raging. Tens of thousands were wandering the countryside in search of food, while a civil war fueled the chaos. Starving people arrived at the camp where Hodes was stationed, and were divided by gender, cleaned in mass showers, and deloused. The staff gave them new outfits donated by Western relief organizations and burned what they’d arrived in.

This was his first trip to Ethiopia. Apart from that brief moment when the clothing’s irony trumped the suffering, the famine remains the most haunting thing Hodes has ever witnessed.

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ON A RAINY FRIDAY AFTERNOON 30 years later, Hodes is riding in the back of his Suzuki along a busy avenue in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s sprawling capital. He sees a man with a severely contorted posture standing at the mouth of an alleyway and orders his driver to pull over.

His assistant, Kaleab, gets out and approaches the man to tell him about the free clinic Hodes runs at Yekatit 12, a nearby public hospital. That’s where we’re heading now.

We’re 15 minutes late by the time we pull into the parking lot. Hodes runs two clinics—this one and another—under the auspices of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), a relief agency based in New York City. He’s not a tall man, standing just 5’3”, and today he’s wearing an oversized yellow raincoat that he’s left unzipped. He walks through the crowded waiting room, a stethoscope hanging from his neck and blank flashcards and several pens tucked into the breast pocket of his button-down shirt.

As he walks, he’ll write a note on a card, hand it to the patient, and ask them to bring it on their next visit.

After a month, he returned to Baltimore, not sure he’d ever return. He applied for a Fulbright grant to work in Zimbabwe, but Fulbright instead offered him a job teaching medical students at Addis Ababa University. This time, he stayed for nearly three years before returning to the States to enter a private practice in Washington, D.C. He liked working in D.C.; it seemed a good place to pursue a career in international health. Soon enough, though, he was on a plane back to Addis Ababa.

By the early 1990s, Ethiopia’s 17-year civil war was coming to a close and the sitting government of Mengistu Haile Mariam was on the verge of collapse. Hodes signed on with JDC to help run a clinic for Ethiopian Jews waiting to immigrate to Israel. He led a team of doctors during Operation Solomon, the largest civilian airlift in world history: nearly 14,400 Ethiopian Jews were evacuated to Israel in less than 36 hours. Following the airlift, he remained in Ethiopia and has been caring for patients ever since.

AFTER HE’S SEEN ALL OF HIS PATIENTS at Yekatit 12, we walk back to the Suzuki, and Hodes explains to me he never expected, as a younger man, that he’d live the majority of his adult life abroad. Behind the clinic’s derelict walls stands a new, modern hospital that will open within a year. Hodes’s clinic has been offered a space in the new building, but he shrugs at the thought: “We’re perfectly happy to stay where we are.”

Brand-new buildings are a common sight in Addis, as Ethiopia is developing rapidly—its GDP is growing at nearly 11 percent per year. However, the country remains extremely poor and nowhere is this more evident than at our next stop: Mother Teresa’s Mission, run by the
Missionaries of Charity, a Roman Catholic congregation where Hodes has been volunteering more than a decade.

We’re not too long. Hodes listens to a few hearts, checks in with the mum, and visits with several patients. I meet Tilahun, a young boy who lost a leg to cancer and is still undergoing chemotherapy. When affordable cancer drugs for Tilahun couldn’t be found in Ethiopia, Hodes flew to India to get them. The Mission is where Hodes first met three of his five adopted sons, orphaned street kids who had been brought in with grave medical issues. Without health insurance, they would have never received the proper treatment, so he decided to adopt them—but he asked God first.

We leave the Mission, and the driver drops me at the guesthouse where I’m staying. Hodes tells me to shower quickly and make the short walk to his house for Shabbat dinner.

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When Rick's gone, it's my job to go to the ATM [and] withdraw money. But what happens when Rick's in Bangkok and the brothel eats his ATM card, leaving us on austerity for weeks? Huge problem, huge stress, complaints bombarding from all sides.

Menachem started sounding less satirical and a bit more moralizing when he described the patients whose lives had been forever changed by Hodes: the child with severe scoliosis from polio, who Hodes found sleeping on the streets, the homeless girl who had her "mitral valve re-placed in California and her Scheuermann's kyphosis operated on while she was on antibiotics in Mombasa"; the orphan with the "severe S-shaped spine" whose bus fare from the Sudanese border Hodes had reimbursed out of his own pocket.

Menachem concluded quoting Hodes, whom he'd asked for the proper response to Alon's query:

"Tell me—what kind of asshole would consider maximizing comfort at any cost in the face of a crisis?" Menachem signed off cynically, wishing he, too, could "scour the cost-effectiveness of dunning patients for their CAT scan copayments."

That evening, Hodes and I drove to the Scheuermann's kyphosis hospital to see what had happened to the child the Shabbat before he'd been treated. "Where is he now?" I asked.

"Tell them that this boy was wounded at the hands of his own countrymen, and that they made a mistake," he said."

To Sister Tena, who is translating, he says, "Tell them that this boy was wounded at the hands of his own countrymen, and that they made a mistake."

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When the patient is ready for surgery, Boachie-Adjei and his team put him into a halo brace and reconfigure the spine either by removing or reshaping vertebrae. They then screw the titanium rods into place for support. Afterwards, patients remain in Ghana typically for about two months, undergoing physical therapy.

When Hodes was living in Alaska, he read "Three Questions," a Tolstoy short story that has stuck with him to this day. A king, hoping to forever avoid failure, seeks the answers to three questions: What is the right time to begin everything? Who were the right people to listen to? And what is the most important thing to do? Wise men offer answers, but none are conclusive, so the king consulates a hermit, who he finds digging in front of his hut near the edge of a forest. The hermit gives no answer, but the king sees the hermit is tired and stays to help dig instead of returning to the palace.

Suddenly, a screaming man stumbles from the forest and the king takes him into the hermit's hut and treats his wounds into the night. The next morning, the man wakes and admits he'd been plotting to ambush the king on his return from the hunt, but the king's knights had found and wounded him. He'd just barely escaped. He pledges his loyalty to the king for having saved his life. As the king makes to leave, he asks the hermit the three questions once more.

"And what is the most important thing to do?" Menachem responds. He was the right man, he said. But the king had not taken pity on the hermit, his enemy would have ambushed him. Had he not treated his enemy's wounds, they would not have made peace. The only important time, then, is now. The most important person is the one you're with. And the most important thing is to do good to others.

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But he had his answer, the hermit explained. Had he not taken pity on the hermit, his enemy would have ambushed him. Had he not treated his enemy's wounds, they would not have made peace.

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