

# PERSPECTIVES ON ASSISTING AFRICAN REFUGEES IN ISRAEL

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*This narrative relates the stories of a variety of Israelis who have come upon African refugees to Israel, and who have attempted to be of assistance. The author provides the reader with information on the reasons, scope and challenges associated with the recent movement of African refugees to Israel. The personal experiences and perspectives of refugees from Eritrea and Darfur provide further background. I relate the narratives of Israeli helpers: from the soldier who initially encounters the newcomer at the border, to the activist who is a catalyst for the development of culturally sensitive social services. The internal working models underlying their efforts are delineated and underscored. The meaning of their helping actions and sentiments within the complex Israeli socio-political context is explored.*

*"The stranger that dwells with you shall be unto you as born among you." - Leviticus 19:34*

In 2003 the Darfur region of Western Sudan witnessed the beginning of a civil war that would culminate in genocide, leaving between 200,000 and 400,000 dead and up to 2.5 million displaced. In the southern region, yet another civil war, that raged from 1983-2005, left an additional 2 million dead and 4 million displaced. The large majority of those who found themselves homeless, up to 5 million, fled to neighboring Egypt (Derfner, 2008; Yacobi, 2009).

The situation of the Sudanese refugees in Egypt has been difficult. Beyond living in substandard conditions, they have been the brunt of racial and ethnic prejudice and a prevailing view that they are undermining the local economy. They are often pursued and harassed by the authorities (Kaminsky, 2009). Many are the victims of violence and a large number of women have been sexually abused (Yiftach Milo, co-founder of ASSAF, Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel in 2006, interview August 10, 2010). The watershed event that led to the beginning of the illegal movement of Darfurians from Egypt into adjacent Israel took place on December 30, 2005. Thousands of Egyptian security personnel forcibly removed 250 Sudanese refugees camped in a park near the offices of the U.N. High

Commission for Refugees. Twenty-seven were killed, including numerous women and children (Barak, 2007).

The crossing of the 135-kilometer long porous border into Israel involves a physically demanding trek through rugged desert terrain. Refugees pay hundreds of dollars each to Bedouin smugglers to accompany them, in the utter darkness of night, to spots where the chance of a successful crossing is greatest (Derfner, 2008; Yacobi, 2009). There is a frightening risk of being arrested by the Egyptian border patrols and being severely beaten. Dozens have been shot and killed on their approach to the border markers (Kaminsky, 2009).

The news that Israel could be infiltrated by land reached refugees fleeing war, famine, religious and political persecution from additional African countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Congo, Somalia, Ivory Coast, and, in particular, Eritrea. For these refugees and asylum seekers, crossing the border into Israel is considered a better option than staying in Egypt or crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Israel is perceived as a relatively prosperous and liberal nation, which makes it a reasonable as well as a reachable destination (Kaminsky, 2009; Yacobi, 2009). Many face torture, imprisonment, or death should they

somehow find themselves back in their homelands (Shahar, 2007).

During the past seven years, extensive human trafficking from Egypt has taken place. Unofficial estimates are that as many as 25,000 African refugees and asylum seekers have made their way to Israel, where the large majority have remained (Yiftach Milo, co-founder of ASSAF, an organization founded in 2006 for the support of African refugees in Israel, interview August 10, 2010). Between dozens and hundreds are said to arrive each week, with up to 100 arriving some days (Barak, 2007; Kaminsky, 2009). Many of these are minors, including children and youth unaccompanied by their parents or other family members (Yacobi, 2009).

The lack of academic writing on the African refugees in Israel, coupled with a relative paucity of official reports and data, necessitates a reliance on Israeli media coverage, as well as informant testimony, in order to begin to understand the phenomenon of African refugees and asylum seekers in Israel.

### **Wasabe's Story**

Wasabe's story may help shed light on the journeys of those Africans who have arrived in Israel seeking refuge.

Wasabe was saved from forced conscription at age 16 when he arrived for school late on the morning of February 3, 2006, only to find its gates locked. Two hours earlier the Eritrean army had made a surprise raid and, storming his school, forcibly recruited his classmates at gunpoint. Up until that day Wasabe had lived with his family in a southern village of sorghum growers. Having lost his father at age nine and being the eldest child in the family, Wasabe was the one largely responsible for the family's agricultural activity and livelihood. He recalls with a smile that when he arrived home early that morning, his mother was angry with him and commented that if he continued in this manner he would never complete his studies. When Wasabe's sister returned home from school, she told him there were lists posted on the walls of the market naming those youths who still faced

compulsory enlistment. Wasabe's name was included.

