

# Giving Voice

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**T**his is Shapira Park,” says the cab driver. “Where exactly should I drop you off?”<sup>1</sup>

I peer out the window toward a dimly lit park, annoyed at the speed of my own heartbeat. I hardly ever venture this far south in Tel Aviv at night; I’ve been told these neighborhoods are unsafe, laden with drugs and crime. As a young woman growing up in the United States, I was taught to steer clear of dark parks. But the coworker who invited me tonight didn’t mention safety concerns. I can see the Central Bus Station just a few blocks away, and feel foreign and foolish for having splurged on a cab.

“*Nu?*” says the driver, employing a classic Israeli expression of impatience.

I scan the park again and find what I am looking for: a small circle of people sit on the grass, spaces between them punctuated by white paper lanterns. I pay the driver and emerge from the cab with a step reflecting more confidence than I feel. I’ve been asked to help translate for a meeting aimed at increasing openness and understanding between this neighborhood’s Israeli residents and some more recent inhabitants: African asylum seekers who, with neither resources nor work, have made Shapira Park their home.

The phenomenon of African asylum seekers seeking refuge in Israel is a fairly recent one, dating back less than a decade. Previously, these Africans fleeing persecution or poverty<sup>2</sup> in their homelands – most of them from Sudan and Eritrea – had sought refuge in Cairo. In the wake of a violently-suppressed protest in Cairo in 2005, thousands of asylum seekers began crossing the porous Egyptian-Israeli border.<sup>3</sup> Since that time, a steady flow of African asylum seekers – several thousand per year<sup>4</sup> – have made their way to Israel.

The arrival of these asylum seekers has created a stir of controversy among Israeli citizens and politicians.<sup>5</sup> In some ways, the concerns raised in the public discourse echo those of any modern nation facing an influx of immigrants. Rhetoric reflecting

concerns for employment, distribution of resources, and changes in the socio-cultural landscape abound in newspaper editorials, statements of politicians, and lay demonstrations.<sup>6</sup> Israel’s identity as a Jewish democratic state adds another layer of complexity to issues of migration.

Interning this summer with the Hotline for Migrant Workers, in Tel Aviv, heightened my awareness of the challenges the influx of African asylum seekers poses to Israel and its citizens, the policy vacuum that has resulted from these challenges, and how this vacuum is affecting Israel’s most vulnerable populations. My time at Hotline also exposed me to a range of voices of different populations with often opposing concerns when it came to the issue of asylum seekers.

Ultimately, my daily work struggling to communicate with asylum seekers showed me the pressing need for organizations like Hotline to give voice to these voiceless people. My contact with asylum seekers, set against a background of voices opposing their presence, helped me come to terms with a definition of justice that allows for advocates to focus primarily upon the needs of a single struggling population.

I will explore here some of the voices I encountered during my time in Tel Aviv, and how each shaped my understanding of the interplay of advocacy and social

change. Scenes in this paper will shift from the Hotline office, where I was exposed primarily to asylum seekers' individual needs, to Tel Aviv's parks and streets, where I encountered asylum seekers within the broader context of urban Israeli life. A neighborhood meeting at Shapira Park brought to my attention the impact African asylum seekers have had upon some of Israel's already marginalized populations. Navigating the jungle of Israeli bureaucracy for Hotline's clients gave me insight into a policy vacuum resulting from opposing voices competing for priority in Israel's policy toward migrants. Interactions with coworkers helped me understand both the challenge asylum seekers pose to Israel's complex Jewish identity, and the difficulty of advocating for a single population while considering the needs of an entire nation.

The challenges presented by this multiplicity of voices bring up questions that speak to the core of social justice in a

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democratic society. Whose voice belongs in a complex political conversation with ramifications for many populations? How do we access the voices of marginalized populations, such as those of the asylum seekers Hotline serves? And does focusing upon the needs and rights of a single struggling group mean sacrificing a larger-scale focus on addressing the needs of a whole society?

### Neighbors

I cross the sparse grass of Shapira Park and approach the circle of neighbors, searching for a familiar face. Participants seem to span from my own age bracket – early 20s – to people approaching middle age. Orit,<sup>7</sup> my coworker from Hotline who organized the event, catches my eye and beckons me with a warm grin.

