

What a Difference a Year Makes!

Marcy Lidman:

Option 2 - Sovereignty and Social Responsibility: the Other

The most vulnerable residents of the State of Israel are the 50,000 African asylum seekers, most of whom live in South Tel Aviv. Of all of the peripheral communities in Israel, the Africans are the only ones who live outside the system, without status rights or protection. If a society is judged by its relationship to its weakest members, South Tel Aviv is the litmus test. In South Tel Aviv we will meet with African activists along with their Israeli supporters, walk the streets of Neve Sha'anun, and visit a kindergarten. The day concludes with a series of conversations with government and municipal authorities. This is a challenging issue for Israeli society and it will be an emotionally challenging day for participants.

This was the description of one of five Tiyyulim, or field trips, sent to participants of the 2015 Community Leadership Program Summer Retreat of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. The other Tiyyul choices were:

- ***The Negev and Ben Gurion's Dream***
- ***Ethiopian Community***
- ***Accessibility in Israel***
- ***Outward Bound in the Land of Gilboa***

But I am getting ahead of myself. For eight wonderful days last month, I was part of the Shalom Hartman Institute community. After hearing Linna Ettinger sing the praises of this learning experience in

What a Difference a Year Makes!

Jerusalem, and casting about for a study program to combine with a visit to our daughter Melanie in Israel, I registered for the program for what I now hope will be the first of many times. I was part of a wonderful group: Linna Ettinger, Mike Rosenberg, the indefatigable Sylvia Schatz, and 50 of my closest friends from Temple Emanuel in Newton.

Several weeks before I left, Dick Wissoker asked me for the title of this talk. All I could think of was, “What a Difference a Year Makes.”

Last year, at roughly the same time, I traveled to Israel to visit Melanie and study with Ayeka, a Jewish education organization founded and led by family friend Aryeh Ben David. That experience was completely shaped by the war that broke out 48 hours after I arrived, and was punctuated by multiple sirens followed by frequent sojourns in bomb shelters. Next week, we will read Parashat D’varim, Moses’ final discourse in which he retells the story of the Exodus, with slight nuances and revisions based on retrospective insight. I was hoping to provide a very different narrative of my week of study, this summer, and I am happy to report I can.

The Hartman Summer Retreat program title was, “Justice and Righteousness – Personal Ethics and National Aspirations.” It took me about a month to memorize that! I had been intrigued with the Hartman Institute since I had participated in the first iEngage program with Temples Emunah and Isaiah several years ago. I admit it, I had an intellectual crush on Donniel Hartman, along with the

What a Difference a Year Makes!

incredible amazing faculty I met via video during that program. I cherish the opportunity to sit at the feet of brilliance, and that's exactly what happened last month.

Each day of the program included an opening 90-minute lecture by a scholar who left me breathless. Donniel Hartman, Yehuda Kurtzer, Micah Goodman, Rahel Korazim, Tal Becker, Moshe Halbertal.... As a professional educator for whom group facilitation and platform presentation constitute about 80% of my work time, I am a very tough critic of others who do the same. Yet, as I wrote on my evaluation, I ran out of superlatives by the second day. The opening lecture was followed by, in my case, Hevruta small group learning facilitated by another Hartman scholar – each one more amazing than the last. My first Hevruta leader was Rabbi Steve Greenberg, a previous Emunah Glatzer Scholar. Evening panel discussions, guest panels, and field trips rounded out the program. We were also treated to a wonderful movie called “Rock in the Red Zone,” highlighting rock bands that have emerged from missile-weary Sderot – and, in true Hartman style, the director was there to discuss the film with us afterwards. If you think I drank the Kool Aid and have become a relentless recruiter for this program – you're right! (And Linna will be taking names for next year at Kiddush...)

So let me return now to the experience of the Tiyyul, the trip to South Tel Aviv to explore the difficult issue of African asylum seekers. As with many issues in Israel, language is politics. We heard the same folks described as asylum seekers, immigrants, and infiltrators during

What a Difference a Year Makes!

the course of the day. The option for this trip came about because Yossi Klein HaLevi's son Gavriel has moved to South Tel Aviv and become involved in helping this community. The reason I chose this option for my Tiyyul is because the same is true of our daughter Melanie. She lives in the Shapira neighborhood of South Tel Aviv, about a 10 minute walk from the Central Bus Station and an area that is, as she describes it, "on the cusp" of becoming a thriving community. Yossi's son lives right in Neve Sha'anani, which is not experiencing that renaissance just yet.

I would like to put this in the context of this week's Parasha, Mattot, in which Moses reminds the Israelites of the importance of keeping their vows and promises – both to do what they say they will do, and to refrain from doing what they say they will not do.

The Israeli Declaration of Independence states:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open to the immigration of Jews and for the Ingathering of the Exiles from all countries of their dispersion; will promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; will be based on the precepts of liberty, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed or sex; will guarantee full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture; will safeguard the sanctity and inviolability of the shrines and Holy Places of all religions; and will

What a Difference a Year Makes!

dedicate itself to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Please keep that vow in mind as Sylvia and I describe the challenges we encountered.