Wasabe hurried to flee. He did not pack a bag or change his clothes, but did manage to grab all his money: about 10 dollars. He did not say goodbye to his mother so as not to entangle her in his planned escape. He simply walked out the door, crossed the family's cultivated fields, and kept going. He did not stop until daybreak. Early in the morning he reached a nearby village where he bought some food. He hiked on. He walked mostly at night for fear of being spotted by military patrols. He sometimes ran into hyenas, but these frightened him less than the army patrols out during the day. He slept in secluded hideouts. When his money ran out he would look for a casual job, work for a few days and then continue. He would not stay in any one place very long as he was afraid of being caught and tried as a deserter.

It took him some eight months to reach the Eritrea-Sudan border, which he crossed at will and without difficulty. In Sudan he was taken in by fellow countrymen. During his month stay he contacted relatives who had fled to Malta years prior. They sent him a small amount of money for food. Wasabe used this to pay a truck driver to take him to the capital city of Khartoum and to buy a train ticket to Cairo. In Cairo he met fellow Eritrean refugees who warned him that he might be arrested there and even expelled back home. They suggested he join them on a trek to Israel, where they promised his life would be safer. Wasabe agreed that this seemed like a reasonable destination, although he had no real idea about where he was going. He believed that he had nothing to lose.

The group of boys hired smugglers to take them through eastern Egypt to the Israeli border. The difficult journey, travelled in large part by foot, took three days. On the fourth night they scampered toward the border marker and, just ahead of the bullets of Egyptian border guards, climbed over a barbed wire fence and surrendered to Israeli soldiers. The soldiers transported them to the southern Israeli city of Beer Sheva where they dropped them off. Wasabe and his friends walked through the streets and asked how to get to

the United Nations office. A university student they met put them in touch with local residents, mostly professors, who voluntarily assisted the newly arrived African refugees.

### **Gabana's Story**

The story of Gabana highlights the experiences of many of the African refugees following their initial arrival in Israel.

On the night of March 3, 2008, Gabana, age 24 from Darfur, arrived in Israel. He had just climbed over large jagged boulders stacked by the Egyptian border police in order to slow the infiltration of African refugees into Israel. Standing one yard inside Israeli territory he stood perfectly still and, with hands clasped over his head, waited for the Israeli soldiers to find him. Gabana was uncertain and wondered about what they would do with him but had heard from other Darfurians he had met during his year-long stay in Egypt that he would at least be safe. Within a short while three soldiers had surrounded him. Shortly thereafter he found himself in the back seat of their Jeep on the way, he would later find out, to a large detention facility constructed near the southern border to house African refugees and asylum seekers.

Gabana was kept there three weeks. While in the detention center, he slept in a large barracks, housing about 100 men. The food was strange to him and a bit difficult to eat, but of ample quality and quantity. There were showers with hot and cold water, which was new to him, and ceiling fans to lighten the desert heat. In the central auditorium there were a few televisions. He would go many times a day to hear news broadcasts. Though he could not understand the Hebrew he waited in hopeful anticipation of seeing pictures from back home. There were uniformed guards, men and women mostly around his age, armed and unarmed, who tried to speak with him in their broken English. He liked talking with them about what it was like to live in Israel. Most of the day he would hang around outside with his fellow detainees, chatting and wondering about their fate. There were Hebrew language classes available, taught by the guards in a makeshift classroom. Gabana enjoyed attending as sometimes the young female

guards, whom he found very attractive, would bring their "students" cookies and candies from home.

During the three weeks he was detained, Gabana met several times with Interior Ministry officials who would decide his fate in Israel. What he mainly wanted to know was when he would be free to go. The detention center was not bad, but he was impatient to start his new life. At night Gabana would find himself thinking about his family. He was very worried for the fate of those who had survived the tortuous killing back home and who were in Egypt without, according to Gabana, any future. It was hard for him to accept that he would never again return to his country. At times he would find himself weeping when he remembered the night in Darfur when he witnessed his sister being group raped, at knifepoint, by the members of the militias.

After Gabana was released from the detention center he was transported in an army bus, along with another 20 detainees, to the dilapidated "central bus station" district of southern Tel Aviv, where he was dropped off without any money or other provisions. (This neighborhood has in recent years become a sort of transit camp with African refugees and asylum seekers joining thousands of predominantly legal foreign workers from Thailand, China, and India.)

