

fer payments to make ends meet. As budget cuts have eaten into this vital supplementary income, they have hit the Ethiopian community, especially children, harder than most.

Ironically, the subsistence lifestyle that sustained Ethiopian families for generations prepared them to withstand today's poverty. To this day, many live on basic food staples — 50-pound sacks of flour, wheat, and lentils — and eat meat only on special occasions. In this way, they can get by on minimal household budgets. But raising a child in poverty is hard, no matter how resourceful and resilient a parent may be.

As bleak as the picture may appear, closer analysis shows considerable progress in helping the Ethiopian Israelis achieve the economic self-sufficiency they seek. In the critical 25–44, year-old age group, more than 70 percent of men and 45 percent of women are employed. These rates are still far below those in the general population but are much higher than only a few years ago.

This progress demonstrates in part the investment the Israeli government, in partnership with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, has made in integrating Ethiopian-Israelis into the workforce. From a major campaign of finding jobs for men who arrived in Operation Solomon, to a program that provides young adults with both a 10th-grade education and a vocational diploma, the JDC has long fostered employment. Even the JDC's cur-

rent focus on education is grounded in the belief that the long-term effects of proper schooling will enhance the ability of the community's children to succeed as adults in Israel's job market.

There has been an increased focus on women's needs, with programs like Eshet Hayil, which has encouraged some 3,000 women to work through workshops, Hebrew language instruction, and job placement. Other employment programs include an employment incubator that trains participants for electronic assembly lines and entrepreneurship.

Even without the sharp reductions in transfer payments Israel is now contemplating, employment — and the special dignity it bestows — offers the only real avenue for the Ethiopian community's genuine absorption into mainstream Israeli society. The prospect of government cutbacks only heightens the urgency.

The limited means of support so many now depend on will soon shrink further still. Unless we intensify our efforts to help more Ethiopian-Israelis gain the employment skills they still need, their poverty, and their life on the margins of the society that greeted them so eagerly little more than a decade ago, will remain as an inescapable testament to our failure.

*Danny Pins is Director of the Immigrant Integration of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Israel.*

## Not Merely Invisible But Also Poor

*Eitan Michaeli and H'ir Aldin Elbaz*

*A preliminary report on a study titled "Nutrition and Hunger in the Negev" headed by Prof. Vered Slonim Nevo, Dr. Roni Kaufman, and Dr. Jonathan Anson from the Department of Social Work at Ben Gurion University of the Negev offers new insights into social assistance and poverty among Jews and Bedouin in the Negev. The following is a conversation between Eitan Michaeli, Associate Director of Shatil in Beersheva, and H'ir Aldin Elbaz, Director of Social Services for the "recognized"<sup>1</sup> Bedouin village Segev Shalom as well as approximately 70,000 Bedouin who live in "unrecognized"<sup>2</sup> villages. The conversation was translated from the Hebrew by Susann Codish.*

**Michaeli:** In the recent study of Jews and Bedouin Arabs in the Negev who sought assistance from social services, 36 percent of the Jews reported that they lacked resources for adequate food, compared to 71 percent of the Bedouin in this group.

When asked, "In the past 12 months, how often did it happen that you did not have food to give to your child to take to school or kindergarten?" 40 percent of the Jewish respondents answered "It happened occasionally," compared with 87 percent of the



Bedouin respondents.

**Elbaz:** Usually, studies get skewed downward, and there is a lack of precise data. Reality is harsher than any study. It is generally known that one out of every two Bedouin families lives below the poverty line. However, the whole concept is problematic. If we define the poverty line as living in a wooden or tin shack, with minimal amenities, and minimal clothing for children in which to attend school — well then, 70 percent of the community lives below this line.

It would be interesting to check how the community itself views the topic of poverty. I estimate that by the end of 2003, because of the cutbacks in education, health, and social services, a growing percentage of families will be defined as living below the poverty line. Poverty is expressed not only in the lack of food, which is actually the last item affected by budget cuts. The first item to go is education — people will be sending fewer and fewer children to school because sending children to school costs money.

Health, too, will be adversely affected, because families will buy less clothing and food, and this will have direct repercussions on the children's health. While mandatory health insurance exists, access to services becomes more expensive. The law applies to everyone who has any income from either work or allowances. But what happens to all those families who have no income at all? Will they still be eligible for health services?

**Michaeli:** It has been claimed that it is precisely within the unrecognized settlements that protection against hunger exists. Even the small scale of undeveloped farming helps critically needy people and provides a minimum income for subsistence.

**Elbaz:** Before responding to your comment, I need to acknowledge that the Bedouin community today is in the midst of a leadership crisis, quite similar to the crisis experienced by the Sephardic communities of the 1950s and 1960s: social conflicts, a crisis of values and norms, a leadership crisis, anomie. The chances of getting a community consensus on any project are low because of the crisis in

leadership.

