



group identity can be a more powerful political motivator than economic self-interest.

The combination of the Intifada, the conservative government it caused to be elected, the battered economy, and the budget cuts that ensued have made matters far worse. Unemployment is well over 10 percent. Benefits have been reduced rather than improved. Child poverty has skyrocketed and is now more than 25 percent. Serious hunger — never a widely noted concern despite the poverty of some groups all along — is now visible and the subject of public discussion.

Attitudes about minority groups — in particular, Arab citizens — are intertwined with the poverty issues. Arab Israeli unemployment is 40 percent, and the poverty rate is even higher. This poverty is entrenched from generation to generation because of discrimination in multiple realms, especially discrimination in spending on education, which leaves Arab children with far less than half the spending per child than is available to Jewish children.

The reasons for taking action on poverty are the same everywhere — it is a moral question as well as, more instrumentally, a question about social stability and the future of the democracy. The kinds of disparities that exist in both Israel and the United States (where, for example, African-Americans and Latinos are poor at three times the rate for whites, and Native American poverty is even higher) call into question the claim of both societies that equality is a fundamental principle and, if they persist, can

threaten the continuing capacity of the economy to generate enough income to sustain a broad middle class. Any hope of knitting together the five highly disparate groups that constitute today's Israel depends at least in part on ensuring all an equal stake in the country's economy and social/civic structure (and on progress toward a more open society, religiously, as well).

But the disparities faced by Arab Israelis raise further, even deeper questions, especially now. Fulfilling the promise of equality for all citizens should be enough of a reason to end the discrimination and the disparities. Now, however, there is an additional urgency. The grim joke among Arab Israelis is that the Jewish democratic state is "democratic" for the Jews and "Jewish" for the Arabs. Political equality — the right to vote — means very little if one is consigned to be a member of a permanent minority that not only loses nearly every vote but also is the object of a continuing pattern of governmental decisions that discriminate spectacularly again and again. Sooner or later, people are going to refuse to take it any more. That day will not be a good day for Israel.

If Israel wants to remain a democracy, it must act. The current position is untenable. Either social, political, and economic conditions will be made better, or they will deteriorate. That is the current reality.

*Peter Edelman, a Professor of Law at Georgetown University Law Center, is President of the New Israel Fund.*

## Penury and Hunger in Israel

*Jenny Cohen-Khallas*

**H**ere is an example of the new Israeli poverty. When Israelis see people like this, they say: "There but for the grace of God, go I." Marina and Yvgeny came to Israel from Riga, Latvia, in about 1994 with two adolescent children, as did Ethiopian Abonash, with her three children. Abonash's husband died of dysentery on the long march to the Jewish Agency camp in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I also want to introduce to you Masha, a doctor who couldn't retrain in Israel, so she became an attendant paramedic in a tour company. Yvgeny retrained and became a computer Webmaster, joining a successful software start-up company. Abonash

worked as a room cleaner in a newly opened five-star hotel.

In 2000 they were all fired because their respective employment situations went bankrupt or were closed at a huge loss. They have mortgages or rent to pay and loans to repay for their children's upkeep and higher education fees. For six months, their severance pay and unemployment benefits supported them. But, now at age 50, they are unemployable. Some sold their cars, CD players, televisions. Then they took a bridge loan. Then the children started working full time to stay in university. Then they tried to sell the

house, but there's a slump in the market and nothing is selling. Then they stopped buying meat during the week. Their credit is stopped, interest payments swell; suddenly there's no food on the table and no money for medicine.

And yet the open use of the words "poverty" and "hunger" arouses waves of discomfort and sometimes indignation in Israel. Some Israelis are shamed by it. Some say that we must lobby the government to change its priorities. Some say that poverty and hunger don't exist — that it's just the exploitation of long-term welfare dependents and the unemployed. But some say that it not only exists but also threatens to overwhelm us. They note that the government is overburdened with defense expenses and we, the citizens of Israel, cannot stand by and blame everybody else.

Israel is no longer the single-faceted ideological society it was in the 1950s when the dire poverty of tens of thousands of Jewish refugees living in asbestos shacks on severe rationing was called, not "poverty and hunger," but "national frugality." Israel is now a postmodern (for a large proportion of its population), Western, industrialized, high-tech state. Israelis no longer share the mentality of struggling for initial economic survival. Israel is now strong enough to enable healthy public discussion of social and other issues. So the fact that one-sixth of the population is defined as impoverished is a shocking reality both to those who thought we lived in a comfortable Western, middle-class milieu and to those whose ideological priorities had never allowed them to consider how the socioeconomic strain of widespread poverty would detour public efforts, solidarity, and electoral tendencies from the national struggle. One of the clear results of daily prime-time media exposure to poverty and demonstrations in front of the Knesset is that vociferous segments of the public are demanding that governmental resources be channeled to welfare and other domestic resources, rather than to strengthening settlements beyond the green line. In the recent national elections, the Shinui Party quadrupled

its size, demonstrating the public's desire to fund civil needs such as welfare, employment, and education, instead of settlements and ultra-religious ventures.