When Gabana got off the bus, he walked up the first street he came upon and immediately noticed a number of small Internet cafés and bars, mobile phone outlets, hairdressers, and laundromats with Africans inside. He entered a café and introduced himself to some of the men sitting inside. He was invited to sit down with them and within an hour they took him to where they were living, a five-minute walk away. It was a large, grey, concrete bomb shelter, which served as short-term free housing for about 200 African refugees who slept on the floor on paper thin mattresses. The physical and hygienic conditions were poor, with two bathrooms for all the residents, and no shower or laundry facilities. This shelter was to serve as an interim stop between the detention center and a rented apartment. Gabana was immediately given a mattress and a few days' food from

the representative of an aid organization unknown to him.

After a short search, Gabana found employment as a dishwasher in a restaurant near the beach. Working for slightly less than the legal minimum wage, he spent most of the coming months there working 10-14 hours per day. Gabana moved out of the shelter within a month to a two-bedroom flat he rented on the same street along with seven other African refugees. Gabana has remained in his job, and spends whatever little free time he has socializing with other African refugees. They enjoy playing soccer together in the local park and swimming in the sea. Lately he has become involved in an organization of African refugees who themselves help newcomers with information and support. Once a month he goes to the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in Tel Aviv, hoping to get more conclusive direction about his future.

Gabana has continued to suffer from chronic skin problems since his arrival in Israel. Untreated in the past, he is now cared for at a storefront medical clinic established to serve African refugees. He was referred by the clinic to a dermatologist in a local hospital who treated him without remuneration. His medicine is expensive in proportion to his salary. However, he prefers to walk to and from work and use the bus fare he saves on his prescription. Gabana has also experienced some mental health issues arising from traumatic experiences in Darfur and Egypt. He is aware that many of his fellow Darfurians in Israel are in need of support and treatment stemming from ordeals they have experienced. What is more, they have next to no contact with their families in Africa, are constantly concerned for their welfare, and are painfully aware that they may never see their loved ones again. Gabana has met a few times with one of the medical clinic's volunteer social workers.

Gabana is grateful for the assistance he has received from many organizations and individuals since he has arrived in Israel. He particularly notes a large public interest in the situation of the African refugees and favorable media coverage. He underscores the relative lack of discrimination and persecution

compared to his homeland and Egypt. However, he emphasizes that it is very hard to make a livelihood and, in addition, that his status in Israel is essentially temporary and unstable. He explains that he is constantly worried and even fearful that his permission to stay in the country will be terminated suddenly. Gabana wants permanent asylum and expects the Israeli government to help him.

### **The Israeli Government Response to the African Refugees and Asylum Seekers**

The state of Israel has not embraced a clear policy with respect to the illegal entry of African refugees and asylum seekers. It has not fully acknowledged that they exist.

The hesitant and ambivalent response of the national government in Jerusalem appears related to the common perception that the illegal entry of Africans poses a delicate problem, which raises a complex dilemma for Israeli society.

On the one hand, the government is wary about being too hospitable to the newcomers, fully recognizing that there are several million in neighboring Egypt. The African refugees and asylum seekers represent an additional financial and logistical burden on an already strapped nation. Most important, however, they have been perceived as posing a potentially serious threat to the preservation of the Jewish character of the state. Israel guarantees a home to the world's Jewish refugees and claims that it cannot be expected to do the same for the world's non-Jewish refugees (Barak, 2007; Derfner, 2008).

On the other hand, Israel is well aware of existing legal, moral, and historical factors that mitigate against expulsion of the African refugees. Refugees and asylum seekers, according to international convention, are to be protected by the receiving country while they await a decision on their case. In addition, Israel is concerned about the safety and well being of African refugees it might potentially deport back to Egypt, including the possibility that the Egyptian government might expel them back to their home countries where many could face imprisonment or even death. Important in Israeli considerations is the fact that the

Sudanese government views any citizen who has stepped foot inside Israel as being guilty of high treason and subject to the death penalty, including refugees seeking asylum (Yiftach Milo, co-founder of ASSAF, an organization founded in 2006 for the support of African refugees in Israel, interview, August 10, 2010).

The inability of the Israeli national government to establish a clear stance with regard to the African refugees and asylum seekers has resulted in a situation whereby it offers no formal health or social services to them while they reside in the country. Most of the refugees reside in Tel Aviv or in the southern tourist city of Eilat. While many manage to rent apartments along with their fellow Africans after spending their initial weeks in shelters, others remain stuck in the shelters or are homeless. While the employment of Africans in the service sector is passively tolerated by the Interior Ministry and Ministry of Labor, and most refugees work, only a handful are issued formal work permits. Several hundred Darfurians, as well as a number of Eritreans who had escaped from their country's war with Ethiopia, have received formal resident status granting them a legal work permit, medical insurance, and social benefits (Yacobi, 2009).