“Would you go see if they need help understanding?” Orit asks me in Hebrew. She points toward two straight-backed, dark-skinned men sitting across the circle. Meanwhile, a squat, white-skinned woman who looks to be in her 30s introduces herself and speaks in impassioned Hebrew.

“My name is Moriya,” she says. “I live just a few blocks from here.” Her gaze shifts along the circle from citizens to asylum seekers. “We are sorry,” she intones, placing her hand emphatically on her heart, “that you are suffering. But you need to understand that this is our *home*. Our children play in this park. To have people sleeping here, using the grass as a toilet...”

One of the men in front of me speaks up in English. “My name is Jacob,” he begins. “I am from Sudan.” He turns toward Moriya. “I understand your concern for your home, but you need to understand that being here – that sleeping in the park is not our choice. We have no work, we have no homes.”

I inhale sharply, touched by Jacob's comment. My connection to asylum seekers in Hotline's office has been largely through paperwork: visas and work permits. Hearing this Sudanese man speak to his Israeli neighbors in the park where he spends most nights has brought a level of gravity to the technical, bureaucratic business of my everyday work at Hotline. He has managed to connect my faxes and files to the concrete, human reality of poverty and homelessness among asylum seekers in Israel.

At the same time, hearing Jacob's neighbors' complaints has also complicated my concern for asylum seekers. Here are voices I have not encountered in Hotline's office at all: Israelis dealing with the addition of asylum seekers to their already-struggling neighborhoods. Back in the office, I will discover that the voices of these neighbors are buried within a vacuum of policy. Caught between conflicting voices and interests, the Israeli government has created a bureaucratic disaster for asylum seekers.

### This is Not a Work Permit

Sunday morning, 9 a.m.: the bustle and noise at the Hotline for Migrant Workers feels hardly less chaotic than the smoggy Tel Aviv street two floors below. Staff and volunteers greet each other in Hebrew and English over the cacophony of phone conversations in French, Arabic and Tigrinya. Clients sit on a square couch against one wall of the office, clutching visas and court orders. They wait to meet with caseworkers, mostly volunteers like me, who welcome them to their desks in between answering phone calls coming to the crisis hotline in a continuous stream.

Four tall African men approach my desk. They are accompanied by a wave of body odor I have grown accustomed to in my work with Hotline clients.

“How I can help you?” I ask with a smile.

“We need that paper. The one that let us work.”

Employment problems are among the most common cases I have seen in my several weeks working in Hotline’s Crisis Intervention Center. One of the most pressing problems for many asylum seekers in Israel right now is lack of work and, as a result, homelessness.<sup>8</sup> People with recognized asylum status in Israel – migrants from Sudan, Eritrea, and the Ivory Coast, plus a handful of individuals from other countries – receive a visa known as “conditional release.” They are released from detention centers (where thousands of migrants are held after illegally crossing the border into Israel),<sup>9</sup> and guaranteed they will not be deported back to their home countries. But though asylum seekers are allowed to physically stay in Israel, making a living proves more difficult. Finding work is a challenge, especially in light of a single line of text gracing the bottom of every conditional release visa: *This permit is not a work permit.*

The Israeli government, stuck in a tug-of-war between conflicting interests when it comes to asylum seekers, has taken little official action, allowing a “policy vacuum” to emerge. Temporary regulations officially take into account one party’s concerns by refusing work visas to asylum seekers. But unofficial agreements not to enforce such regulations<sup>10</sup> seem intended to address competing humanitarian concerns. This compromise creates a bizarre bureaucratic middle ground, which leaves subsistence here challenging, but not impossible, for asylum seekers.

“Where are you from?” I ask one of the clients hovering over my desk.

“Sudan,” he says. “My friend...he says you give him paper here. And he give to employer, and he can work.”

“An information packet, you mean?” The man stares at me blankly. I grab a stack of papers from behind my desk, a series of instructions for employers on how to legally hire asylum seekers. “Show this to your employers,” I tell the clients. “It explains here that they can hire you, no problem.”

“So this is a work permit?” asks another of the clients.

Is it? Israel’s government does not grant work permits to most African asylum seekers.<sup>11</sup> Why not, I wonder, when the government allows Hotline volunteers like me to inform employers “unofficially” that they may legally hire these men? Government officials seem pulled in one direction by voices like Hotline’s, which cite humanitarian concerns, and in another by voices<sup>12</sup> desiring to stem the flow of illegal migration. The result, currently, is not a comprehensive policy, but a series of bureaucratic roadblocks that asylum seekers can only circumnavigate with Hotline’s help. How might concrete policies more effectively take into account these conflicting voices?

