



Nissim Elmakias is a genial man who has a kind, but sad face. It's as if he has become so used to hearing heartbreaking stories that his face has become permanently fixed in sympathy. He entered the Meir Panim soup kitchen dining room he has run in Dimona for twelve years and stood in front of our one hundred students. After two days of lectures I wondered how he would hold their attention before they broke into idle chatter. His short introduction only added to my fear.

As if sensing this was about to occur he began telling a story about his son who, on his way to school every day, passed the local bakery with two friends. He would buy a roll. His friends would steal theirs. As his son explained it the boys weren't criminal by nature, rather poor. They had nothing to eat at home. What followed was a moving story of how Nissim's son began paying for their lunches.

The economic situation in Dimona is bleak. The town hasn't broken the shackles of its original 1950's look. Apartment buildings appear eroded like the Arava that surrounds them. The center of town is a loose connection of stores and offices that lack both theme and cohesion. A local mall houses darkened alleys that become oppressive wind tunnels in winter and offer temporary shade in summer.

Dimona has enjoyed periods of economic growth, but there has been a growth in redundancy over the last few years. The economy has risen and fallen, and the unemployment rate currently stands at more than 10%.

I know of people who live in Dimona who vociferously claim that the city has changed, has been upgraded, and has a future. They are quick to mention the high salaries of those working for Dead Sea companies. They cite the tax advantages, the reduced school fees and cheap housing. They have an obvious interest in promoting the town,

but even a rich man can look unkempt and homeless, and that is the immediate impression that outsiders are prone to get.

Earlier in the day I had walked into the police station with three students in need of a bathroom. The anteroom was filled with young men who didn't look as though they were there on a sightseeing tour. The building was clean and occupied a prominent place in the center of town.

We had dropped in while on our way around town trying to complete an interesting task. My small group of students had been presented with a pen. Their task was to see if they could swap it for anything of similar value. They were to swap that new found item over and over until they had increased the value of that pen.

Barak is a young man who won't graduate with a diploma. He has already seen the wrong side of the law. He had spent the previous two days disrupting our group activities. Today, however, he was in form. He turned that small pen into a tie, a costume, then a hat until two hours later it eventually morphed into four goldfish. Later that afternoon he would present them to a children's day-care center we would visit.

Maybe it was the mention of crime or maybe it was the pathos of the story, but Nissim's story had Barak transfixed.

Nissim told us the story of a widow fearful her children would be taken away from her. The fear emanated from the fact that they are constantly ill. She is out of work, has no food in the house, and is too embarrassed to ask for it. Nissim got word via the grapevine of her dire straits and paid her a visit. She became hysterical when she saw him, mistakenly believing he was working with the welfare department. She thought he had come for her children.

Nissim made her a deal. He asked her to work at the center. She would be given a small wage and could take as much food as she needed. The solution was only partial because her small children were still ill. Once Nissim managed to convince her of his intentions she invited him in. What he saw sickened him. The walls and ceilings were covered in green mold. No wonder the children weren't well. In the fridge he found no more than a container of humus and half a bottle of ketchup.

Nissim contacted his buddies at the police station. Together they formed a volunteer group that cleaned up the apartment. It took time, but Nissim was pleased to inform us that the apartment is now clean, the children are well, and the woman is eternally grateful.

He is accustomed to fielding phone calls in the middle of the night. This winter has been especially cold and one morning at two o'clock he received a call from an elderly gentleman who wondered if Nissim might be able to provide him with a blanket the following day. Nissim understood the desperation of the call. His son was serving in the army so he took the heavy blanket from his bed and drove around to the man's house.

One can only wonder why non-profit organizations have become the focus of such selfless acts of good will. Where are the government agencies? Why don't they help the freezing, the hungry, and the homeless in places like Dimona? Why does the government abrogate responsibility to non-profit organizations like Meir Panim? Why, for example, can't the government match a few shekels for every person Nissim needs to feed?

The irony of the situation isn't lost on Nissim, but he doesn't have the luxury of dwelling on it. He accepts the facts on the ground with a sigh. He wishes the situation improved to the point where he could close the kitchen. Unfortunately, in the last year and a half alone the kitchen has gone from feeding 450 to close to 650 families a week.

After he told us the story of the elderly gentleman and the blanket, he placed an advertisement in the papers requesting donations. The day the ad appeared he received a phone call from someone asking if Nissim had enough room to store blankets if he came down with a truck that very day. Nissim said he did, but was certain the man was just playing a practical joke on him. Five hours later a truck pulled up carrying over 300 hundred blankets, each costing in excess of 250 shekels a piece.

The truck was driven by Micha Hollander. Micha owns a shooting range in Kfar Saba. He asked Nissim for the addresses of people in need of the blankets. He and his daughter spent the day going from house to house. Micha wasn't finished. He came back with another truck load of pillows, small heaters and emergency torches.

With Pesach around the corner the center has long stopped the practice of handing out baskets of food that look good in front of the media who always seem to pay attention around chagim. Nissim now hands out stamps that are valid for food, but not items like alcohol or cigarettes. He also makes it a point of giving the stamps to mothers, who are more likely to use it on goods that are both vital and nutritious.

It was clear that Nissim had more stories to tell, but we had to go. I looked around the room and noticed how even the most talkative and disruptive of our chargers were silently shuffling out through the narrow corridor. Barak walked ahead of me looking unusually somber.

Since visiting Dimona I have twice spoken to Nissim and on both occasions I could hear the sadness, but resolve in his voice. His work at Meir Panim is far from over. If he could he would shout from the mountaintops to alert as many people as he could to the severity of the situation in Dimona. The least I could do was help him reach a few more hearts by writing this short story.