It is not that the national government is entirely impotent with respect to the African newcomers. It is their correctional service, a branch of the Ministry of Internal Security, which operates the several detention centers where, in the last three years, thousands of African refugees have been held. Many detainees are released to reside in Israeli urban centers only after the detention centers are full to the brim and there is a need to make room for newcomers (Yiftach Milo, co-founder of ASSAF, an organization founded in 2006 for the support of African refugees in Israel, interview August 10, 2010). Prior to the establishment of these centers the refugees would simply be taken by army personnel to such cities as Tel Aviv, Eilat, or Beer Sheva and be dropped off, left to fend for themselves. Whatever limited help they received was either from student activists, volunteers, or select municipal governments (Yacobi, 2009).

The Tel Aviv municipality has been the singular government body that has exerted substantial effort in helping the African refugees and asylum seekers and the city of Tel Aviv is considered by many of them as a place of possibilities. In order to keep the refugees afloat financially, the municipality has established several shelters to house them on their arrival. While the shelters for male African refugees are grossly overcrowded and of substandard quality, the Tel Aviv shelter for African refugee women and children is considered adequately equipped to address the needs of its residents. Hundreds of African refugee children attend municipal schools and kindergartens and refugee mothers and children attend well-baby clinics. In 2008, when the mayor of Tel Aviv first announced a plan to build a much larger shelter to take African refugees out of the inadequate shelters and off of the streets, the project was stopped by Prime Minister Olmert's office (Yacobi, 2009).

The rhetoric on the national political scene has likewise reflected the government's fundamental ambivalence toward the African refugees and asylum seekers. Former Minister of the Interior Bar On warned that Israel would face major geo-strategic difficulty should it fail to stop illegal African infiltration. He emphasized that sympathy among the Israeli public for the African refugees was ill founded, as only a minority of those reaching Israel originated from the viciously embattled Darfur region (Shahar, 2007).

Similarly, former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert described the thousands of African refugees residing in Israel as a "tsunami." He called for stricter security measures in order to bar infiltrators from Africa and established detention centers for the housing of those African refugees and asylum seekers who did manage to arrive. In addition, it was Prime Minister Olmert who ordered the first deportation of 50 refugees back to Egypt, albeit only after receiving assurances from Egyptian President Mubarek that the deportees would be treated well and not be sent back to Sudan (Derfner, 2008; Yacobi, 2009).

Sixty-three members of the Israeli parliament, representing both the political left and right, signed a petition urging the

government to refrain from this deportation. This was part of a large public campaign, including substantial street protests and damning media coverage, appealing largely to the Jewish historical collective memory of persecution. Supporters likened the plight of the African refugees to that of the European Jewish refugees of the Holocaust who, in the face of a genocidal threat, also needed shelter and protection (Barak, 2007). The chairperson of the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, an extremely prominent public institution in Israel, proclaimed "We cannot stand by as refugees from genocide in Darfur are knocking at our doors" (Barak, 2007; Derfner, 2008; Yacobi, 2009).

Former Justice Minister Friedmann strongly advocated for the absorption of Darfurian refugees claiming that Israel must adhere to the principle of "biblical compassion." Drawing a clear parallel between the Israelite exodus from Egypt 3000 years ago and the current African refugees leaving Egypt, he urged Israelis to ask themselves to what extent their response to African refugees and asylum seekers is within the "pathway" of such compassion. He stressed the need for Israel to play its part in global efforts to aid these victims of persecution and war (Yacobi, 2009).

#### **The Israeli Voluntary Sector Response to the African Refugees and Asylum Seekers**

African refugee care has in large part fallen on Israeli humanitarian and aid organizations, as well as individual volunteers. Local charities, small businesses and families have donated food, clothing, transportation and temporary housing. Physicians, psychologists, social workers and lawyers have provided pro bono legal and health services. The arrival of the African refugees and asylum seekers has been the impetus for the expansion of the scope of the activities of various preexisting organizations dealing with human rights, such as the hotline for migrant workers, Tel Aviv University Law School's refugee rights clinic, Hamoked center for the defense of the individual, Amnesty International and others, along with community organizations, such as the kibbutz movement (Kaminsky, 2009; Ravid,

2007). A small number of new agencies have been established to aid the African refugee and asylum seeker, most prominently ASSAF, which seeks to meet their social service needs. Veteran African refugees themselves established the African Refugee Development Center as well as the Committee for the Advancement of Refugees from Darfur, organizations that sought to procure donations of basic food and clothing products, as well as money, for the most recent newcomers. In 2007 an interorganizational coalition was established, based in Tel Aviv, to create a network as well as to increase cooperation between the organizations (Yacobi, 2009; Yitach Millo, co-founder of ASSAF, an organization founded in 2006 for the support of African refugees in Israel, interview, August 10, 2010).

