

REFUGEE SEDER SUPPLEMENT

“In every generation one is obligated to view oneself as though one personally came out of Egypt.”

Israel is currently home to over 45,000 people who have fled violence and persecution in East Africa. The government’s response has been to build a fence on the Egyptian border, so no more refugees can enter, and to begin detaining those in Israel at the Holot “open” detention facility, in an isolated part of the Negev.

Since 2007, Israeli activists, progressive Jewish organizations, and African refugee and asylum seeker communities have united to hold a communal "Refugee Seder" in Tel Aviv each year. The participants celebrate a commitment to working together for freedom.

This year, you can join the solidarity freedom movement by using this supplement at your seder and by creating cards to send to asylum seekers (see the accompanying page “Let them know the world has not forgotten them”). Most Jews have refugees somewhere in their family tree; we encourage you to share your own family’s exodus story around your seder table and continue the tradition of “in every generation...”

What is the difference between asylum seekers and refugees?

Refugees are people who escape war, violence, or persecution in their home countries. They may seek asylum (protection) in another country through a formal application process. Those whose applications for asylum are approved get official refugee status, which comes with certain rights and government services. Israel lacks a functioning and fair system for approving asylum applications, which leaves asylum seekers in limbo—neither forced to leave nor welcome to stay.

Four Questions

- Have any members of your family ever sought refuge?
- What do you know about their stories?
- Have you ever met a modern refugee?
- How does your family background shape your relationship to refugees?

“We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt...”

The reason people are leaving Eritrea is not hunger; it’s a dictatorship that imprisons and tortures citizens at will. If he could live in Eritrea with freedom and safety, W told me there was no place he would rather live; it was home. As we drove out of Holot [Detention Facility in the Negev], W said, “it looks exactly like the military camp in Eritrea” (where men do constant, mandatory service until they’re 55, making it impossible for them to have any other life). “Exactly the same! The only difference is that in Eritrea, the fence is wood,” he said, looking out at the high, thick metal topped with barbed wire.—Testimony of W, a refugee from Eritrea, recorded by journalist Ayla Peggy Adler, 2/12/14¹

“The Egyptians treated us badly and they made us suffer, and they put hard work upon us...”

I was born and raised in Eritrea, where I was fortunate to be well educated... I taught high school math... On January 10, 2012, I fled my homeland to escape persecution... Smugglers offered to take me to a refugee camp, but instead they transported me to someplace in the Sudanese desert and held me and others as slaves. We worked in our captors’ houses and fields all day, without a break. I tried to escape, but they caught me; as punishment, they isolated me and held me, blindfolded, in solitary confinement for a month... We suffered greatly. We saw our friends die... I didn’t think I would survive...

On July 7, 2012, my captors took me, and others, to the Israeli border. Israeli soldiers spotted us but refused us entry. We turned back, and eventually we found a different route to cross into Israel. Security forces immediately picked us up and transferred us to the Sabaronim prison.—Testimony published anonymously, 1/28/14²

“It is because of what the ETERNAL did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.”

Kamal ("Kimo"), 26, was born in a village in Darfur. He was 15 when the Janjaweed attacked his village. 800 of his villagers fled to the Nuba Mountains, where they made a temporary camp. Three weeks later, the UN found them, said it was unsafe, and helped them get to Kakuma camp in Kenya, but there were no opportunities for a real future or education there. With his best friend Ibrahim, he decided to leave. He left his family and went to South Sudan where he worked for a year to earn the money for the Bedouins to cross the Sinai. After climbing the fence to Israel, Ibrahim and Kimo walked for ten hours with no food or water. They finally saw the Israeli border patrol and they were given food and water and put into a detention facility. After six months there, he was brought to Levinsky Park in South Tel Aviv, where he stayed for three months outside, while working to get his visa. He has worked in hotels for the last four years. In his free time, he studied computers, psychology, and English and volunteered with the ASSAF (Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers) Youth Program. He received a summons to report to Holot Detention Facility on April 2, 2014.

—Testimony reported during a series of writing workshops developed and run by Madelyn Kent with Jeremy Elster and Right Now: Advocates for African Refugees in Israel. These stories are part of a larger storytelling/video project with African refugees, "Desert Stories."

Rabban Gamliel's three central symbols of the seder, reinterpreted:

Pesach—Freedom

I have been out of jail [in Israel] for a few weeks now. I can't tell you how much I appreciate my freedom after what I have been through. I take nothing for granted... My only wish is to remain free. Please, just leave me my freedom and let me live my life in peace. —Testimony of an anonymous refugee from Eritrea¹

¹ <http://forward.com/articles/191547/an-african-asylum-seekers-hellish-journey-to-israel/>

Matzah—Poverty

When we reached Sinai, our traffickers raised the bounty, demanding that our families pay \$30,000 each... I now work in a big house and do whatever is asked of me... I work 10 hours a day, six days a week, earning \$71 per day... What is most important to me now is paying off my debt. My family borrowed money from so many people to secure my freedom from the torture camp in Sinai, money that needs to be repaid. —Testimony of an anonymous refugee from Eritrea.² The Israeli government has imposed restrictions making it difficult for asylum seekers to work, so paying back these debts while paying for food and shelter is an extraordinary challenge

² <http://forward.com/articles/191547/an-african-asylum-seekers-hellish-journey-to-israel/>

Maror—Suffering

Many among us were tortured... in Sinai. When we reached this democratic State of Israel, we didn't expect such harsh punishment in prison... We lost all hope and became frustrated by this situation, so that we ask you to either provide us with a solution or send us to our country, no matter what will happen to us, even if we have to endure [the] death penalty by the Eritrean regime. —Testimony of an anonymous refugee from Eritrea³

³ From a July 2, 2013 public letter from an Eritrean detainee held in Ward 3 of Saharonim prison.

DAYEINU

The song “Dayeinu,” which literally means “it would have been enough for us,” thanks God for all the miracles performed for the Jewish people: from the Exodus out of Egypt, to their journey through the desert, until they entered the land of Israel where they built a national home. In reality, no one of these alone would indeed have been enough. But we celebrate each step toward freedom before moving to the next step. If we dismiss small victories, we will never achieve the whole liberation.