

A-Maisseh

Foreign Workers in Israel!?

Recommendations

This lesson plan explores some of the inter-connected and complex relationships that exist in Israel today. An often forgotten and marginalized group of people within the fabric of Israeli society are foreign workers, who number approximately 250,000. Despite bearing the brunt of governmental regulation and permit struggle, foreign workers form an indispensable part of the Israeli work force, performing jobs that other citizens often do not want to do.

The phenomenon of foreign workers, especially in the care of the elderly, is the focus of this short film. Participants will learn about foreign workers in general, the challenges they face despite their necessity in Israeli society and explore the deep relationship formed between an elderly man and his caretaker. Participants will be asked to explain this relationship on a philosophical level, requiring analytical skills and the ability to extrapolate from what they see in the film.

Target Age Group

Upper High School or University Students.

This plan can be adapted for Middle School as well.

Objectives

- To familiarize participants with the plight of foreign workers in Israel today.
- To encourage participants to seek meaning in relationships.
- To foment participants' extrapolation skills.
- To encourage a discussion about effects of the Holocaust on the elderly.

Supplementary Materials

Appendix #1 Background on Foreign Workers in Israel

Appendix #2 Hebrew Labor

OPENING ACTIVITY – An ‘Other’ in Israel

Goal: To familiarize participants with the context of this film: foreign workers in Israel.

(a) Learn the Background

Hand the participants Appendix #1, an information sheet about foreign workers in Israel. Let them know that foreign workers have been an issue in Israeli society for at least the last ten years and will continue to be so as long as there are labor-force issues in the country.

Invite participants to sit in pairs to read the information presented and discuss the following questions:

- Why is there a need for foreign workers in Israel?
- Why is there a limit on visas for workers?
- Why do you think such a large number of Israelis employ illegal foreign workers?
- Why is it problematic for the state of Israel that there are illegal foreign workers within the country?
- Can you think of a legitimate argument for and against foreign work forces in Israel? Think of your own country - are these arguments relevant to your country as well?

These questions can be used for discussion in small groups as well as in the larger forum. Depending on how far into the issue the group is seeking to explore, this discussion can also be curtailed until after watching the film.

For younger groups, conduct the discussion of the background information in the whole group format. Explain the idea of Jewish majority and the demographic issues Israeli might face if they allow foreign workers to become citizens. Make sure students understand that the demographic issue and the lack of labor force in certain industries, especially care of the elderly and construction, is the reason that Israel allows workers to live in the country.

(b) Optional Activity: Foreign Labor in Light of Zionist Philosophy

During the second aliyah, in the 1920s/30s, there was a strong movement to discuss the foundations and goals of Zionism. Thinkers such as Berl Katznelson and A.D. Gordon talked extensively about the concept of "Hebrew labor."

Write this term on the board and ask students to throw out associations with this concept. Use Appendix #2 for the rest of this activity.

Ask students to read the background information on the sheet and then read the quote from A.D. Gordon's work.

- How does Gordon explain the necessity for "Hebrew labor?"
- How is this concept justified in his vision for the Jewish State?
- How do you imagine Gordon would react to the issue of foreign workers in Israel today?

One option is to lead a debate with the students. Give half the class the job of representing A.D. Gordon and other labor Zionists from the 2nd aliyah that believed strongly in the need for Hebrew labor. Have the other half of the class act as Israelis of today defending the need for foreign workers. This can be held as a full debate or done as a writing assignment, asking students to argue both sides of the debate in a paragraph.

Remind students that the Zionist project has gone through many metamorphoses over the years and that Israel, as a young state, still has many developments to make. Their thoughts on this subject are relevant to a current debate happening in Israeli society, as we will see through one particular case in the short film.

Also remind students that there are MANY other dimensions to this issue that are not presented in this lesson plan.

SECOND ACTIVITY - Exploring Relationships

Goal: Participants will watch the film and examine the unique relationship between an elderly Israeli man and his caretaker, who is an illegal foreign worker.

(a) Watch the Film

Tell participants to look specifically at the way the grandfather in the movie acts towards his caretaker. What creative step did he take to protect the young boy?

THIRD ACTIVITY: Breaking the Law?

Goal: Participants will explore the situation in this film, in which an elderly Israeli man decides to protect an illegal foreign worker. Knowing that he is breaking the law, participants will connect the elderly man's history with his actions now.

(a) Initial Reactions

Give participants a moment to react to the film verbally.

- What do they think right after seeing it?
- How does the movie make them feel?
- With whom do they sympathize in the film?

(b) Processing and Organizing

Divide the board into three sections; at the top of each one write a character: "grandfather," "caregiver" and "children."

Ask participants to list under each column in what ways each character is justified in his/her actions in the movie. In another color, write ways in which they are unjustified in their actions. After making these lists, divide participants in pairs/small groups for the first part of the discussion.

(c) Why does he do it?

In their study groups, ask the participants to discuss, in light of the previous brainstorm, the following questions:

- Why does the grandfather want to protect his foreign worker?
- In what way does he ensure that the worker will not be discovered?

Note to Teacher

Participants should notice that the elderly man has taught his caregiver Yiddish. Working with his caregiver's knowledge of this language the grandfather is able to ensure that the worker can hide in the bathroom and "fool" the policemen. If need be, hint this to participants.

- If we assume that this elderly man is a Holocaust survivor, in what way might he justify his protection of his foreign worker despite the law?
- In what ways is this situation similar to that of Jews hiding during the Holocaust (that might spark the memory of the grandfather)?
- In what ways is this situation different from that of Jews hiding during the Holocaust?