#### **The Soldier**

Rami, age 20, was drafted into the Army at age 18 for three years of compulsory service after completing high school, where his studies focused on music and dramatic arts. Rami is a gifted guitarist and sports a tattoo of a treble clef on his forearm. He brought an old instrument of his to the Army, and stores it in the corner of the camouflaged tent he shares with eight other young men. Rami's father is a computer programmer and his mother is an art teacher. After one year of exhausting basic combat training, he was stationed on the southernmost border with Egypt. There, in addition to undergoing advanced anti-terror combat training, he takes part in routine border patrols. These are done with three other soldiers who, dressed in full battle gear, drive in an open air Jeep up and down an assigned section of the border checking the fence and adjacent ground for any signs of infiltration.

Rami has encountered tens of African refugees on his nighttime patrols. "We are just driving and suddenly in the glare of the headlights you see them standing: still, silent, with their hands over their heads. They are usually in small groups. The smugglers wouldn't make a big enough profit from just one. They look frightened and tired. They don't speak until they are spoken to. We have to pull out our guns at first, until we can determine

for sure who they are. This is hard for them. I know they are scared of guns. The Egyptians shoot at them. Usually at least one of them speaks pretty good English. Quickly we have the situation under control. We usually carry food in the Jeep. They are hungry and gladly accept it. They laugh at our food. Some of them have never eaten pita bread and hummus before. But they always love the cola. We call for another Jeep, and while we wait we try to tell them about what will happen to them and we ask them about where they are from. We are just low-level soldiers but we try to be helpful. They go to our base for a couple of hours until we can organize transportation to take them to detention. Often they have been hurt on the trip in Sinai or on the border fence and the rocks (scratches, scrapes, that kind of thing.) The base medic takes care of them. If they have been shot, and that has happened to me a few times, we airlift them right away to hospital in Beer Sheva.”

Rami talks about why he tries to assist the African refugees he meets. His words highlight positive childhood memories of his own experiences with Ethiopian newcomers in his small home town. In addition to a sentimental connection to his own past, Rami also appears loyal to his perception of a historical legacy of embracing those in need of a safe haven. Since its establishment in 1948 Israel has absorbed more than 50% of its entire population through immigration. The tens of thousands of men, women, and children actively brought to Israel during the last 30 years from impoverished, conflict-ridden Northern Ethiopia represent one of the most visible immigrant populations (Doron & Markovitzsky, 2006).

*“I grew up in Kiryat Gat. When I was a boy I had a few Ethiopian friends. We used to play soccer together and we would visit each other’s homes. I really liked them. They were a lot more polite than my other friends. When we met they would make a slight curtsy. And they were smart. I enjoyed their music. Africa seemed like a real cool place to me at that age—exotic.*”

*One of them had a mother, her name was Memoo, who I liked a lot. I was always amazed at her white linen clothing. I had never seen anything like it—so white and clean. I even ate the injira bread she used to make on their stove. When my parents would work late, which was quite often, I would stay there after school, some days for hours.*

*“Besides we are all newcomers in Israel. Everyone came from some other place at one time or another. As a boy I was surrounded by Morrocans, Tunisians, Egyptians, and Yemenites. They all settled here after the war of independence. They left their homes in the Arab states of North Africa and came here. They were the shopkeeper, the school janitor, the repairman. I grew up with immigrants. My own grandparents came to Israel from Eastern Europe. Israel has always been a nation of immigrants. I wouldn’t be here today if my grandfather and grandmother were not taken in. That is a large part of who we are. We should continue that way. It has built our country.”*

#### **The Detention Center Social Worker**

Orna, age 26, completed her undergraduate degree two years ago and her first social work position has been in a detention center established by the national correctional service to house approximately 1,000 African refugees and asylum seekers. Her appearance presents a juxtaposition of the personal and the professional. On the one hand her blue, military-style uniform, complete with three stripes denoting her rank, and on the other, her warm smile and personal manner. She is full of enthusiasm for her first job as a professional and wants to do her best. Her parents came to Israel from Syria and are still somewhat loyal to their traditional beliefs. Orna believes that working in the correctional service somehow reflects divine will. Every morning at 6:30 she makes her way from Beer Sheva in a large blue correctional service bus, along

with a dozen colleagues, to the detention center a mere few kilometers from the border with Egypt.

