

A People Tall and Smooth

Stories of Escape from Sudan to Israel

Judith Galblum Pex



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Foreword

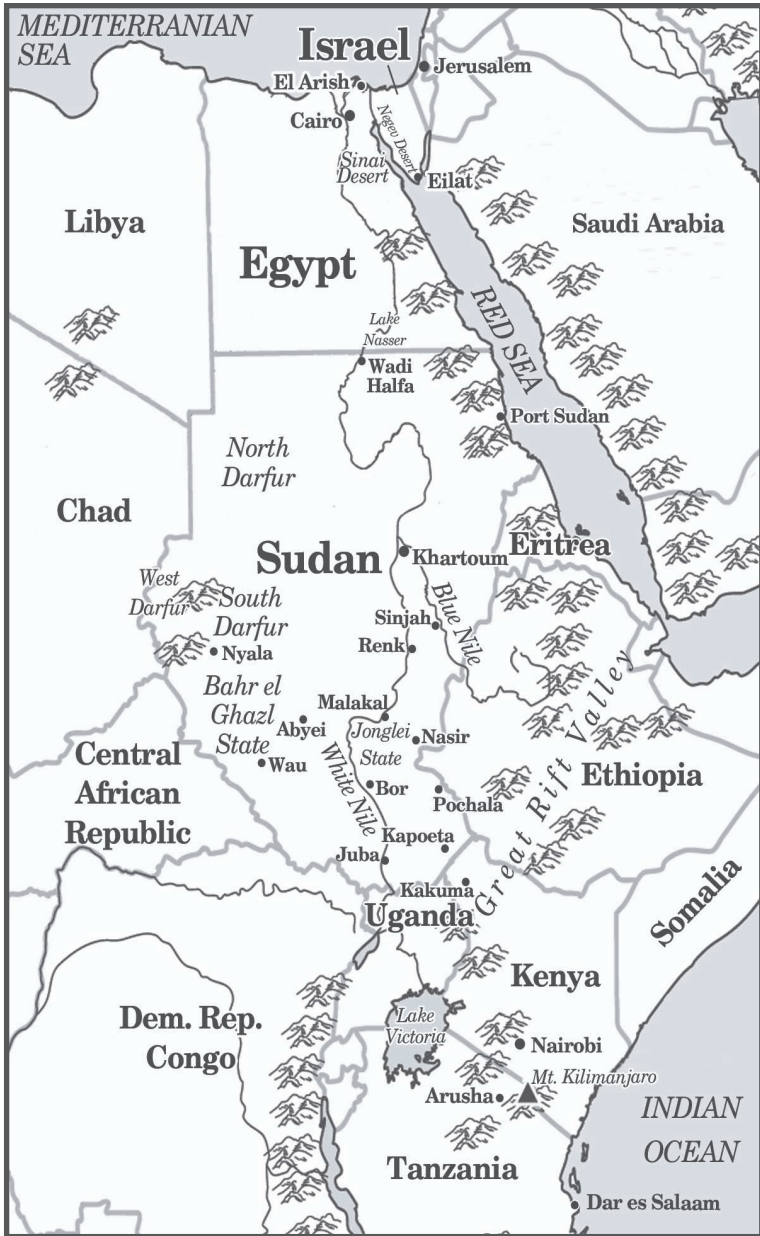
Like most people I had heard and read about the tragedy in Darfur and the ongoing hostilities in South Sudan that have taken at least two million lives. But I had little comprehension of the terrible living conditions of the thousands of refugees from such horrors until I met them face to face in Egypt. In large numbers they have moved into some of the most pitiable slums in Cairo and somehow or other they eke out an existence there. However, in their crowded, unhygienic (I caught Typhoid) and dangerous environment we found viable, vital little churches, believers who despite their poverty dressed in their “Sunday best” to worship. And we saw Christian love on show.

