

Dorit's Yom Kippur talk about AJWS

Prostitutes are human beings.

I'm guessing those are not words you expected to hear from me.

But that is what I learned from spending three months in Uganda this year, working as a volunteer with American Jewish World Service.

(Incidentally, the preferred word is sex worker – so that's what I'll say from here on.)

I first learned about AJWS when I heard our own Riva Silverman speak from this Bima a few years ago. Riva's talk about AJWS work in Darfur inspired me to join AJWS Volunteer Corps, which links professionals with local grass-roots organizations in the developing world.

AJWS asked me to work with a small non-profit founded by three young sex workers in Uganda. The organization is called Women's Organization Network for Human Rights – WONETHA. I agreed

to the assignment with considerable trepidation. I couldn't imagine how my experience could be relevant to sex workers and I feared I wouldn't be able to relate to their needs.

It turned out to be an amazing, eye-opening experience. Because I am a lawyer, my work mostly involved helping WONETHA with legal issues such as compliance with local labor laws. The work was interesting, and I'd like to think it was helpful. But the work was perhaps the least important aspect of my experience.

I met many sex workers in Uganda. I saw where they worked and heard their life stories. In 100% of the cases, these women turned to sex work because of desperate poverty. In Uganda, polygamy is legal, so many of these girls came from families with 20 or more children. Some had been raped. Many were born HIV-positive.

These girls turned to sex work so that they could put food on the table. With no education or skills, selling their bodies was their only option. And they were very proud of being able to help their families—many told me of paying to educate all their siblings

because education isn't free in Uganda. Several told with pride of building homes for their moms.

The three women who founded WONETHA were determined to make life better for sex workers. At great personal risk, they have gone public to show that sex workers are mothers, daughters, sisters and sometimes even wives, with human rights like everyone else. They have opened up dialogue with community leaders to obtain improvements in the health and well-being of their colleagues. They run workshops teaching sex workers about condoms, healthcare, and alternative careers. They are extraordinary women.

One day I was working with one of these women, who I'll call D. D was writing a report for one of WONETHA's international donors – something she had never done before. I gave her some tips, but a few minutes later I found her sobbing as though her heart would break. She was feeling overwhelmed and incompetent.

This is a woman who has been raped; has HIV; has a disabled daughter; and has been selling sex since she was 14. She is outspoken and funny. To all the

world, she seems to be totally self-confident. Yet she was undone by a project that my child could have done in middle school.

D needs training in how to write reports. She needs an English tutor. She needs a mentor. She really needs a mother.

I couldn't give D everything she needed in my short time in Uganda. But I did give her a hug and a pep-talk. I helped her write the report, and left her with tools to help with the next one.

Getting to know D and her friends made me appreciate how lucky I am – and how lucky my children are – to have been born into a life full of everything we need to thrive physically, financially, and emotionally.

We did nothing to deserve this. It is just our accidental good fortune to have been born into our lives. D didn't deserve her plight – but I admire her extraordinary courage, spirit and determination to do something about it, and to help others in the same terrible situation.

The Haftara this morning reminded us about the mitzvah of sharing our bread with the hungry, clothing the naked, and developing empathy for the poor. When we do that, we bring light to others but also into our own lives.

So on this Yom Kippur, please think about how you might help

Pick up the materials about AJWS in the lobby. They do really important work, all over the world -- and all motivated by Judaism's imperative of tikun olam – repair the world, a little bit at a time.

Whether you contribute your time, your money, or your voice – you will be helping someone in desperate need. And I can assure you that no matter how you choose to contribute, you will receive much more than you give.

Thank you. Shana Tovah and Gmar Chatimat Tova