

Several years ago, one of our custodial assistants was an immigrant from Eritrea. Some of you may remember Tesfai. His two daughters used to come around to help: The younger, very American, was a strong student in the sciences. The older sister had grown up in Eritrea and I later learned had left a boyfriend or fiancé behind. This fiancé, unable to come to America directly, walked north over a thousand miles until he found Bedouin smugglers able to get him across the Sinai desert and into Israel. That's when she contacted me hoping there was some way to bring him from Israel to the United States. Though there are organizations in Israel dedicated to helping the African asylum seekers, the chance of these star-crossed lovers ever being reunited seems slim. Undocumented in Israel, and from Africa, he is unlikely to gain permission to enter the United States.

It is estimated that there are between 30,000 and 38,000 African asylum seekers in Israel today. This is down from a high point of 60,000 back before Israel completed its security barrier in the south in 2014. In

fact, last year, 2017, there were no infiltrations, zero, along the entire southern border.

Before the completion of the border fortifications, there was a great deal of anxiety in Israel about the land connection with Africa. Israel is a small country, about the size of the Bay Area, with a relatively small population. Israelis were frightened of being overwhelmed if the masses of Africans seeking the benefits of living in a first-world country began walking in its direction. Further, with Egypt's political problems, the Sinai Peninsula had become the lawless wild west, somewhat like Afghanistan at the time of 9-11, and there was fear of terrorist infiltration.

The reality today, though, is that there is no continuing flow of undocumented immigrants and that 20,000 of the African refugees have already left, whether for asylum status in Canada or Great Britain, or through financial incentives, i.e., bribes to leave, or deportation.

The remaining asylum seekers include children who have known Israel as their only home. I saw some of these children at the Bialik Rogozin

school in South Tel Aviv when I visited there three years ago. At a public school with children from 51 countries, the students sang all the old patriotic Zionist songs of the 1950s for us, showing their loyalty to Israel, their home.

Right now, 92% of the African asylum seekers in Israel are either from Eritrea, with its autocratic government and cruel military conscription, or Sudan, which has been plagued by civil war; but even so, of the over 15,000 who applied for legal asylum, only 12 were granted refugee status, less than 1%. This compares very negatively with Canada, where 97% of those from Eritrea received refugee status, or even with Germany, where 75% of those seeking it receive it.

Recently Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced his intention to deport 20,000 of these refugees in the next 22 months. Notices began to be distributed in February, and in April, during Passover, the actual deportations will begin. Since it is illegal to return refugees to the place they left if it would endanger them, these Africans will be deported to a third country, in the past Rwanda, where historically they

have been mistreated, trafficked, and pushed over the border into Uganda, where some have been killed.

The outcry over this policy has been widespread. Those objecting include Holocaust survivors and Israeli airplane pilots who are refusing to fly the deportees out of Israel. Liberal groups have objected, like HIAS, the New Israel Fund, and the residents of North Tel Aviv, but also Alan Dershowitz, recently a big fan of Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the Jewish Agency, a quasi-governmental organization that rarely speaks out. The Jewish Agency has asked that 500 young Africans who arrived as unaccompanied minors be allowed to stay and that there be set up for all the refugees a “transparent due process in examination of their application for asylum.” Others are asking for a ten-year visa so that the government can develop an absorption plan or find safe places to which they can go.

In the meanwhile, because of labor shortages the government has asked to increase the quota of foreign construction workers from

16,500 to 22,500 for next year, and large numbers of foreign workers are being brought in by labor brokers from Eastern Europe, China, and the Philippines. The preference of these foreign workers over the Africans has led to accusations of racism and also of corruption, with the labor brokers accused of paying bribes.

While Israel cannot be expected to shoulder the burden of all of those who wish to leave Africa, taking in 30,000 to 35,000 refugees, in a country of 8 million, does not seem excessive. The concerns of the poor neighborhoods in which they currently live can be addressed, and these asylum seekers are neither a security nor a demographic threat.

Yesterday I went up to San Francisco to meet with Shlomi Kofman, our Israeli Consul General, and his assistant, Ravit Baer. Our meeting was under the auspices of the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco. I had the privilege of being able to ask Kofman a question directly about the situation.

He responded that Israel is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee convention and reminded us that Israel has taken in refugees from Vietnam,

Kosovo, Darfur, and even Lebanon. He insisted there was no racial element here, but merely a concern for the Jewish character of the state. He commented on the outcry in Israeli civil society and suggested that the solution would come with new legislation or a judgement of the Israeli Supreme Court. He urged us, that if this was an issue that we cared about, that we should make our voices heard.

This Shabbat is Shabbat Parah, one of the special Sabbaths that lead up to the celebration of Passover. As we clean out our food pantries and stock up on goodies for the seder, let us also consider taking action in the spirit of this festival, when we are reminded that we “know the heart of the stranger having been strangers in the land of Egypt.” For Israel to deport these people during the festival of Freedom is too much of an offense against its essential teaching. Join me in speaking out and encouraging a better solution.

You can write the Consul General Shlomi Kofman at the Israeli Consulate, 456 Montgomery St., # 2100, San Francisco, CA 94104, and

express your own feelings on this issue. He will convey them back to the Government in Israel.