

Sukkot Reminds Us of the Plight of the World's Refugees

By Karen Brodsky

As we approach Sukkot, one of the most joyous of all Jewish festivals, we are reminded that our ancestors wandered in the desert for 40 years. They lived in tempo-

rary shelters, called booths or huts. On Sukkot, we are commanded to dwell in huts, take our meals there and, if possible, sleep there.

While we cannot be certain if the Israelites enjoyed living in

their temporary shelters, the Torah tells us that miraculous "clouds of glory" surrounded and hovered over them, shielding them from the dangers and discomforts of the desert.

Fast forward to today. Millions of people languish in refugee camps around the world. They, too, live in huts. There are no clouds of glory to surround them. They have no running water, must bathe in public and live by candle

power or for some, who are luckier, kerosene lamps.

There are many refugees in Charlotte who have lived in these camps. Some spent upwards of 20 years in refugee camps. Two of Charlotte's newest residents, Ngana Subedi from Bhutan, and Myin Aung from Burma (known now as Myanmar), spoke to us for this story.

According to the HIAS Inc. website, Bhutan, located in Southern Asia, has produced, in proportion to its population, one of the largest groups of refugees in the world. In the early 1980s, the government of Bhutan began cracking down on the rights of ethnic minorities, especially the rights of the Lhotampas, a group originally from Nepal. After languishing in refugee camps for up to 17 years, refugees from Bhutan began entering the United States in 2008.

The Subedi family fled to the Beldangi II camp, run by the UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency. Ngana, who was ten at the time, described it as rooms built with bamboo and mud. A family lived, slept, and did their cooking in one room. They bathed with cold water. There was no facility for waste removal so they dug holes in the ground to dispose of it. Ngana's little sister,



A Burmese mother of seven sits on her stoop. Photo courtesy of UNHCR.

Indra, was born in Beldangi, adding to the already-crowded room. There was no electricity, but each family had a kerosene lamp. Food rations included rice, cooking oil, powdered milk, and seasonal vegetables.

The Save the Children Fund and UNHCR ran medical clinics in the camps. While children attended school, Ngana said there were few skilled teachers. There was also physical punishment, so students were not motivated to go to school. They said they had nothing to look forward to.

Ngana's brothers were lucky to have attended high school and learned English in Bhutan. They were able to leave the camp to teach in boarding schools run by Nepalis who had slim pickings of

(Continued on next page)

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Bhutanese refugee children play in an alley behind their bamboo huts. In the distance, a shiny solar rice cooker stands in the sunlight. These were placed in camps in Eastern Nepal in 2008. Photo courtesy of UNHCR.



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Levine JCC teen campers enjoyed playing Wii™ this summer with Oasis Senior Enrichment Program participants, like Mike Schreiber (pictured above). The Wii™ helps seniors with mobility and range of motion. Its purchase was possible thanks to a grant from the Area Agency on Aging Senior Center. If you would like to make a donation to Oasis or to serve as a volunteer driver, please contact Linda Bass, 704-944-6735 or linda.bass@charlottejcc.org.

Below: Levine JCC teen campers Tommy Winterfield and Jake Bernstein learn a game from Oasis Senior Enrichment Program participants, Betty Ravitch and Kaye Liachoff.



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