Incredibly, out of their poverty these believers were reaching out to their Darfurian neighbors whose plight was worse than theirs. And remember the Sudanese from the south are “Christians” and the Darfurians are “Muslims.”

Most of the people we met were glad to be in Egypt but were eager to move on, hopefully to a place where they could rebuild their lives. But permission to move was hard to come by; so I was not surprised when I heard from my friend Judy Pex in Israel that large numbers of Sudanese were making the exhausting and hazardous journey across the Sinai to Israel. “Hope,” as they say, “springs eternal in the human breast”; and no doubt refugees keep on hoping longer than most.

In the case of those who reached Israel and found “The Shelter” in Eilat, many of their hopes were realized. Judy tells their story. It will gladden—and tear—your heart.

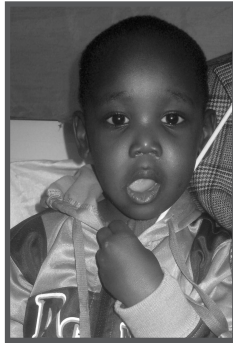
Stuart Briscoe
pastor, author, broadcaster



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INTRODUCTION



A Sudanese refugee child in Eilat, Israel

Who are They and Why Have They Come?

People from over one hundred nations intermingle in Israel. Besides Jews from Kazakhstan and Kansas, Burma and Belgrade, Calcutta, Congo and places in between, over a million tourists every year add to the mosaic. Include in the mixture two hundred thousand legal and illegal workers from countries such as China, Thailand, Philippines, Nepal and Ghana, and it's clear that the average Israeli is used to seeing faces of all colors and shapes.

In 2007, however, a new group appeared on the scene whose appearance and status was unlike any other till this time. We began to notice men, women, children and babies on the streets in our town of Eilat who were exceptionally black and strikingly tall.

"Where do they come from and who are they?" My husband John and I asked ourselves. "What language do they speak?" Having managed The Shelter Hostel in Eilat on the Red Sea since 1984, we are used to interacting with diverse people groups and were eager to meet these new arrivals.

Our questions were answered when a tall, dark man walked through our front gate one morning. "I'm Gabriel, a refugee from Sudan," he introduced himself in perfect English. We then had even

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more questions. How did these Sudanese get to our city of Eilat in the south of Israel? What made them want to come to Israel of all places? Were they refugees from the genocide in Darfur that we'd been reading about lately?

The next time he visited, Gabriel brought several countrymen and the connections multiplied quickly. As the Sudanese refugees became an integral part of our lives, their story gradually unfolded for us and Gabriel in time became a dear friend.

"Why did you come to Israel?" we asked Isaac, one of Gabriel's friends. Sudan, we knew, was one of the most extreme Muslim countries.

"In south Sudan we are mostly Christians," he explained. "The fanatical Muslims who hate Israel are likewise killing our people. We escaped from Egypt as the children of Israel fled from Pharaoh and his army. There's a chapter in the Bible about the Sudanese coming to Mt. Zion."

Sudanese on Mt. Zion? Although I have been reading the Bible since I came to Israel in 1973, I couldn't recall that passage.

Isaac opened a Bible to Isaiah Chapter 18 and we read:

Woe to the land of whirring wings along the rivers of Cush, which sends envoys by sea in papyrus boats over the water. Go swift messengers to a people tall and smooth-skinned, to a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech whose land is divided by rivers ... At that time gifts will be brought to the Lord Almighty ... to Mount Zion.

Cush was the ancient name for Sudan. Our new friends were obviously tall as well as smooth-skinned, having little body hair. In the short time we were acquainted with them we noticed their hot tempers, which matched the description of "an aggressive nation."

"Sudan is the 'land divided by rivers' because the White and the Blue Niles meet in Khartoum, the capital," said Isaac.

Whatever the original meaning, many Sudanese took this passage as a personal encouragement in their complicated struggle as

refugees in Israel. Still, life with uncertainties in Israel was better for them than what they had endured in Africa.

