November 1, 2010
Sorensen Fellowship Application

“How’s the book?”

My mother’s voice was distant; my eyes refused to leave the page. “Just a second,” I managed to reply, as word after word pulled me away from my living room and drew me into the horrifying world of sex slavery.

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn’s *Half the Sky* relates some of the most pressing issues facing women worldwide, from rape warfare to honor killings. The book touched me on multiple levels, reflecting several areas of my deepest passions and concerns.

*Half the Sky* navigates the tension I often feel between “macro” and “micro” approaches to social change. Jewish tradition, a major source of my commitment to ethics and social justice, teaches that saving one life is akin to saving the entire world. However, to focus upon one region, one person, or one problem means I will neglect many others. Would it be better to focus on teaching a single child to read, or to work towards reforming the education system of a whole city or country? Would choosing a “macro” approach require I spend my life in an office, and never have the opportunity to look those in need in the eye and truly touch them?

*Half the Sky* addresses this concern in several ways. First, the authors hone in on a particular population, women, while extending the reach of their concern globally, to women’s issues worldwide. But perhaps most compelling is the way *Half the Sky* conveys messages about large-scale problems and large scale change, without ever losing sight of the individuals being affected.

The statistics in the book made my stomach turn, but did so only because the women and their stories were anything but statistics. Their deeply human tales of both suffering and hope
touched me in ways sweeping global statements alone could not, and in so doing made those large-scale statistics and initiatives compelling.

The stories in *Half the Sky* also spoke to me because they describe a kind of population that concerns me particularly: one of the world’s most vulnerable. My concern for populations like this are deeply rooted in my Jewish upbringing. My parents, teachers, and my own study of Jewish traditional texts constantly reinforced the value of protecting the most vulnerable members of society.

The most frequent commandment in the Hebrew Bible is the warning never to oppress the orphan, widow, or foreigner, Biblical paradigms for populations highly susceptible to exploitation. It is simple to cheat a new immigrant, who may not know the local language or currency, or an orphan, who does not have the guidance or protection of a parent. Further, to navigate a legal system well enough to advocate for oneself takes a degree of cultural know-how to which these vulnerable populations may not have access. Aware that such cases may never make it to human courts, the Biblical text often points to God as the ultimate advocate for society’s most vulnerable, providing a powerful model for our own behavior: a challenge to advocate for those who cannot protect themselves.

I first learned of the plight of migrant workers in Israel while interning with Bema’aglei Tzedek, a Jewish social justice organization based in Jerusalem. Working with BmT’s initiative to certify restaurants that treat their workers ethically, I heard stories of refugees and immigrants so desperate for work that they felt they could not demand even the most basic ethical standards, such as minimum wage or paid overtime. These workers, I learned, are both the most vulnerable and the most invisible part of the workforce: they are the kitchen, custodial, and security workers, functioning behind the scenes, isolated from the public eye.
At Bema’aglei Tzedek, I had the opportunity to promote workers’ rights on a national scale. I was working to address a global problem - the rights and ethical treatment of immigrants and refugees - and fighting to protect the most vulnerable members of society. I left Israel last summer having grown in my capacities to mobilize the general population to take responsibility for social change on a grand scale, yet yearning myself for a deeper level of human contact with the individuals suffering the injustices we were working to solve. I was using every organizational skill I had, but my interpersonal skills, my abilities to listen and empathize, lay dormant.

According to their mission statement, The Hotline for Migrant Workers (HMW), is dedicated to “promoting the rights of undocumented migrant workers and refugees and...eliminating trafficking in persons in Israel.” The organization aims “to build a more just, equitable and democratic society where the human rights of all those residing within its borders are paramount civic and political values.”

The individuals HMW serves make up the most vulnerable population in Israel today: migrant workers and trafficked women. Both populations have little access to local language or resources. They are often refugees fleeing countries with terrible conditions, and have little understanding of their cultural or political surroundings or of the rights they might be afforded.

Immigrants’ rights and human trafficking are universal problems, yet the opportunity to work with these populations in Tel Aviv in particular is exciting and fitting for me on a number of levels. As Israel is one of the few democracies in its region, it is a crossroads for many refugees fleeing conditions such as genocide in Sudan, or extreme poverty in the Philippines. My skill set and cultural and linguistic knowledge might limit my ability to serve such populations in their home settings; but in Israel, where I know the language and can navigate the cultural and
political terrain, I can offer assistance and hope to people fleeing atrocities from a variety of cultures and backgrounds.

The Hotline for Migrant Workers is an ideal next step in my exploration of how to effect change for vulnerable populations on a global scale while maintaining close contact with the human beings involved. HMW is a multi-level organization, and interning with them would afford me the opportunity to work at every level of their effort to alleviate the suffering of migrant workers, from policy advocacy to visiting detained workers in prisons and detention centers.

As a student, my search for how to spend my summers involves a delicate balance between opportunities to give and opportunities to grow. Interning with HMW through the Sorensen Fellowship would allow me both to learn and to give at my greatest capacity. The internship itself would afford me experience in every field of social change, while utilizing my abilities to organize and think about the big picture alongside my abilities to love, respect, and attend to the needs of suffering individuals. To prepare for the internship, I intend to take the course “Organizations and Social Change,” which will give me a deeper perspective on how NGO’s and other organizational structures like HMW can most effectively contribute toward sweeping social change.

Most exciting, though, is the opportunity, through the Sorensen Fellowship, to engage in a community of peers involved in similarly life-altering experiences around the globe. The follow-up provided by the Fellowship would allow me to process my experience, to exchange ideas with peers, and to expand what I have learned in Tel Aviv toward next steps in my journey to protect the world’s most vulnerable people.