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# ISRAELIS AND THEIR RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS REFUGEES

by Or Mor

**W**ith sixty million refugees and displaced persons worldwide, more than in the end of the Second World War, displacement and forced migration have become a major global issue in recent years. Consequently, many individuals and organizations in both high-income and low-income countries have dedicated their efforts to support refugees. Likewise, Israel, which hosts dozens of thousands of African refugees, has become the home of civil society efforts to advance the wellbeing of refugees and to offer assistance in response to their many perils.

The largest floods of refugees to Israel began a decade ago, emanating from a civil war and genocide in Sudan and a harsh dictatorship in Eritrea. The refugees that arrived in Tel-Aviv found their first line of support at the African Refugee Development Center, which was the first non-governmental organization in Israel focusing solely on the development of refugees, and offering shelter upon their arrival. In 2007, ASSAF (the Aid Organization for Refugees in Asylum Seekers in Israel) was born, providing aid and psycho-social support for those who desperately needed it. It was not long before a myriad of other humanitarian organizations, human rights advocates, philanthropic institutions, political groups, social activists and religious congregations joined in to offer their assistance.

Governmental support was lacking, and as a result, civil society had to take on the government's role in supporting the refugees that have arrived at our doors. Government policy was mostly opposed to the absorption of refugees and was generally harsh, creating constant obstacles for those who work with this population. However, this was also one of the main reasons for me to join this struggle. Early on, I decided that I want to concentrate my efforts into giving hope where almost none is offered by the government, particularly in face of deportation and imprisonment. I was first motivated to action by the racism and acts of violence that were perpetrated against refugees in Israel, with blatant incitement coming from dominant public figures in the Israeli political arena. I decided that it was my moral obligation to show the proper hospitality to the foreigners that have come to us for protection. When one knocks on your door in search of asylum, I believe, you should do all that you can in order to offer assistance and protection. My work with refugees started in 2013, when I was offered an internship with ASSAF and started to volunteer with their youth program which provides support to teenage refugees. It was there that I learned that the smallest efforts can have the greatest impact on people's lives. When people lack the elementary support systems, the most basic, positive environments can give much hope.

I was also driven by the belief that there is a need to bring more Israelis to empathize with refugees in order to bring change in the way they are treated by government policy. Thus, I joined a group of activists that started a community initiative whose purpose was reaching out to the Israeli public to tell their stories and I coordinated a program of lectures given by refugees in schools and universities.

Later, I was fortunate to take part in founding the first community center for African refugees in Jerusalem. In establishing the center, we have decided to build a structure that will reflect the cooperation between Israelis and refugees in their efforts to bring about a future of dialogue and coexistence. This was our answer to the bigotry that surrounded us, though more importantly, it was our answer to the lack of hope. It was at the center that I learned that where hope is not provided by the government, it is the people themselves who need to work towards bettering their future. Working on this project for the past year-and-a-half, I witnessed how a community is able to develop itself and create hope just by having a place to gather and learn. The Jerusalem African Community Center is now an NGO that is driven from the bottom up, while plans and decisions are made in constant dialogue with its constituents who have taken a major role in the establishment of the center. I truly believe that this project can become a model for how development should take place.

Over the past few years of my work with asylum seekers, I am often asked why I chose to assist refugees, while there are other communities in Israel that are in need. Living in Israel, one is often told that the poor of our cities take precedence over the poor of other countries. This Jewish tenet that gives precedence to the aid of Jews over non-Jews is often seen as a religious imperative. It dominates the Israeli discourse and questions the very foundations of caring for non-Jews. In my view, this conflict lies at the core of the complicated relationship between Israel and the developing world and is a conflict with which every Israeli development practitioner has to deal with.

My regular answer to such criticism is that I have chosen to work not only with the poorest of my city, but with the poorest of the poor. I do not mean this literally of course. The refugee community in Israel might not be the most disadvantaged economically, and in fact, most refugees are generally able to sustain themselves, and are by no means helpless. Yet, they are still, in my view, the most marginalized



PICTURE BY HILLEL ASSAF

community in Israel in terms of their status here. Refugees in Israel have almost no social rights, no access to public healthcare, no official legal status, limited options of work, and limited freedom of movement. This social marginalization is in addition to living in constant fear of deportation and incarceration, while being tormented by the monthly ritual of traveling across the country to wait in long lines in order to renew their temporary visas. The difficult reality of living in Israel with no government support adds to the excruciating burden of unattended traumas of human trafficking, torture, and war. These are the factors that I take into account when I choose to define the refugee community the most marginalized community in Israel, and these are the ones that drive my work.

I have learned in the past few years that beautiful things can be done relying solely on the devotion and work of caring citizens and civil society. I have learned that even more beautiful things can be accomplished by communities working to develop themselves. These lessons bring me to the conclusion that change can only come about through the will of simple and ordinary people, often in defiance of the negligence of their government. I remain hopeful that if the people will lead the way, governments will eventually follow to bring about lasting change.