The four asylum seekers thank me and leave Hotline’s office, each equipped with a fresh photocopy of our employer information packet. To where, I wonder, are they returning? I think back to my meeting at Shapira Park, hope these men will spend this sweltering day somewhere cooler, somewhere they can call a home.

### “Not Our Responsibility”

Whose responsibility are the asylum seekers? From my desk at Hotline’s office, I often find both government officials and humanitarian aid workers expertly shift

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responsibility away from themselves when I reach out for assistance for my clients. Leaving the office for Tel Aviv’s streets gives me a different sense of who has borne the brunt of responsibility toward asylum seekers since their arrival. It seems those affected most by asylum seekers’ presence – those who live in the neighborhoods where the asylum seekers have congregated – may not be the same as those making political decisions.

At the Shapira neighborhood meeting, a young Israeli woman raises her hand. “We know you refugees are not the enemy,” she says. “We have a common enemy, and that is the municipality.” I see heads nod around the circle. “Our neighborhood has been neglected by the local government for years.”

My coworker Orit, a petite woman with an infectious smile, speaks up in a sweet yet commanding tone. “Let’s talk a little about approaching the municipality,” she suggests. “People have brought up a number of concerns – more lighting in the park, maybe building restrooms here. Is there a consensus on bringing these requests to the municipality?”

Moriya, the squat, energetic woman in her 30s, breaks in again. “Listen, I’m sorry,” she begins, in a tone that doesn’t strike me as entirely apologetic. “But the neighborhood *is* neglected, and personally I can’t see where we would want those funds pulled from. My daughter’s school

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needs funds. I’d rather see the money go there than into bathrooms in the park.” She looks at Jacob, waits for the translator before continuing. “I’m sorry,” she says again, shaking her head, “but it is not our fault the government has dumped you here. It is not my fault you don’t have work visas. We have our own problems. This is not our responsibility.”

I find this comment harsh, but refreshingly honest. Since arriving in Tel Aviv about a month ago, I have encountered a range of opinions among Israeli friends when it comes to what should be done about the asylum seekers. Many express compassion initially, but often that compassion is muted by concerns about distribution of resources, especially among struggling populations.

This neighborhood meeting has created space for two marginalized populations – the asylum seekers and the Israelis who encounter them closest to home – to voice their concerns and needs. By the end of the meeting, the group has come up with a few small, concrete points of shared concern with which to approach the municipality. But their voices have also struck some dissonant chords; when it

comes to distribution of resources, it may be that the needs of these two groups are at odds.

Having spent several weeks in an office assisting migrant workers and asylum seekers, I feel grateful that Hotline also seems to want to facilitate such dialogue. But I know, too, that tomorrow both Orit and I will return to the Hotline office and continue advocating for asylum seekers, pushing for their right to stay and work in Israel. Considering the needs of the asylum seekers’ neighbors is neither a clause in Hotline’s mission nor part of its overall agenda. Is it fair of us, I wonder, to be pushing only one side of such a complex web of social problems?

### “We Mustn’t Spoil the View”

In the weeks that follow, I eavesdrop on my coworkers’ conversations about the Israeli public discourse regarding asylum seekers. Since the staff and volunteers at Hotline invest so much in advocating for refugee rights, I expect they will express support for left-wing activism supporting asylum seekers, and disgust for right-wing anti-refugee demonstrations. But one volunteer’s response to right-wing rhetoric surprises me:

“They have a point,” she says. “The people advocating for these refugees – the upper-class liberals – don’t live in south Tel Aviv. We come here to work, we go home. Our neighborhoods, our schools, they aren’t changing; but the people who live here, they feel the change.”