As to your comment: It is well known today that families in stress take advantage of every addition to their income. We know of families whose entire income is derived from a few sheep and subsistence farming near their homes. Because of unemployment and the lack of established sources of income, people today look for new avenues, not just farming but also small businesses, such as running shops in tin shacks at the sides of major highways or providing ad hoc transportation in pickup trucks — every type of informal income. The hope of improving one's economic lot lies in establishing a small business, even if it is illegal.

**Michaeli:** Can you illustrate the difficulties of the Bedouin existence?

**Elbaz:** It is very hard to pick a few examples from among so many. Within this population, it is very common to find couples made up of a Bedouin husband and a wife from the occupied territories. Such families have no legal status and no rights to social services.

A young Bedouin man, a father of six, divorced his first wife. The children stayed

with him. He took another wife, from the territories, and they had a son. Today, he has no income at all. During the last festival, he locked himself, his wife, and his seven children into a room so that no one was able to leave the home. He justified his actions by saying that this was the only way he could prevent his wife and children from seeing their neighbors eating a festive meal and enjoying holiday gifts.

Another example is that of a Bedouin family with eight children whose only income today is child allowance. Up until a few months ago, the family also received a national insurance income subsidy. They have a wreck of a car, a Subaru that serves as their means of transportation in and out of their unrecognized village. Obviously, there is no public transportation in this area. And, of course, the car was not registered in their name so as not to hurt the unemployment insurance, but rather was registered in the name of the husband's brother. A few months ago, the father was stopped for a traffic vio-

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lation, and prior traffic citations were checked. So the authorities discovered that the car was being used regularly by the family. The income subsidy was revoked, and the family was ordered to return all the money it had been drawing. Now they have no income but they do have a debt.

**Michaeli:** And, in conclusion, who are you, H'ir Aldin Elbaz?

**Elbaz:** I was born in the area between Moshav Nevatim and Tel Sheva. In the mid-1970s, my family moved to Tel Sheva. I studied Social Work at Ben Gurion University of the Negev and paid for my education by doing all sorts of odd jobs. After completing my bachelor's degree, I received a scholarship from the Friends of Ben Gurion University to continue my studies toward a master's degree in Canada, in Social Policy Planning. There, I worked with immigrants and the native population.

Although I was offered Canadian citizenship, I chose to return to where my parents live and to raise my own two children here. I also wanted to invest my citizenship in this country with new meaning, so I formed the Department of Social Services for Segev and the unrecognized villages.

My goal in life is to establish a service that matches the needs of this specific population and to serve that population as well as possible. I started from scratch. Today, as I sit in various government

offices or with colleagues, I am not ashamed of the services I developed, even when I compare them with the range of social services available to the non-Bedouin population.

<sup>1</sup>Recognized Villages – In its attempt to concentrate the Bedouin in a small number of nonagricultural settlements and to minimize the land available to them, the government initiated the planning of seven urban villages for the Bedouin population in the 1960s. The villages are considered to be failures from a planning point of view. Infrastructure is poor, there are no employment opportunities, and the level of services in education and health is low grade. All of the seven recognized villages rate among the 15 poorest settlements in the country.

<sup>2</sup>Unrecognized Villages – Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, the Bedouin lived in all parts of the Negev. During the 1950s, the government forcibly transferred the Bedouin to the northeastern area of the Negev. These primarily agricultural villages (including 45 settlements with approximately 70,000 residents) are unrecognized by the government and as such lack basic amenities including running water and electricity, even where infrastructure does exist. Unrecognized villages do not have legal status and, as a result, dwellings are considered illegal and at risk of being demolished at any time.

## Wealth, Poverty, and the Zionist Vision

*Eliezer David Jaffe*

**T**he Zionist vision of the founders of the State of Israel was never monolithic, but goals that all agreed upon were economic stability, security, and minimal socioeducational gaps. Today unemployment is nearing 300,000 people, 1.2 million Israelis (531,000 of them children) are living under the poverty line, and the income gap between the wealthy and the poor increased by 23 percent in the past two decades. The poverty line is 50 percent of the median family income, or NIS 2,768 (\$575.00 U.S.), for a couple. Inequality is a sad reality in the Promised Land. Poverty in Israel is not a new phenomenon and is always relative. In the past it was accompanied by a need to absorb mass immigration,

build housing, create educational and health institutions, provide work, and defend the country.

Poverty today is caused foremost by the economic depression worldwide and the ongoing war with the Palestinians and lack of peace. This combination has been deadly for the Israeli economy, leading to a syndrome of lack of investments, business closures, flight of capital, down-sizing, unemployment, debt, and drastically increased welfare expenditure. The government, hampered by serial weak coalition governments (institutionalized by an archaic electoral system that allows dozens of parties into the Knesset), vainly attempts to counter this decline by instinctively increasing taxes, curtailing so-