On the bus to Tel Aviv from Jerusalem, Yossi gave us some historical and demographic context. 47,000 asylum seekers, mostly from Eritrea and South Sudan, are currently in Israel. The Israeli government has formally adopted a policy of making their lives so uncomfortable that they will leave – and in fact, 10,000 have. Israel constructed a fence on the Sinai so no more refugees could enter. Many are held in “open imprisonment” in Holot, meaning they need to report there 3 times a day, which prevents them from getting jobs. We did learn that this requirement has been relaxed to an evening roll call only. Detainees are able to leave the facility, but are not able to work legally in Israel and are not able to leave from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.

As the Real News reported in May, African asylum seekers are therefore stuck in a legal limbo, where they're held under collective protection, meaning the situation in their home countries is so dire, Israel doesn't deport them as a group. However, since their individual refugee claims are not examined by Israeli authorities, they're not granted any rights.

What a Difference a Year Makes!

Sylvia Schatz:

Let me backtrack a bit.

We were excited, energized, really bowled over by the spectacular lectures we were treated to at Hartman.

Then we got on the bus to South Tel Aviv and we were confronted with the real world of justice and righteousness – the struggle for it, its complexity, and the scarcity of it.

It began slowly. We visited Mesila

*MESILA supports **undocumented families of asylum-seekers** and **migrant workers** living in Tel Aviv. At MESILA, we focus primarily on the wellbeing of the community's children, and we regard the surrounding family and community structures as critical factors.*

Despite Israel's participation in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, those children are left unsupported by the government and by Israeli society, and often suffer from extreme poverty, a lack of basic rights and stunted emotional and physical security.

MESILA's staff, which includes social workers and therapists of various kinds, works cooperatively with the municipal welfare authorities. Together, we carry out a wide array of projects in response to the foreign community's needs. This community is essentially invisible to Israeli society and government, and in the absence of a coherent government policy on the matter, it can be difficult to grant this community meaningful care. MESILA is partially funded by the city of Tel Aviv and the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services, but most of its projects are made possible with the support

What a Difference a Year Makes!

of individual donors and organizations, such as the European Union and the UN Refugee Agency.

The Elifelet Association – civilians for refugee children

Elifelet is a non-profit organization taking care of over 400 children and infants from over 70 kindergartens, babysitters and afterschool "HomeMade" educational centers in Tel-Aviv. The children are being born without record(s) due to their complex legal status, and therefore are unable to get the Israeli national rights for free excellent medical care. They are all in different levels of hunger and physical distress due to poverty.

We try and complete (sic) all that is missing in these young children's lives: food, shelter, health care, hygiene, physical care and personal attention. All of the children and babies in our care are born into heartbreaking poverty. We are always in need of funding and resources to buy the very basic: food, medicines, clothing, heating and even baby formula and dippers/DIAPERS. These children are hungry, and the food we provide is usually most or even all of their nutrition.

On April 2012, after a Molotov was thrown and burned down Blessing's kindergarten, our largest one – the children were left without a home. Learning the terrible reality of their lives and risks – we decided to make sure no child in Israel, regardless of any difference, will be without a shelter from the streets. We are making sure they will have what they need and continue to help as much as we possibly can.

What a Difference a Year Makes!

These babies and children – 3 months old to 8 years old - are at risk due to the many hours their parents are away working. Our kindergartens and educational “HomeMade” afternoon centers work all year long, no holidays or vacations. The children spend all day in our kindergartens and some facilities accommodate infants and young children over night as well, when the parents are unable to put a roof over their heads.

We are not funded by any governmental channels. All we have is given by people who care for children who live under the most heartbreaking poverty and loneliness possible at such a young age.

Elifelet is the recipient of “The 2015 Yigal Alon Award for Exemplary Pioneering Activities” and the recipient of “The 2015 Israeli President's Award for Volunteerism” – lovely recognition, but it doesn't buy food, clothes, or salaries for caretakers

We went to Blessing's “baby sitter”. We might term these “baby sitters” a daycare facility/kindergarten.

There were two rooms: one housed about 25 babies, cribs side by side; the other had about 25 children ages about a year and a half to three. Volunteer women come to play with the children and help any way they could. Blessing is the only “staff” at this facility. (??) (I urge you to go to <http://www.blessingdaycare.org/en/> after Shabbat.)

What a Difference a Year Makes!

Marcy and I wondered why there were two organizations with similar overlapping agendas. Wouldn't it be more efficient to work together? Maybe efficiency is not a goal.

Both are brave, up-hill attempts to address overwhelming needs – too few social workers, too little money, largely dependent on volunteers, a disinterested government, at best, and indifferent larger society.

We moved on – to meet the population Marcy told you about – the asylum seekers, the refugees.

We met several young men from Eritrea and the Sudan. They had fled their countries because of repressive governments and were hoping to return to those countries and change the government, improving the lives of their countrymen/women. They had been engineering students at the university. One, in particular was hoping to study in Israel and change his field to psychology/sociology – to be better equipped to deal with the issues in Eritrea. They weren't interested in settling in Israel; they wanted to go home and change their world.