The feeling of having these asylum seekers “dumped” on their doorstep is not unique to the residents of the Shapira neighborhood. In the absence of any consistent policy toward absorption of asylum seekers or formal recognition of their asylum status, restrictive regulations have confined them to very specific

locations, mostly development towns or neighborhoods with populations that already struggle with economic disadvantage.<sup>13</sup> One Israeli leader spoke frankly about the regulations restricting refugees to low-income zones:

*... Let’s throw them over to the distant periphery ... In central Israel, between Hadera and Gedera, we mustn’t spoil the view, so we’re going to send all of them to the periphery, which is already weak and will now also be ugly.<sup>14</sup>*

The frustration of peripheral communities has also been leveraged by right-wing politicians to launch campaigns aimed at pressuring the government to deport asylum seekers and crack down on border control. This summer, in one such campaign, a member of Knesset<sup>15</sup> partnered with a right-wing activist to bring a busload of African asylum seekers to a pool in affluent north Tel Aviv. Their goal, according to the member of Knesset’s website, was to “make liberal Israelis in upper class neighborhoods aware of what it is like to have African infiltrators living near their home.”<sup>16</sup>

What kinds of change are Israeli citizens afraid of? Partly, the concerns are economic and aesthetic: the addition of an impoverished population with little to no employment opportunities presents a public nuisance at worst, a drain on public funds within an already-struggling community at best. Some public figures cite growing crime rates as an additional concern, though the nature of this threat is highly contested.<sup>17</sup> Some estimates claim the crime rate among the asylum seeker population in Tel Aviv is much higher than the rate among the rest of the city’s population; another estimate assumes the polar opposite, that the crime rate among the asylum seeker community is drastically lower than that of Tel Aviv citizens.<sup>18</sup>

Fears about resources and crime aside, the influx of asylum seekers also poses a concern of a slightly different nature: changes in the political and cultural landscape of the country. The particular nature of Israel's socio-political makeup brings an additional layer of concern to the table: the maintenance of Israel's identity as a Jewish state.

## The Jewish Question

My most enlightening conversations this summer about Israel's Jewish identity have taken place with Hotline's National Service volunteer,<sup>19</sup> Aviyah. These conversations, set against my other coworkers' relative silence regarding Israel's Jewish identity, have taught me a great deal about the ways the state's Jewish identity poses a unique challenge to asylum issues.

On one relatively quiet morning at Hotline, Aviyah pushes away from the piles of paper at her desk and turns her swivel chair toward me as she pulls back her wild black curls. Her eyes catch the sun's sparkle, two mischievous pools of light set against creamy olive skin.

"Shani, I have a question," she says, fidgeting with the sweater draped loosely over her shoulders. Aviyah sometimes expresses discomfort at having her shoulders exposed, though she claims to have ditched more conservative religious dress years ago. "Do you think, say, if I went to the U.S., that people there would know that I was Jewish? I mean..." She circles a hand in front of her petite, dark face. "Could they tell I'm Jewish," she continues, "just by looking at me?"

Jewish identity is complex and multifaceted. Whether Judaism itself is a religion, nation, ethnicity or culture is a continual conversation among Jewish thinkers and scholars.<sup>20</sup> Translating this identity dilemma to a national scale is

bound, therefore, to yield a tangle of mind-bending questions. Does a "Jewish state" mean a state guided by certain principles and values derived from Jewish tradition? Does it mean a secular state inhabited by majority Jewish citizens? If the latter, who is considered Jewish? And what happens to the state's Jewish identity when a flock of non-Jewish African asylum seekers is added to the mix?

Pushing aside this mess of questions for now, I focus on Aviyah's question of personal identity. Would people in the U.S. recognize her as Jewish? "Do you mean," I say, mirroring her gesture toward my own European-Jewish pale skin and dark curly hair, "because you don't look like me?"

Aviyah is descended from Yemenite Jews; my grandparents were Eastern European Jews. Though our ancestors share a core of religious tradition and text, there is great variation between our cultures. To complicate matters, I consider myself an "observant" Jew; I strive to live my life according to Jewish religious law. Aviyah comes from a religious family, but chooses to live as a "secular" Jew, not restricted by religious obligations. And while I was born and raised an American Jew, Aviyah was born and raised Israeli – a citizen of the Jewish state. With all of these ways to be or express the Jewish identity of an individual, defining the Jewish identity of an entire state is a daunting task.

However one might choose to address these questions, the advent of a large population of migrants – who claim no Jewish roots or connection, but nonetheless appeal for political protection – poses a great challenge to Israel's Jewish identity. The dearth of conversation surrounding this issue surprised and confused me when I first arrived at Hotline. But I am beginning to see this silence as another facet of the

greater questions of advocacy and social justice I have been grappling with since my arrival in Tel Aviv.