Soup kitchens have mushroomed as the situation in Israel gets worse. While some blame the Intifada for the poverty, the underlying causes may be more complicated. Israel was a world leader in the high-tech bubble. For 10 years a large percentage of the Israeli work scene was devoted to training, offering employment in, and proliferating high-tech services and environments. The bubble burst, and thousands became unemployed. Older workers could not find alternative employment.

In addition, the wave of immigration that boosted Israel's population by over 20 percent in the early 1990s brought an abnormal, negative socioeconomic balance, the impact of which the government had not foreseen. The immigration brought a disproportionate percentage of old and unhealthy people without families, a disproportionate percentage of single mothers, and a roller coaster of drop-out immigrant adolescents who felt alienated from their Israeli peer group and uncomfortable in their parental homes.

There were whole communities of families from the Asiatic ex-Soviet Union, Ethiopia, Yemen, Syria, and Kurdistan who were unfamiliar with Western, democratic society.

This is how we arrived at 1,000,000 people under the poverty line — one-sixth of Israel's population, Jews and Arabs included, 400,000 children included. In nearly every school, teachers know who comes to school without a sandwich because he or she forgot it and who cuts back on the sandwich and doesn't eat until the evening because the family exists in penury. The overloaded social workers are helpless and refer the impoverished to nonprofit soup kitchens and associations that distribute food, clothing, household goods, and school books to the needy. When, in August 2002, Minister of Education Limor Livnat approached the Pitchon Lev Association to help address the problem of hunger in schools, the organization was accused of serving

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politicians and allowing the government to shirk its welfare responsibilities. But the dimension of poverty today is so great that the government is incapable of coping; social welfare organizations today are essential if Israel is to keep feeding the hungry.

Like other welfare organizations, the demands for services have grown. When Pitchon Lev started operating in 1998, it provided 300 food parcels a month, in addition to blankets and heaters to old people. It now provides 5,500 food parcels a month to over 140,000 needy individuals a year. There is a waiting list of 1,000 families. The needy are referred by social workers and include people from all backgrounds. Rather than providing meals in soup kitchens, Pitchon-Lev delivers weekly parcels of food for the family — enabling the family to prepare its own meals at home and maintain its dignity and independence. Food is also provided to certain welfare institutions such as Beit Hashanti and shelters for battered women and children.

Many people-to-people Israeli welfare associations wrestle with whether to directly address social need or to work toward governmental intervention. In addition to weekly news programs emphasizing the plight of the poor, the work of nonprofit associations, and dwindling governmental resources for welfare, there have been numerous discussions among charity foundations and the nonprofit sector as to who will deal with the hunger crisis.

The tremendous growth of organizations that

provide hands-on solutions to various aspects of poverty and hunger indicates the enormous increase in numbers of families whose material support systems have totally collapsed, including the governmentally funded welfare services that are colossally over-stretched. It is also increasingly clear that the crisis is going to get worse in the next few years. Until the current conflict with the Palestinians is resolved, Israel will not enjoy the confidence of tourists, investors, or developers. Resources will not be made available to develop new employment fields or attend adequately to the fallout of thousands of alienated and asocialized immigrants. International embargoes, both overt and unspoken, will not be rescinded until the regional conflict is solved.

Increased citizen involvement and a more attuned media are addressing the poverty crisis. As a result, one of the main banners of the recent elections was the claim of parties — not known for their social agenda — that they would invest immediately in new sources of employment in poor areas, in reducing governmental waste, and in solving the problem of hunger.

*Jenny Cohen-Khallas came to Israel in 1975 from the United Kingdom at the age of 22. She has an M.A. in Jewish Studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary and has done post-graduate studies at Hebrew University. She has four children (two currently in the Israeli army) and lives in Jerusalem. For the past 28 years she has been active in community welfare work.*

## Employment Not Poverty

*Danny Pins*

**I**srael's economy continues to worsen. Recession, layoffs, massive government budget cuts resulting in reduction of transfer payments — all are adding to the burden of Israel's weakest populations, particularly those with large families. More and more, Israelis are hearing reports of severe social difficulties — even cases of hunger.

Among those most vulnerable to the effects of economic downturn are the very immigrant groups who struggled to find their place in Israel, even in times of prosperity. And prominent among these is the Ethiopian-Israeli community of some 85,000, 50 percent of whom are

below the age of 18.

The greatest challenge to the integration of any immigrant group has always been employment and economic self-sufficiency. Yet with the unique cultural challenges they have faced in their integration, large numbers of Ethiopian-Israeli adults remain unemployed. Even many of those who do work are in unskilled, low-status, low-income jobs, which are often the first positions to be cut as employers strain to trim costs to the bone.

The result: many families — including many who do have a working parent — depend on trans-