Due to the war in south Sudan which had been going on intermittently since 1983, thousands of Sudanese fled to Egypt, but life was difficult for them even there as Egyptians are naturally prejudiced against dark-skinned people. As refugees, they lived in the worst neighborhoods in Cairo and worked in the most menial jobs in a country where much of the native population lives in poverty and unemployment. They often weren't paid and had no recourse to collect their wages. Workers were frequently abused by bosses. If someone was sick, proper medical treatment often wasn't available.

Somehow the Sudanese hung on, partly through the hope that the United Nations would resettle them in Australia, Canada or the United States. A few had succeeded, but the process was extremely slow.

Subsequently, for many refugees, their already difficult life became unbearable. Soon the first of the current wave of refugees began making their way to Israel. They must have been desperate to take such a risk. How did they decide to cross the border illegally into an enemy state—a country of which the only news they heard in both Sudan and Egypt was negative to the extreme?

In the beginning the flow was little more than a trickle, but by June 14, 2007, Haaretz newspaper reported that up to fifty refugees each day were crossing from the Sinai into Israel, and that in the span of a month and a half, seven hundred Africans had arrived in Israel, a third being from Sudan.

When the surge began, Israel was faced with a dilemma. Sudan is an enemy state having no diplomatic relations with Israel. In the past, Sudan harbored terrorist groups including Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. Enforcing the sharia law, Sudan is even today one of the most extreme Islamic states. In Israel, therefore, Sudanese citizens were considered a security threat and the government felt justified in sending the men to jail.

Yet Israel began to realize they couldn't keep stuffing prisons full of refugees. Israeli human rights organizations protested that

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this went against the Geneva Convention. In 1949 the young state of Israel had lobbied to have a clause added to this Convention requiring countries to differentiate between refugees from enemy countries and enemy citizens, citing the example of Jewish refugees seeking safety in England from Nazi Germany.

The Sudanese refugees found advocates in Holocaust spokesmen such as Eli Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate who protested that Israel had a moral obligation to help people fleeing from genocide, as the Darfur situation was defined.

As a result of the pressure from non-governmental agencies (NGOs) but without a clear plan or vision, the Israeli government began releasing from jail some of the refugees, to kibbutzim and moshavim where they were allowed to work. They reasoned that the refugees would be under a type of house-arrest but have the ability to reside outside of prison and to earn money.

A friend of mine was working with the Sudanese at the time. “They’re happy to be out of jail, but they still don’t feel free because they aren’t allowed to travel outside the kibbutz,” she told me. “And it’s hard for them to live as a single family on the kibbutz since they’re used to living in a community.”

Hearing that the refugees were allowed to work in the kibbutzim, the hotel managers in Eilat, a city dependent on tourism, had a bright idea. Desperately short of workers but unable to find enough Israelis willing to work in the lowest paying jobs as dishwashers or cleaners, they reasoned that the Sudanese could fill those positions. Eilat is separated from the rest of Israel by the Negev Desert, so the Sudanese could also be considered to be under house-arrest while working in Eilat.

The government agreed and within a few weeks, in May and June of 2007, hundreds of Sudanese began arriving in Eilat and working in hotels. Gabriel was one of the first.

It appeared to be the perfect plan. The refugees received housing, meals, and even daycare for their children; and the hotels found cheap labor.

“Where else in the world do refugees have it so good?” I asked John. “In Afghanistan, Chad, Pakistan, the Congo and other places,

the refugees live in deplorable conditions in tent camps or slums, while in Eilat they have jobs and apartments.”

In this connected world of cell phones and email, friends and family of the refugees soon heard about the excellent conditions waiting for those who arrived in Israel. More and more refugees arrived, as well as nationals from other African countries such as Ivory Coast, Eritrea and Nigeria, who were seeking a better life for themselves and a chance to earn a higher salary than at home.