When the bus gets within sight of the detention center, one discerns a campus consisting of a large number of white buildings, the entire periphery surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Unlike other Israeli correctional service facilities, there are no guard towers but only a gate manned by two security personnel. Once inside, one encounters the caravans which house the administrative offices, including those of the seven full-time social workers. There are no detainees in sight. One has to walk a couple hundred meters beyond to reach the barracks. There are several large compounds for males and a separate compound for women and children. The women's quarters consist of large tents similar to those that house Israeli combat soldiers but inside these there is electricity, running water, and sanitation facilities. In addition to the military cots, there are wooden clothes closets, mostly adorned with photos of loved ones back home. The female guards in their early 20s mingle freely with the detainees. Orna brings red nail polish from home for an unaccompanied adolescent detainee from Eritrea. The girl is wearing blue jeans given to her by Orna.

At the far end of the women's compound is a child care center which Orna started. Much of the furniture Orna brought from the homes of her own relatives. The walls are colorfully decorated with tens of pictures drawn by the young children. Orna organized a fund, which most of the detention personnel contribute toward, to cover the monthly expenses of the paints and other art supplies for the kindergarten.

Orna is extremely committed to aiding the clients in her caseload, which number 200. During her ten-hour workday—minus a 15-minute lunch break she takes when she has the time—she is mainly busy providing individual counseling and support. She also administers a therapeutic group for female detainees who have been sexually abused, specifically on their journey through Africa. She also maintains contact with social workers in the southern region general and mental

health facilities. At any one time up to 20 detainees may be hospitalized. She attempts to provide guidance for those who are soon to be released into the community, and when she can she provides them with referrals to volunteer organizations, mostly in Tel Aviv. Orna has not missed one day of work in the past year and feels her professional services are crucially important to her clients' well-being. She has a strong sense her absence from work would cause at least some of her clients a strong feeling of abandonment.

Orna's explanation of her intense desire to help the African detainees relates strongly to a Holocaust discourse. Although Orna herself has no direct familial connection to the Holocaust, her vehement sentiments and beliefs emerged from her public school experience. Her Holocaust studies culminated in high school when Orna participated, as did thousands of other Israeli highschool students, in the "March of the Living." Overcome with emotion on her visit to the Auschwitz death camp, she vowed there and then that she would devote her life to helping others who have been victimized and persecuted.

"When I was completing my BSW degree, I happened to watch a rerun of the movie *Schindler's List*. That night I couldn't fall asleep. I sat up in my bed until the morning. I remembered all about my trip to the death camps. We were standing right in the middle of a gas chamber huddling together saying a prayer for the souls of the victims. I was sobbing. That's when I swore I'd give my life to helping the weak and oppressed. It was really at that moment that I started my journey towards social work. If there had been social workers in Germany maybe the Holocaust could even have been prevented. But in actual fact, no one helped the Jews in the Holocaust. Countries even closed their borders to us. Cuba cruelly turned back a boat full of German Jews. They were all slaughtered when the boat returned to port. We Jews are obliged to help whoever is oppressed and beaten down. We have a mission to help all refugees. It was that night that I figured that in my first job after graduation I wanted to work helping the Africans. I joined the correctional service for that reason. In my recruitment interviews I



almost begged them to send me to a detention center for the Africans.”

### **The Social Activist**

Ben, age 38, has devoted much of the last four years to developing and operating a new community social service dedicated to assisting the African refugees and asylum seekers. Prior to that, she was a public school teacher. However, for what now seems to her almost as long as she can remember, she has been working virtually around the clock on behalf of the newcomers. Since 2006 she has been on call most evenings and nights and more often than not she is called out to one of the shelters to provide food, bed clothes, or to help arrange for emergency medical care and medication.

In addition to her humanitarian work, Ben provides public lectures about the situation of the African refugees and asylum seekers in order to raise the level of public support for them and for government changes in policy towards them. Ben spends what remains of her time writing and phoning members of parliament in order to convince them of the need for the government to take formal responsibility for the African refugees, in particular with regard to their physical and mental health. She is part of the efforts of those who are promoting among Israeli politicians the concept of “social residence,” whereby each and every person residing in Israel would have a right to full social and medical services irrespective of his legal status in the country. Before the arrival of the African refugees and asylum seekers, Ben was highly involved in humanitarian and human rights work on behalf of Palestinians living in the occupied territories.

