Our Feast of Freedom Cannot Become a Famine of Hopelessness for Israel’s African Migrants
by Rabbi Moshe Rudin

Rabbi Moshe Rudin stands next to a sign in support of African migrants in a Tel Aviv restaurant. The sign reads: “You shall love the stranger for you were strangers…(Deuteronomy 10:19), No to persecutions and expulsions.”

It is heartbreaking that on this year’s celebration of freedom, Passover, April 1st, a forced mass exodus of strangers in a strange land will begin. The strangers? Mostly young males from the despotic regimes of Eritrea or Sudan. The strange land? Israel, our Jewish homeland founded on principles of justice and ingathering of refugees fleeing unspeakable atrocities.

One such stranger (who now speaks Hebrew) is Sumia Omer, 33. Sumia escaped from Darfur after the Janjaweed militia attacked her Sudanese village. “I was fleeing for my life,” she said quietly adding she witnessed babies being boiled in pots, rape and murder. She sought refuge in several places including her capital city of Khartoum and Egypt, but was not safe anywhere. Finally, she reached safety when she walked across the Sinai, at times staying with Bedouins, and arrived in Israel. Sumia now works in Tel Aviv for the African Refugee Development Center helping others seeking asylum in Israel.

I met Sumia during a recent trip to Israel. While I was there, I also saw posters all over Tel Aviv supporting the migrants with the words from the Torah: Love the stranger, for You were strangers.
Israel’s African migrant population is relatively small, only about 37,000, and not growing. In 2012, Israel effectively shut illegal immigration with a 143 mile southern border fence. Many of the adults are now employed. They make restaurant food, work at late night food stores, serve coffee and staff hotels. Employers report wanting to hire them because they are good workers. They pay taxes; actually at a higher rate. Within their population is an sub-population of 5,000 children who remember no other home other than Israel. They are Israel’s “dreamers.”

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which the new state of Israel helped draft, the majority or all of asylum seekers would fit the legal definition of a refugee as they have fled from persecution. Yet many in the Israeli government seeks to portray them as work infiltrators and criminals.

Rather than following the Convention, which calls on countries to examine every individual claim for asylum, a bureaucratic system of limited hours has slowed the process to handling only a few forms a day while hundreds line up overnight to be seen. An Israeli human rights organization reported that of the more than 13,000 who applied for asylum, only 11 were granted refugee status. In January, Israel’s refugee office even stopped accepting asylum applications at all.

Now, as Passover arrives, Israel is laying down an ultimatum: leave on a free flight to an undisclosed country, likely Rwanda, with $3,500 or go to prison. On April 1st, visas will start to expire and some asylum seekers will receive deportation notices.

That prospect is frightening. A recent Ha’artz report found that those who took this offer in the past had their money stolen upon arrival, were transferred to smugglers and were often imprisoned or killed.

As the countdown to deportation marches on, resistance is growing. Nearly 800 US rabbis and clergy signed a letter in January calling on Israel to stop its plan to deport African migrants. “Our own experience of slavery and liberation, and our own experience as refugees, compel us to act with mercy and justice towards those seeking refuge among us…” the letter read.

Hundreds of Israeli academics said Israel had a “historic duty” not to deport the asylum seekers. In late February, 20,000 Israelis took to the streets to demonstrate alongside Africans in Tel Aviv.
Susan Silverman, a Jerusalem rabbi and sister of comic Sarah Silverman, was inspired to create a movement modeled after Anne Frank’s story with hundreds of Israeli rabbis promising to hide migrants facing deportation. Even El Al pilots have refused to fly the planes to deport the Africans.

To be sure, Israel has taken some courageous and positive steps: it has allowed tens of thousands of African migrants entry into Israel rather than turning them away back to the Sinai or trying to repatriate them to their home countries. It has granted large groups temporary protected status, provided health care, children’s education and more. It has as yet not taken the draconian measures of splitting families through deportation such as has happened in our own country.

But the Torah says it all. The full quote, engraved on every Jewish heart is: *Do not oppress the stranger for you know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:9).*

The world Jewish community, and perhaps the entire world, looks to Israel not as a nation among nations but as a moral example. Our Israel, which has absorbed millions of our brothers and sisters from all over the world and helped them- albeit with many challenges and difficulties- rise from poverty and decimation, can surely help the African migrants, grant them a fair hearing for refugee status, help their children, provide them a place of dignity and peace.

For those who wish to stay as immigrants, they will need go through the same process and be called upon to shoulder the same responsibilities as other would-be citizens. And for those who wish to return home again when they can do so in safety, Israel can provide a welcoming and supportive temporary home, or help make the move to one possible should the migrants wish.

As passionate Zionists and supporters of Israel, this Pesach let us reach out to support Israel in fulfilling and actualizing its mission of compassion and showing the world a different way. Share support for the migrants with Israel’s ambassador and consulate, at the Seder and with Israeli friends, relatives and community partners and give support to organizations such as the African Refugee Development Association and others that provide advocacy, training and resources.

Allison Sheehan Cohen, Development Director of the African Refugee Development Association will be speaking at Adath Shalom following Shabbat
services on Shabbat HaGadol, March 24th at 12:00 PM. All are invited for Kiddush lunch to hear her perspective.

African Refugee Development Association Staff provide guidance to an asylum seeker living in Netanya in their Tel Aviv office. Photo: Joyce Rudin