What we saw before us were nascent Nelson Mandelas, some of the 75 thousand Africans who had trekked from east Africa through the Sinai desert – attacked, beaten, killed – in order to find refuge in Israel, the Jewish State whose values include helping “the stranger because you were strangers in a land not your own.”

So now you have a population of about 47 thousand, 80% male (an ominous ratio), Black, Christian dumped in the economically

What a Difference a Year Makes!

stressed South Tel Aviv. Where will they live, find work, take care of families?

Governments are supposed to process refugees. Weed out those who don't fit the 1951 Convention guidelines for "refugee." The Israeli government has not done that – in contradiction of international law. And, as Marcy told you, has made their lives as miserable as possible to get them to leave. A government official, Miri Regev has called them "a cancer" on Israeli society. She did apologize for her remark, but the damage had been done. They live in limbo; unable to access what the Israeli government could give them, medical help, education, jobs. As such, as an isolated, ignored population they can pose a threat to that larger Israeli society. If for no other reason than self-interest Israel needs to address their presence.

Armed with our righteous indignation, we went to the New Bus Station to visit the older, long-term residents of South Tel Aviv.

Here we heard different language. Those Black Africans are "infiltrators," not refugees. "They take our jobs, rape our women, take our stores and public spaces/parks...they have so many children they'll outnumber us and Israel will no longer be Jewish."

It's the language we hear from Donald Trump about Mexicans, what we heard from the Know Nothings about the Irish Catholics in the 19th century, the Chinese who came to work on the railroads on the west coast and all the other "foreigners" who threatened us over the years.

What a Difference a Year Makes!

There is a reality to their fears. Mohamed, a Muslim who came from Egypt 25 years ago has lived and worked in South Tel Aviv. His landlord tells him he's sorry but he's going to raise his rent, double it. Mohamed can't possibly afford that. His landlord says he can get that doubled rent for his apartment because 12 or 14 Africans are willing to live in that 2-room apartment where Mohamed and his wife have lived and will collectively be able to pay the doubled rent.

His boss in the laundry is going to cut his wages in half. If Mohamed doesn't like it, too bad. His boss can get Africans to do his job for half what he's paying Mohamed.

An older woman tells us through the translator that she's afraid to go out. She locks her doors at 6 o'clock; she used to go to social clubs, visit friends, but now stays behind locked doors "in fear for her life."

The young woman who is the organizer, translator, and fiery advocate for her neighbors tells us how she was trapped by two African bicyclists in the middle of the afternoon, had her clothes torn off and was just barely rescued.

"And where," she wants to know, "are those fancy North Tel Aviv ladies, those 'do-gooders' crying over black children, who could help us!"

So here you have the dilemma. Both competing for justice – and rightly so.

What should/can be done?

What a Difference a Year Makes!

Melanie Lidman, Marcy's daughter, has started a gardening project in her neighborhood bringing together Africans and Jewish residents in a common purpose. When you're digging in the dirt with someone you do get to know them, see them, recognize your common humanity. That's the kind of small incremental steps that crumble walls.

On the way back to Jerusalem we asked Yossi Klein Halevi what he saw as possible "answers."

1. Close the "open prison." It is not only a humanitarian travesty, but also a breeding ground for retaliatory acts, terror, against the State of Israel.
2. Move some of the African population out of the South Tel Aviv area into other parts of the country so that the moral and practical responsibility is spread out to other segments of Israeli society.
3. Most urgent = the government must process the refugees. This will sort out those who do not qualify for refugee status and should be deported. It will allow the "genuine" refugees to receive necessary services to which they are entitled so that they can contribute to the society rather than being a sore spot and a target for all the discontent Israelis feel. How to get the government to move is a daunting problem in itself.
4. Yossi says Israelis are "suckers" for children. Witness the volunteers coming to the babysitters. So that is encouraging.

What a Difference a Year Makes!

He also suggested that the Hartman Institute adopt a baby sitter, providing volunteers, money, equipment.

(Could/should we?) He says, “When I open my eyes to suffering I need to act, but when compassion fatigue happens I feel overwhelmed.”

5. Take small steps; we can't fix the whole problem in one fell swoop. [We] need to act collectively through community, in addition to individual actions.

In the spirit of Hartman, we can look at our texts for support/guidance. Rabbi Yosef, a 4th century Talmudic scholar in a rabbinic response to commandment about lending money to ‘my people’ interprets ‘my people’ to mean that given the choice of giving money to a Jew and a non-Jew the Jew has preference, between “**your** poor/relatives and the poor of the town, your poor comes first.” Thus, take care of your own first. Pirke Avot – “If I am not for myself who will be.” BUT continues – “If I am for myself **alone**, what am I.”

And finally – the often repeated – “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.”

Shabbat Shalom

What a Difference a Year Makes!

Marcy Lidman:

The garden club that Melanie created is not as rosy as it may sound. Melanie told me yesterday that she cannot schedule Africans and residents to work on the same days. "We are beginning to build a bridge, but it is only the very beginnings of a steppingstone. This is a very complex problem, and the more I understand both sides, the less optimistic I am about a neat solution," she said.