## The Big Picture and the Little Guy

After a long afternoon in the office, I walk with Itay, a Hotline volunteer, toward Tel Aviv's Central Bus Station. Itay's pace is calm and fluid – he has just returned from a Buddhism-infused backpacking trip to South Asia. Still, his lanky stature requires me to step in double-time to keep up with his long-legged stride.

Removed from our frenetic routine of addressing desperate clients, I take advantage of our walk to get Itay's insight into my most recent questions about Hotline's work. "I feel like the question of Israel's identity should be more of a concern at Hotline," I tell him. "It seems almost fundamental to the policy vacuum, and to so many of the concerns about asylum seekers in Israel. Why is it that nobody in our office talks about it?"

The State of Israel – whose foundation came, in part, in the wake of the Nazi Holocaust – seeks to serve as a homeland for all Jews. Its immigration priorities thus

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Israel's Jewish identity, then, poses a dual challenge: the implied imperative to protect the rights of immigrants and refugees in light of the Jewish historical experience, pitted against the necessity of maintaining a Jewish majority so that Israel maintains its identity as the Jewish homeland.

remain focused on absorbing Jewish people. Citizenship policies must always take into account "demographic issues" – that is, maintain a Jewish majority within the country so that the democratically governing body will always prioritize the protection of the Jewish people in their homeland.

Israel's Jewish identity, then, poses a dual challenge: the implied imperative to protect the rights of immigrants and refugees in light of the Jewish historical experience, pitted against the necessity of maintaining a Jewish majority so that Israel maintains its identity as the Jewish homeland. Protecting the demographic and prioritizing Jewish immigration necessarily places non-Jewish immigrants at a disadvantage, if not as an outright unwanted population.

I assumed, upon my arrival at Hotline, that the staff here would be deeply engaged in this difficult debate, would at the very least be pushing the side of Israel's responsibility toward the non-Jewish migrants and refugees that Hotline serves. Yet in the weeks since I've been here, conversation about the "Jewish problem"

– in Hotline's literature or among the office staff – has been rare. I hope Itay, who has volunteered here for years, might be able to explain this strange silence.

Itay strokes his straw-colored mustache thoughtfully. "You're right," he says. "The Jewish identity of the state is important to the big-picture question of how Israel addresses asylum seekers. But Hotline can't be concerned with the big picture."

Itay's response disturbs me. "What do you mean they can't be concerned with the big picture?" How can Hotline staff not be involved in trying to reach a balanced understanding of the implications of their advocacy? How could promoting any policy be ethical without weighing its broad social outcomes first?

We turn a corner; I see Tel Aviv's Central Bus Station looming over the small, crowded shops on this southern city street. To our left, adjacent to the bus station, is Levinsky Park, a sunny green expanse dotted with tiny trees. African men in sweat-soaked, tattered T-shirts mill about the park. They sit or stand alone or in small clusters, and seem for the most part to simply stare into space. Some lie on the grass, asleep and baking in the hazy July heat.

"Hotline is focused on promoting the rights of the 'little guy,'" Itay says. "If they were to focus on the big picture, they wouldn't be able to advocate for their clients. You can't do both at the same time."

Itay's casual comment jars me; he has touched upon the core of my struggle this summer. Choosing whose voice has a place in a complex political conversation comes down to a single fundamental question: is it possible to think deeply about an abstract large-scale situation while acting out of deep concern for an individual who is suffering from one facet of that situation?

Itay's answer is no – and if his explanation of our coworkers' silence on the large-scale political implications of accepting asylum seekers is correct, then most of Hotline's staff seems to agree. They have chosen the little guy over the big picture, promoting the rights of the individual over seeking to address the needs of multiple struggling populations.

The very nature of working with a disempowered group seems to require taking that group's "side," and setting aside more sweeping considerations of the impact of promoting their rights. What if, as Itay suggests, it is impossible to give both the individual and the greater society equal weight? What if any kind of social change requires we prioritize one or the other?

## The Voiceless

"MOUSSA, I CAN'T HEAR YOU."

At the office the following morning, Aviyah stands over a desk piled high with paperwork, pressing a phone receiver to her ear. Her free hand is shoved against the phoneless ear, as if to catch whatever sound is coming through the receiver before it escapes out the window into the Tel Aviv heat.