(d) Group Processing

This last discussion should be a time for participants to process the film. This short film combines two sensitive issues: the foreign work force in the modern state of Israel and the feeling of being chased left over by the Holocaust in the memory of an elderly survivor.

Ask participants first to share their answers to the above questions.

- Do they validate the old man's behavior?
- To whom do they feel sympathy?
- In light of the complex situation of foreign workers in Israel, some legal and some illegal, can you see the side of the children who want their elderly father not to take issue with the law?

The central question for this discussion can be based on the sensitivity of both issues: foreign workers is a difficult subject in Israel because it goes against the original Zionist adage of bringing "Hebrew labor" to work the land. In today's Israeli society, non-Jewish labor forces do most of the construction work.

Another difficult aspect is this elderly man's attachment to his caregiver. If the young man initially received a visa for a year or two and then could not extend it, how is this to be explained to a senile elderly man? Invite participants to consider these issues on two levels: technically and/or legally or emotionally.

CONCLUSION

In the end, give participants a chance to say what they feel. The film brings up a sensitive issue to which there are many dimensions and many issues. This film is a tool to explore the issues.

APPENDIX #1 - Background on Foreign Workers in Israel¹

Israel's rapid economic development in recent years, coupled with its rising need for labor - foremost in agriculture, constructions and nursing - has recently made the country a target for foreign workers. These people are willing to work for wages that, though lower than the Israeli norm, allow them to save and send money to their families in the countries of origin.

The population of foreign workers in Israel today stands at about 250,000 - of them 100,000 legally in the country, and 150,000 "illegals." The latter either come as tourists and stay on, or come legally as foreign workers and overstay their permit, or go to work for higher wages to other employers. Foreign workers account for about 13 percent of the labor force. In a survey of 1,400 upper middle-class families in Israel (Ha'aretz, April 9, 2004) 98 percent employed foreign workers without a legal work permit (despite threats of a 10,000-shekel fine!)

Illegal foreign workers come from Romania, Ghana, Nigeria, Colombia, the Philippines, Turkey, Ukraine Russia, and other former Soviet countries, in all from sixty-seven countries worldwide. Residents, even when illegally in the country, are entitled to health and education services and may complain to the police about offenses against them. The police will deal with such complaints, without taking their illegal presence into account.

A majority of illegal foreign workers lives in Tel Aviv, and there are kindergartens, schools and clinics that serve mainly them and their children.

Problems of illegal workers are mainly related to exploitation - terms of employment; living conditions; social benefits that fall short of accepted levels; denial of workers' freedom and/or holding them as hostages; and, in extreme cases, trade in these workers, in contravention of accepted moral norms and mores. Thus, in July 2001 the Knesset passed the Law for the Prevention of Trade in Human Beings, which prescribes a maximum penalty of sixteen years' imprisonment for this offense (twenty years when the victim is a minor).

¹ From Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website, "Foreign Workers"
http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2001/8/Foreign+Workers.htm

Israel regards illegal foreign workers mainly as victims and the focus of its policy is to treat the causes of victimization, rather than the results. In order to stem illegal immigration, and above all "white slavery", close and sustained cooperation with the countries of origin, as well as those of transit, is of importance. The authorities have arranged for tougher control procedures, including sophisticated technology, to prevent illegal immigration at the points of entry into the country. Those arrested for illegal presence in the country have three days in which to lodge an appeal against deportation in court. A hearing, by a representative of the Ministry of the Interior (with the status of a judge) has to take place within 14 days; he has the authority to nullify the deportation order, or to grant release on bail. According to a May, 2003 report by Kav La'Oved (Foreign Workers' Hotline), it is not unusual for workers to be deported without receiving wages due them. The report also accuses the Immigration Police of using brutality when dealing with foreign workers.

APPENDIX #2 - Hebrew Labor

Background Information

During the second *aliyah* period, many Jewish immigrants to the Land of Israel sought year round jobs on the agricultural tracts and plantations of their co-religionists who had arrived during the first *aliyah*. Rather than hire their fellow Jews, the immigrants of the first *aliyah* were initially inclined to hire local Arabs, who provided cheaper, seemingly more experienced, labor. Eventually the immigrant laborers of the second *aliyah* successfully unionized and emphasized their Jewish identity and shared nationalist goals in order to persuade the first *aliyah* immigrants to hire them and thereby displace the Arab labor.

They organized under the banner of "Hebrew Labor" or "conquest of labor". The leaders of the second *aliyah* agreed that Jewish labor was vital for the national revival process; they were convinced that Jews should 'redeem' themselves by building with their own hands a new type of Jewish society. They also thought the use of Arab labor could create a typical colonial society, exploiting cheap, unorganized indigenous labor, and would hamper further Jewish immigration. Finally they considered manual labor a good therapy for Jews as individuals and as a people. In Ben-Gurion's opinion Jewish labor was "not a means but a sublime end," the Jew had to be transformed and made creative in his/her own land.

A.D. Gordon on "Hebrew Labor"²

The Jewish people has been completely cut off from nature and imprisoned within city walls for two thousand years. We have been accustomed to every form of life, except a life of labor- of ***labor done at our behalf and for its own sake***. It will require the greatest effort of will for such a people to become normal again. We lack the principal ingredient for national life. We lack the habit of labor... for it is labor that binds a people to its soil and to ***its national culture, which in its turn is an outgrowth of the people's toil and the people's labor***. ... We, the Jews, were the first in history to say: "For all the nations shall go each in the name of its God" and "Nations shall not lift up sword against nation" - and then we proceed to cease being a nation ourselves.

² A.D. Gordon, "Our Tasks Ahead" 1920 (Emphasis added)