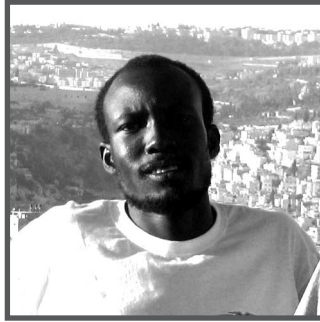
In time we realized that the hotels weren't charitable organizations with altruistic goals. In some cases the money being deducted for the refugee's expenses was more than they were making and the poor people were in debt to the hotel.

The refugees themselves and those of us who were helping them realized that Israel could in no way accommodate all the poor Africans who wanted to come here—potentially millions. But what was the solution?

We believed it was our duty to help those already in Israel and to treat each one as a human being created in God's image. We would help however we could. And we would try to understand their situation—what they came from, how they got here, and how we can help them transition into a new culture.

The heart-wrenching sagas of their dangerous, roundabout journeys from south Sudan and Darfur to Israel touched us deeply. Our lives have become so intertwined with theirs, that at the end of the day John and I often look at each other and ask, “What did we do before we met the Sudanese?”

1. GABRIEL



Gabriel in Jerusalem 2007

Into the Promised Land

On a comfortable day in May Gabriel began calmly telling his story. With skin darker than almost anyone I'd ever seen, he folded his long, thin frame into an armchair in our living room. He paused and looked around the room with doleful, steady eyes. Around him, twenty five young people sat in chairs and on the floor in eager silence, straining to hear Gabriel's smooth, calm voice.

If I told you everything that's happened in my life it would be too sad, so I'll make my story short. I'm about thirty years old, and I've experienced war in my home country since I was six. I haven't felt any happiness in my life.

Gabriel was our guest at a planning session for the 2007 "Fun Day" we were organizing for Sudanese refugee children. We asked him to share his story, hoping he could help us understand the background of these children.

To understand our problems, you have to know that throughout its history, Sudan has been divided between the north with its Arab, Muslim heritage, and the south where we are Christians (as I am) or animists.

During Sudan's Civil War that began in 1983, government troops from the north attacked and bombed my village in the south. My family was separated—we all ran in different directions. Most were killed. At that point, I was still with my mother but when I was eleven years old I separated from her and fled with other young boys to Ethiopia. Eventually I began wandering from place to place in East Africa. But wherever I went, I was an outsider, a refugee with no documents.

As I listened I thought how I like to travel and have been to many countries. But I couldn't imagine traveling without a passport. Of course I'd often read about refugees in the newspaper and seen pictures on television of displaced people from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq and other nations. There are millions of refugees all over the world. But I'd never realized that the simple detail of not having a passport was enough to cause Gabriel to be thrown into jail in nearly every country he entered.

Gabriel continued:

In 2004, after wandering about for so many years looking for a peaceful place to live and the possibility to study but with no success, I decided to move to Egypt. Unfortunately, I discovered that in Egypt the situation was no better than in Sudan. Gangs of thugs attacked us Sudanese on the streets for no reason. The people of Egypt and north Sudan all act the same toward us southerners and hate us because of our black skin.

I was employed in Cairo as an interpreter of the Dinka language, my mother tongue, into English for the United Nations and the International Red Cross. But the Sudanese government

officials weren't happy with my work on behalf of the refugees from south Sudan. My life was in danger and I couldn't move about freely on the streets.

I'd heard about Sudanese crossing the border into Israel. I knew about Israel. By this time I had acquired a passport, and in it was written, 'Good for all countries of the world except for Israel.' I was aware of the dangers but I had nothing to lose and saw no other path open to me. I knew I couldn't return to Sudan.

I decided that even if Israel were an enemy state to Sudan, I would go there and tell them, 'Sudan and Israel are enemies. But the Sudanese government that's against Israel is against me too. I'm running away from that government, but they've followed me to Cairo. So please, I'm fleeing for my life. Please forget about Sudan being an enemy state and help me.'