"MOUSSA..."

I make my way over to my own desk, scan my checklist of tasks for the day.

1. *Call Sinait – has she found a lawyer?*
2. *Call Ministry of Interior – what happened when Sadiki came in to register? Do they have a translator there?*
3. *Call Kalilo – received copy of his court protocols – first remember why I requested them???*

I reach for the phone on my desk; my hand hovers over the receiver. Which call to make first? Speaking Hebrew with impatient public officials feels daunting this early in the morning. My American upbringing with its emphasis on politeness makes me balk at the shouting matches I've found to be standard in my few weeks speaking with Israeli bureaucrats. Maybe I should start with English calls. I close my eyes, trying to recall the conversations I had with the Eritrean Sinai in our office last week. What language were we speaking? English? Or was her boyfriend translating her Tigrinya into Hebrew?

The phone on my desk rings.

"MOUSSA, I WILL CALL YOU BACK," Aviyah screams a few feet from my desk.

I take a deep breath, pick up my phone. "Hotline – *shalom*," I say, trying to assume Aviyah's authoritative Hebrew tone.

"Yes, hello," says a male voice speaking in fragmented Hebrew. "I need help. My friend – my friend is missing. I am afraid – maybe they send him back. His visa –"

"NO, MOUSSA. I WILL CALL YOU!" Aviyah's phone is no longer glued to her ear; she is simply holding the mouthpiece about an inch from her face and screaming into it.

Struggles with communication have been the salient frustration I have encountered in my time at Hotline. Equally daunting is a maze of bureaucracy I spend my days helping asylum seekers navigate, so that they can stay and work in Israel without fear of detainment or deportation. I have been learning Hebrew since my childhood, and understand and speak nearly fluently, but even I have found the culture of assertiveness here difficult to adjust to. I can only imagine the difficulty my clients – many of whom share no common

language with Israeli bureaucrats – would face without Hotline volunteers and staff working tirelessly to advocate for them.

If these challenges are not great enough, sometimes it takes enormous effort not only to traverse language barriers, but noise barriers between Hotline staff and clients.

"This guy calls me six times a day from Givon prison."<sup>21</sup> Aviyah sighs, drops her phone in its cradle. "There's so much bloody noise there I can't hear a word he's saying."

I turn back to my own call. "Forgive me," I say. "Is English better? Hebrew?"

"French," says the man. I tell him to call back tomorrow, praying one of our French-speaking volunteers will be in.

Asylum seekers face enormous challenges merely communicating with even those Israelis striving to help them. To advocate for themselves on the policy level would be impossible without native Israelis – who have language, cultural know-how, and voting power – giving voice to asylum seekers' concerns and needs.

As I approach the end of my two months at Hotline, I find my focus shifting away from the broader questions of how asylum seekers' presence affects the general population, as I become more attuned to how truly voiceless this particular population is. If Itay is right, and concern for both greater society and the "little guy" are impossible to hold in absolutely equal measures, then I have begun to feel Hotline's priorities are in the right place. If Hotline and other organizations weren't bringing the plight of asylum seekers into the public eye, if Hotline wasn't devoting resources and energy to get detained asylum seekers released, the public discourse in Israel would be severely

imbalanced, devoid of voices from one of its most vulnerable populations.

## Conclusion: Of Justice and Compassion

Toward what population, and toward whose needs, can resources be devoted most fairly? Why should Hotline spend its energy promoting asylum seekers' voices above the voices of others?

This question can be framed as a trade-off between justice and compassion. From a viewpoint of compassion, it is difficult to speak in theory about a hierarchy of societal needs when you have seen the men sleeping in Levinsky Park, or people imprisoned after fleeing their homes. From a strict justice point of view, taking pity on a single person distracts from questions of the broader consequences of addressing that individual's needs. This is a fundamental question of social justice. Who is best equipped to assess in what direction society should move? Is it the "objective," removed party with a more global perspective, or the "subjective" party with direct contact with the humanity of the issue? Who should be involved in shaping Israel's policy toward asylum seekers: detached academics or politicians, or people like Hotline staff, who have daily contact with the plight of these people?

Toward what population, and toward whose needs, can resources be devoted most fairly? Why should Hotline spend its energy promoting asylum seekers' voices above the voices of others?

