

Rabbis for Human Rights

The jahalin

The Jahalin Bedouin camp in the Judean Desert twenty minutes from downtown Jerusalem continues to offer warm hospitality and challenge moments to dedicated volunteers and concerned visitors. This community of 100 families who have been uprooted three times in the last fifty years – they were forced out of the northern Negev into the West Bank in the early 1950's, then they were forced off the hills between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea when Maaleh Adumim was established in 1978, and finally they were forcefully relocated on a hill next to the Jerusalem Municipal Dump when the settlement was expanded in the late 1990's – has not only faced physical removal, but have also lost their traditional way of live and livelihood; no longer shepherds living in nature, they are basically an ex-Bedouin proletariat who build, clean and watch over the comfortable settlement which has taken their place.

During the past decade during which we have supported their struggle, the Jahalin have consistently put the education of their children as their highest priority. Indeed, they are exceedingly and justifiably proud of the five young women who study at the nearly Al-Quds University, and the high school students who are working hard to do well in their matriculation exams. The steady troop of volunteers, including many rabbinical students, and Jews and non-Jews from all over the world who give these children (and the occasional adult) English lessons, as well as teach Hebrew, paint, draw, or just play with the kids have surely helped their academic achievement, as well as serve as inspiring role models. The hospitality they receive goes far beyond the endless cups of sweet tea flavored with mint, sage and local herbs for which we cannot find English names; it doesn't take long before the shockingly drab shanties and containers in which they live become the mere props of warm families that manage to maintain their dignity in horrific conditions (and in full view of the nearby prosperous settlement).

Although the government has done little to alleviate the harsh physical conditions on the hill – there is hardly any infrastructure of electricity, sewage and healthcare facilities, and the nearby dump is a severe environmental hazard – the Jahalin have slowly improved their living conditions. A fully successful transition to urban life would include vocational training for jobs that have a future; however, currently, most of the younger generation cannot hope to be more than unskilled laborers. But compared to the conditions in which the rest of the 50,000 Bedouin in the West Bank live, the

Jahalin camp is Beverly Hills; in Gaza, Bedouin are much worse off, while within the state of Israel, almost 200,000 Bedouin live only slightly better. Thus, while the proximity of the Jahalin to Jerusalem makes for an easy and memorably wonderful visit, it also provides a eye-opener to a troubling issue of major proportions.