I saved some money and traveled with a friend to El Arish in the northern Sinai. We found Bedouin guides and paid them to help us get to the border. Our first problem was Egypt's many secret police and roadblocks. Just being a Sudanese on the way to the Sinai arouses suspicion. If you're caught, they kill you or throw you into jail; or if you're really unlucky, they send you back to Sudan.

Although the border between Egypt and Israel is guarded and in most places has three rolled, barbed wire fences, it is more porous than one might think, considering Israel's reputation for tight security. The local Bedouin were already conducting successful smuggling operations of cigarettes, drugs and prostitutes through the rugged desert and across the frontier.

Our Bedouin guides encouraged us, 'Be strong and be calm. Your only problem is here on the Egyptian side. If you reach Israel, you'll be okay. The Israeli soldiers will help you. They'll treat you with respect. Maybe then your life will be okay. We can't go with you to the fence, because when they see us, they'll

shoot. Don't turn around. Always go forward. Because if you turn back, you'll lose your way and might be shot.' And with that the Bedouins ran away and left us.

The fence was still about 700 to 800 meters away. And the Egyptian soldiers were in between. I told my friend that we should hide ourselves. 'We'll creep along the ground until we reach the fence.'

It was very hard work. We were both afraid, but my friend was petrified. When we came near the fence the Egyptian police saw us from afar. They began shouting at us, but didn't see us clearly because it was still dark. We probably looked like small trees to them.

The Bedouins had told us, 'If they see you, just run.' My friend took that concept and bolted. It was a terrible risk. They couldn't see us properly, but as we ran they could tell we were Sudanese. Soldiers were running after us and shooting. I ran back and hid myself. It was daybreak, about 4 A.M. I remember being very, very tired.

My friend was caught. He was really crying, sobbing. And they kept beating him. I took a chance—with the help of what seemed to be a supernatural power—and jumped over the fence. I fell into the Israeli side where I lay unconscious.

When I awoke, the sun was bright. I went to the road and waited until I was found by Israeli soldiers. They took me to their camp. That was on June 22, 2006. They asked a lot of questions, but didn't make me feel I was their enemy, though Sudan has no diplomatic relations with Israel. They understood.

The soldiers gave me and other refugees food, but in our exhaustion we couldn't even eat. A doctor examined us, cleaning the wounds of one injured Darfurian and giving him medicine. In the evening we were taken to Negev Prison where we met about one hundred Africans living in tents inside the prison compound. The refugees were on one side and the Palestinian prisoners were on the other side.

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Just before hearing Gabriel's story, we had eaten a tasty, filling meal. In a few hours we'd go to sleep in our comfortable beds. All around us were friends and people who loved us. But here was a man, a follower of God as we were, yet because he happened to be born in Sudan, his life had gone in a direction completely opposite to ours. I grew up in a loving, Jewish family in the U.S. and by choice I now lived in Israel, happily married with four children.

Life in prison wasn't that good. We had enough food. But we didn't understand why someone who had run away from war was being held in prison. The guards were kind and kept telling us, 'Don't worry. No one will beat you here.' They encouraged us to be patient.

I could only imagine other prisons Gabriel had been in where he obviously had been starved and beaten.

That's how it was in that prison. The only bad thing was that if we were sick, they wouldn't treat us because we weren't officially convicted prisoners. They told us, 'You haven't yet been sentenced in court, so we can only give you first aid, not medical care.'

We were moved from one prison to another, and after nearly a year I was released. In May 2007 I came to Eilat, but we were freed on condition. I am allowed to work in the Royal Beach Hotel in Eilat but cannot leave my job without permission. I'm concerned because the Israeli government threatens to deport us back to Egypt, and we're tired of living with that uncertainty.

When Gabriel stopped speaking, we were all speechless. How can he sit here and in such an emotionless voice tell us this?