
5 Leadership Lessons from Israeli Model Titi Aynaw

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Yityish “Titi” Aynaw is not your typical 25-year-old. Some might say she has already lived many lifetimes. A top Israeli model, Aynaw is a television personality and community activist with 52,000 Instagram followers. And those are only a few of her accomplishments.

During a recent visit to the University of Pennsylvania, Aynaw shared stories of her life growing up in Ethiopia, her experiences serving in the Israel Defense Forces as company commander with the rank of lieutenant, and what it felt like in 2013 to become the first Israeli-Ethiopian to win the Miss Israel beauty pageant title. Throw in two months last year on an island in Honduras competing for the Israeli version of “Survivor” — where she placed second — and her latest social enterprise, the “Titi Project,” and you’ve got some great conversation starters. And talk she did on her visit in November to Perry World House in Philadelphia, during which KWHS reporter Anthony Williams gleaned some valuable leadership insight. Here are some of his key takeaways from his time with Titi:

- 1. You can let adversity swallow you – or motivate you.** Aynaw was born in the village of Chahawit in the Gondar province of Ethiopia, a state in Africa that is surrounded by such African nations as Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Kenya. Her father died when she was a toddler and her mother died after a long illness when Aynaw was 10, prompting her and her brother to move to Israel to live with their grandparents in Natanya. Though she had experienced instability in her childhood, Aynaw found her footing at a high school for religious girls near Haifa. She was elected president of the student council and participated in track and field. In Ethiopia we had “no electricity, no private bathrooms and used horses for transportation,” said Aynaw, who had formed an image of what Israel would be like from the Bible. “I was surprised by what I saw in Israel – buildings, cars, industrialization.” She realized that she had to learn the language quickly to do well in high school. “I thought, ‘No one is going to do it for me.’ She learned Hebrew in three months and has since picked up English as her third language, largely from watching television.
- 2. You must challenge yourself if you want to grow.** Aynaw joined the Military Police Corp of the Israel Defense Forces after high school to “test myself all the time.” Ultimately, she had up to 300 people under her command. She made “the tough choice” to be in an all-men platoon because “it was really important to me” to be the teacher, mother and parent of my soldiers. While most women stay in the Israeli military for one year, she chose to stay for three. “I learned to be very strong and how to be a leader,” she said.
- 3. Opportunity can appear in disguise (wearing a dress?), and when you least expect it.** When Aynaw was 21 a few years ago, her BFF registered her for the Miss Israel competition. She had never even modeled and was not accustomed to wearing makeup – she showed up to the audition in a plain, large men’s shirt. “I told my friend that I didn’t have time for this,” said Aynaw. “I had to go to university” and continue my education. The interviewers at her audition asked her one question: why did she come today? She explained that after 35 years of champions, it was time to have a “black beauty” Miss Israel. In February 2013, she was crowned the first black Miss Israel, sparking a flurry of media attention from the likes of CNN and the BBC. “I had no idea it would make such huge noise in the world,” noted Aynaw, adding that she has since seen more black girls auditioning for the competition. “They lean on me as a role model,” she said. “It is an amazing feeling to give them hope and power to do something – to be brave.” By the way, Aynaw counts U.S. president Barack Obama as one of her role models. He invited her during his first trip to Israel in 2013 to attend a state dinner at President Shimon Peres’ residence.
- 4. Leadership is not just commanding units and inspiring young girls, it is making a conscious effort to help**

others. Aynaw said she feels a strong connection to her childhood community, particularly to Ethiopian-born Israelis living in Israel. She recently founded and helps fund the “Titi Project,” which provides extracurricular activities and enrichment like basketball and computer classes to 66 Ethiopian kids from disadvantaged backgrounds in Netanya. “It is easy to get into bad habits at 13 and 14,” said Aynaw. “I want to help them stay out of trouble. I want to give them a place to be. They aren’t bad children, but they have been born into a hard life.” Aynaw is passionate about expanding the project around the world and helping to give other kids educational opportunities that she lacked growing up.

5. **It all comes down to hope and perseverance.** “I work hard, I keep dreaming, and I never listen to [negativity],” said Aynaw, who believes when you transcend color, you open yourself up to a world of possibilities. Despite other “Survivor” competitors seeing the women in her group as weak, she challenged those stereotypes by speaking up often and honestly – a strategy that nearly won her first place (she lost by one vote). “I don’t see color when I look at myself. People always say good things and bad things. You need to continue stronger and not listen to the bad. You don’t know what you’re going to be tomorrow — you just have to keep doing the hard work.”