I have discovered I am comfortable with organizations like Hotline taking the compassion route, as long as they function within a greater framework of justice in which multiple voices still flourish. Someone must advocate for voiceless populations like asylum seekers. If Hotline didn't choose the little guy over the big picture in this situation, the needs of asylum seekers might not factor into policy-level decisions at all. Understanding the challenges asylum seekers pose on a national scale, and then making the tough choice to proceed in advocating for their rights, is a legitimate and admirable approach to positive social change.

In an ideal world, these tough choices to "take sides" would take place within the context of meaningful dialogue among academics, citizens and politicians. Such dialogue would provide a framework for the multiplicity of opposing voices to be woven together. The result would be not a policy vacuum resulting from a political wrestling match, but a tapestry of views and positions interacting to yield positive steps toward addressing the needs of all concerned parties. I am left wondering how such meaningful dialogue can be fostered within an Israeli socio-political scene that often feels more like a shouting match than a conversation. But small-scale forums for dialogue, like the meeting I observed at Shapira Park, seem a good start. In the meantime, I feel privileged to have spent time in an organization that works so tirelessly to give voice to the voiceless.

## Notes

1. All dialogue was recorded in writing in my daily journal within 24 hours of occurrence.
2. Whether the majority of the asylum seekers are flocking to Israel due to persecution, or in search of economic opportunity, is a matter fierce debate among Israeli leaders. See Yacobi, Haim. "African Refugees' Influx in Israel from a Socio-Political Perspective." CARIM Research Reports, Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies, San Domenico di Fiesole (FI): European University Institute 4 (2009): 11-12
3. Ibid. 2-3
4. Afeef, Karin Fathimath. "A promised land for refugees? Asylum and migration in Israel." New Issues in Refugee Research, 183 (2009): 8.
5. See, for example: Wurgaft, Nurit. "We have slandered." Haaretz Online Edition. 10 July 2011. 6 Nov 2011. <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/we-have-slandered-1.388697>
6. Yacobi, Haim. "Let Me Go to the City." Journal of Refugee Studies, Vol. 24 (Issue 1), Oxford University Press (2010): 61-63; see also ben Yacov, David. "Operation 'Welcome Sudanese' Begins in TA." Arutz Sheva. 7/21/2011. <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/145949#.TsPfrz0f6so>
7. All names in this paper have been changed to honor the confidentiality of Hotline's staff and clients.
8. See Afeef 16.
9. Yacobi, "Let Me Go to the City," p. 11. See also "Policy Paper: The Detention of Asylum Seekers and Refugees." Refugees Rights Forum. The Hotline for Migrant Workers, 2009. Accessed November 16, 2011 from [http://www.hotline.org.il/english/pdf/Detention\\_paper\\_021809\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.hotline.org.il/english/pdf/Detention_paper_021809_Eng.pdf).
10. Afeef 10
11. See Friedman, Ron. "Court: Drop Employment Prohibition from Sudanese Visa." The Jerusalem Post. 17 February 2011. 16 Nov 2011. See <http://www.jpost.com/NationalNews/Article.aspx?id=208594>
12. See Wurgaft 10 July 2011. See also Dickman, Orna. "Incitement and Racism Against Asylum Seekers in Israel." The Hotline for Migrant Workers: 6 Sept 2010.
13. Afeef 13
14. Wurgaft, Nurit 10 July 2011.
15. Israel's parliament
16. <http://michaelbenari.com/>
17. Dickman, Orna. "Incitement and Racism Against Asylum Seekers in Israel." The Hotline for Migrant Workers. 2010. 16 Nov 2011. [http://www.hotline.org.il/english/pdf/092310\\_Incitement.pdf](http://www.hotline.org.il/english/pdf/092310_Incitement.pdf)
18. Wurgaft 10 July 2011. See also Dickman 6 Sept 2010.
19. At the age of 18, all young Israelis are required by law to perform two to three years of army service or government-approved "national service," which usually involves full-time volunteering in a struggling community or an NGO.
20. See, e.g.: Seltzer, Robert M. Jewish People, Jewish Thought. New York: MacMillan Publishers, 1991: 616-618.
21. Most detained asylum seekers in Israel are held in one of two detention facilities: Givon, in the northern city of Ramle; and Ketziot, in Israel's south.