

Maayan Milgram

TRANSLATING TEXT INTO ACTION AND TRADITION INTO ADVOCACY

February 17, 1939; Caracas, Venezuela. Gusta Feldman, a teenager and my great-grandmother, had arrived from Romania two and a half years earlier in search of a better life. That Friday she awaited with great anticipation the arrival of the *Koenigstein*, a German steamboat carrying Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. President Eleazar Lopez Contreras had given permission for the Jews to dock. Eventually he allowed them, and other Jewish refugees, to make Venezuela their permanent home. The president's act of humanitarian outreach is representative of the general attitude with which Venezuela welcomed the arrival of Jews over the course of the entire twentieth century, an approach that enabled the building of an economically vibrant, cultural, religious, and pro-Israel Jewish community in Venezuela. Today Venezuela does not take in refugees. Currently in a state of emergency, with rapid social and economic decline, thousands of Venezuelans desperately flee the country weekly and are themselves now refugees.

The Jewish values imbued in me by my family, school and community implore me to take action, apply my ideals to a real-life situation and heed the call of Hilda Specter Morgenstern, "to love and serve our fellow men and community." The tables have turned, and my generation of future Jewish leaders has a unique opportunity to give back to the Venezuelan people what they gave to the Jewish refugees: help, hope and a new home. I can think of no better place to enrich my Jewish education with the express goal of effecting change in public policy than Israel, a country with deep insight and extensive experience in the integration of foreign citizens into a new society. At Nishmat: The Jeanie Schottenstein Center for Advanced Torah Study for Women, where I am enrolled for the 2018-2019 academic year, I will

experience firsthand how the teaching of Jewish values, spearheaded by an influential female Jewish educator, can result in social action and public policy initiatives that help the plight of the new immigrant. Integrated with the program I will attend is Maayan, Nishmat's initiative designed to prepare young Ethiopian immigrant women for a life in Israeli society, its workforce and institutions of higher education. Indeed, Nishmat's Ethiopian students often enroll in the Ministry of Education's Shiluv program, through which Ethiopian students are admitted to Israeli colleges.

THE VENEZUELAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Once a country with a booming economy and a thriving middle class, today, despite its resources — Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves [!] — doctors, lawyers, professors, and accountants struggle to buy basic items such as toilet paper, hand soap, and bread. Medicines are unavailable, and the murder rate is a staggering 92 per 100,000 people per year and climbing. The Citizen's Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice recently declared Caracas "the most violent city in the world." Admiral James Stavridis, former Supreme Allied Commander at NATO, predicts there will be a civil war. People are suffering; and now they are leaving. The exodus has begun. But who will absorb these refugees? Some have already begun to make their way to the shores of South Florida and many, many, more will soon arrive.

The United States must prepare itself for the inevitable deluge of Venezuelan refugees. These refugees, like so many before them, will seek political asylum and protection. The Venezuelans are made up of a strong and educated workforce of professionals and skilled laborers in areas that once flourished in their native land. They include graduates of Venezuela's top universities, still among the finest in Latin America, former scientists and engineers in the fields of crude oil and crude steel production, as well as agricultural technicians. Who will assist

these refugees to regain a life of normalcy? Who will hand these professionals, many of them parents of young children, some semblance of hope? I want to help these people rebuild their lives in America.

I propose starting a nonprofit organization, *VIDA* (Spanish for “life”), Venezuelan Immigrants Determined to Advance, the first step towards petitioning the current administration of the United States to launch a full-blown refugee plan for fleeing Venezuelans. While seeking public funding, I will also raise money among Venezuelans already in the United States. That same population will serve as the initial professional contacts for the new immigrants. I will create a mentoring program based on the fields of specialization of the new arrivals and those Venezuelans already here. And, in order not to saturate professional markets in specific American cities, through research-based studies on the demand for different professionals all over the United States — whether physicians, educators, engineers, skilled laborers or others — my organization will effectively relocate Venezuelans specifically to regions where they are needed. In this way, each and every refugee will begin his or her life, *vida*, anew.

STUDY IN ISRAEL: THE INTEGRATION OF TORAH VALUES AND SOCIAL ACTION

Nishmat’s founder and dean, Rabbanit Chana Henkin, a senior woman educator of rare erudition and conviction in Israeli Orthodox society, is a trailblazer in the education of Orthodox women in Israel. She is a role model for all young women wishing to immerse themselves in traditional Jewish study with the goal of effecting social change in the communities around them. Nishmat’s educational model and communal configuration will both enhance my experience. With a flexible curriculum, students are encouraged to design significant parts of their yearlong

study program. Furthermore, as already mentioned, the program for overseas students is fully integrated with the concurrently run Maayan program for Ethiopian immigrants.

My chosen curriculum will focus on specific questions related to the plight of refugees. Both ancient and medieval Jewish texts are full of information and insight about the Jew's obligation to her fellow Jew and community at large. Indeed, talmudic texts and their medieval commentaries seek to define the parameters of one's obligation to one's fellow. They richly engage the ethical dilemmas revolving around the freeing of captives, the imperative to teach someone a trade in order to be independent and the value of providing the persecuted with refuge.

Studying at Nishmat will not only give me the opportunity to engage in a meaningful self-designed curriculum relevant to my goals. Being at Nishmat will give me the unique experience of actually living and engaging on multiple levels – academically, socially and communally – with a cohort of my contemporaries with direct knowledge of persecution, relocation and assimilation into a new country and its culture. While, certainly, the experience of a young Ethiopian woman integrating into Israeli society is starkly different from that of a Venezuelan moving to the United States, some common elements between refugees and immigrants from politically unstable, violent and war-torn societies do exist. My time living among the Ethiopian community at Nishmat will open my world to a whole host of new possibilities and perspectives as I sharpen the program and goals of *VIDA*, a plan I expect to set in motion upon my return to the United States, while a student at Barnard College. I want to translate text into action and transform tradition into advocacy. I know abuela Gusta would be proud!