Ben’s explanation of her strong desire to assist the African refugees has at its core her vision of seeing Israel as a “light unto the nations.” She sees her aid work as critically important in terms of the state of Israel remaining part of the “enlightened” world community. She explains her extraordinary concern for Israel’s place amongst the nations in terms of a childhood spent in large part in foreign countries.

*“When I was a child my father would be invited to go on missions outside of Israel for years at a time. I really loved living in those countries. We were in Sweden and later Belgium. From an early age I saw there were ways of doing things in this world different from how we are used to doing them in Israel. The big world out there became very important to me. Today it is very important to me that Israel be counted amongst the progressive world nations. Ideally I would want us to be a leader in humanitarian activity, but if not that, at least we need to be in the right club. If one day I will start to feel that my nation is part of the dark side of the globe, that will be the saddest day of my life. I will have to leave Israel for good and be a refugee somewhere else. Helping the African refugees is the best way I know of to prevent me, myself, from being a refugee in the future. I enjoy the big world for sure, and want to live abroad again, but I want to always be able to call Israel my permanent address.”*

### **The Teacher**

Tami, age 48, holds a master’s degree in education and has been a teacher approximately 20 years. She was born and raised on a kibbutz and has always been affiliated with the Israeli political left. She has been involved all her adult life in the promotion of literacy amongst new immigrants to Israel and during the past two years has devoted much of her after-school time to collecting and distributing English reading material to African refugees and asylum seekers in the Tel Aviv neighborhood where most of them reside.

Tami teaches a relatively large number of children from African refugee families in the Tel Aviv school where she has worked most of her career. She expresses an extremely strong commitment to these children and believes that the state of Israel should make a formal decision to support and aid the African

refugees. She expresses deep disappointment that their situation has become largely the concern of the city of Tel Aviv. Tami firmly believes that parental involvement in their children's education is a prerequisite for success and devotes school recesses to meeting with African refugee parents and coaching them as to how they might best be able to help their children learn. Tami has organized a cadre of volunteers who give the children private Hebrew language lessons after school.

Tami's explanation of her high motivation to assist the African refugee and asylum seeker families rests largely on her fundamental belief that the hallmark of an Israeli society she could value and remain part of is its ability to genuinely accept those who are different from the Jewish majority. Furthermore, it is of paramount importance to Tami that "her Israel" enhances the well-being of those who are "fellow travelers" in a manner equal to how it supports its Jewish citizens.

*"I am staunchly committed to this country. I love our nation deeply and I feel that I have a huge stake in her future. What we are worth as a nation depends largely on how well we do in accepting our non-Jewish fellow travelers. Our society has failed miserably with our Arab countrymen. Now we have been given a fresh chance on a silver platter: it has literally come knocking on our back door. How we treat these strangers, for me, is maybe our last chance to show that we can be fair and kind to those who are different than us. We need to remember that in the Holocaust, we Jews were the different ones.*

*Look what happens to a society that rejects those who are not like the majority—that is a cancer for the society and will soon kill every good cell in the social fabric. And if we are able to learn how to accept and even embrace our non-Jewish fellow travelers, we will surely be able to embrace those*

*amongst us whom we have also tended to exclude: the homosexual and lesbian community for example."*

### The Physician

Dan, age 45, studied medicine at the University of Tel Aviv. After completing his specialty training in North America, he began to practice in northern Israel. He is considered by his peers to be one of the national leaders in his field. His quiet demeanor and modest clothing mask his professional success. He sports a *kippa*, the traditional head covering for observant Jewish males. He considers himself moderately religious. He firmly believes in the compatibility of science and spirituality.

Two afternoons each week he makes the long drive to the center of the country where he volunteers in a storefront medical clinic for African refugees and asylum seekers. He arrives home about midnight, stopping on the way for a roadside sandwich and to unwind emotionally. The work at the clinic is plentiful. Some days, a long line forms on the adjacent street up to an hour before the clinic opens its doors. The patients are all ages, both men and women, with problems that range from minor scrapes and sore throats to cancer. Dan has become familiar with the life situations of a number of his patients. Though typically politically uninvolved, he has become increasingly disturbed by the lack of assistance that the national government provides to the newcomers. He has even become interested in the efforts of several social activists he has met through the clinic, to lobby members of parliament for policy changes. Dan claims that the issue of African refugees has essentially woken him up from a kind of social lethargy. He concedes that he started to volunteer at the clinic for the "wrong reasons." At the beginning it mostly represented for him some sort of quasi-professional challenge. He was somewhat bored with regular medical practice and wanted to try himself under more challenging circumstances. Tel Aviv seemed closer than going all the way to a third world country.

Dan strongly believes that his volunteer work is bringing him closer to the principles on which the state of Israel was founded. He perceives helping the new arrivals from Africa as no less than a new brand of Zionism that has the potential to rejuvenate more tired Zionist ideas and activities.

*"This country and its future are very important to me. My family would have been saved from the Holocaust if there was an Israel back then. The country has been terribly confused, for years now. I may be religious but I have to say that the occupation is draining from us a lot of our humanity. What has Zionism become? Settlements? Roadblocks? What can my children turn to when they think about where they want to live their lives? I guess that may be necessary for now; I am far from a politician and usually I saw politics as being something far away, even foreign to me. Now it's different. Since I have been at the clinic, I am looking for answers to the bigger questions. My work here is my Zionism. It is a kind of healing of a wounded Zionism for me. And not just for me, for lots of the people who volunteer here. Helping others, the weak, as we Jews once were, seems to me the essence of why we are here in the Middle East, why we have our own nation. In short, my work here has given me an idea, for the first time in a long time, of what this country was founded for. I have rediscovered Zionism in this clinic."*

### **Discussion and Concluding Words**

African refugees and asylum seekers in Israel appear to benefit significantly from the help they receive from a variety of local civil organizations and individuals. This benefit notwithstanding, the internal working models underlying much of this assistance may be

lacking in direct concern for the well-being of the newcomers.

A prominent element of the motivation to help appears to be the manner in which the provision of assistance brings Israelis closer to their sense of the Jewish historical collective experience, and in particular Zionism. Helping the African refugee and asylum seeker seems to speak powerfully to the Jewish "heart," triggering an almost instinctive desire on the part of helpers to connect more closely with a perceived and highly valued Jewish legacy of altruism, charity, and justice.

Emotion focused therapy (EFT) may prove useful in understanding the kind of helping that seems to derive from deep within one's guts. The EFT theory of human functioning (Greenberg, 2002) posits the fundamental importance of emotional meaning structures, or emotional schemes. These foundational schemes consist of emotions, along with their associated cognitions and orientations to action. The self identifies, interprets, heeds - and is guided by these emotional schemes. Such primary and deeply internalized psychic structures may be at the heart of much of the helping behavior of Israelis toward the African refugee and asylum seeker. The collective traumatic memory of the Holocaust appears to be a defining feature of the emotional schema of many Israelis. An additional element is related to the biblical imperative to be an ethical and humanitarian guiding light to the nations.

As a result, the assistance that many Israelis have extended to the African newcomer may be more motivated by an historical, deeply embedded, highly emotionally driven sentiment than by a clearly defined identification and understanding of the problematic life situation of the arrivals. What is communicated in the helpers' narratives is a commanding need to connect with, preserve, and promote what are considered essential Jewish, and therefore by definition, Israeli values. Many Israelis have an almost primal need to live in a humane and just nation: a nation that they will be comfortable identifying with and sacrificing for. The African refugees and asylum seekers have, in an important sense then, arrived at the right place at the right time.

This is not to say that such is the exclusive discourse found in Israel. To complicate matters there exists in the Israeli Jewish ethos, side by side with these prevalent and powerful emotional schemes, an extremely strong need to preserve the state of Israel as an ethnocracy, a state established to enhance the self-determination and well being of a particular ethno-nation (Yacobi, 2009). The tension generated between protecting historically commanding Jewish values and maintaining a Jewish majority in the state of Israel may at times be excruciating. To be a truly bright light unto the nations would mean the arrival of perhaps millions of African refugees and the possible extinction of Israel as an ethnocracy. On the other hand, to live in darkness would mean the bankruptcy of Israel as a state upholding Jewish ethical and moral values. Such a Jewish state would also have no viable future. Israel seems to exist in a precarious balance between these two poles of particularism and universality.

In light of this highly complex, fundamental and stubborn dilemma it seems appropriate to conclude this essay by citing a uniquely inspiring event that was reported in the highly respected national newspaper *Haaretz* (Kaminsky, 2009).

Just prior to last Passover, under the banner “a common bond of suffering seems to unite us and the Jews,” a group of approximately 200 African refugees and asylum seekers labored voluntarily to help elderly Holocaust survivors refurbish their Tel Aviv apartments. These same 200 Africans later participated in a public seder symbolizing the ancient exodus of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage. They had made a strikingly similar journey over 3,000 years later (Barak, 2007).

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