



Mumbai and Beyond

An AJWS tour of grassroots India

One week before terrorists attacked Mumbai in late November, Ruth Messinger led an American Jewish World Service Study Tour to India that offered a very different glimpse of the country than that revealed in the wake of the tragedy. Eighteen supporters of AJWS explored the sources of injustice against India's poor, and met grassroots leaders working across the country to overcome it. What they saw gave room for hope: in a support group for battered women, in the homes of HIV homecare providers and at a clinic for intravenous drug users in Mumbai's slums, they encountered again and again the courageous people working to diminish the stigma and discrimination within the caste system and advocate for equal rights for all of India's people. Our grief at the loss of 163 innocent lives and AJWS's proximity to the attacks make the beauty of India's grassroots activism all the more poignant.

PHOTO RUTH MESSINGER



“In Mumbai, the young women and girls are standing to greet us. ... Shy only for a moment, they suddenly cannot wait to tell us their stories. Their need to tell is matched by our eagerness to hear. Wives whose husbands abuse them, discard them, but won't grant a divorce.

A 16-year-old whose husband throws her out of her home, and when she later writes to tell him she is pregnant, denies the baby is his. A woman in black garb and dark sunglasses sits quietly in the corner. The glasses hide eyes so badly damaged by beatings that she required two surgeries.”

—Debra Weiner



“As I listened to the strong, determined women tell their stories I couldn’t help thinking of the Jews fleeing Egypt, or the Sudanese who survived even though their villages were burned. ... I loved how passionate they were about demanding their rights.”


—Alison Katz



“For me, in India, there were only the children—on platforms and slums; abused, infected, hungry; untouchables sweeping toilets. I never understood what low caste really means. Now, I will

never forget it. But I will give to those who have not lost hope and they will give to the children. ... I have given and therefore, I have planted many plants to feed bodies and souls no different than mine.”

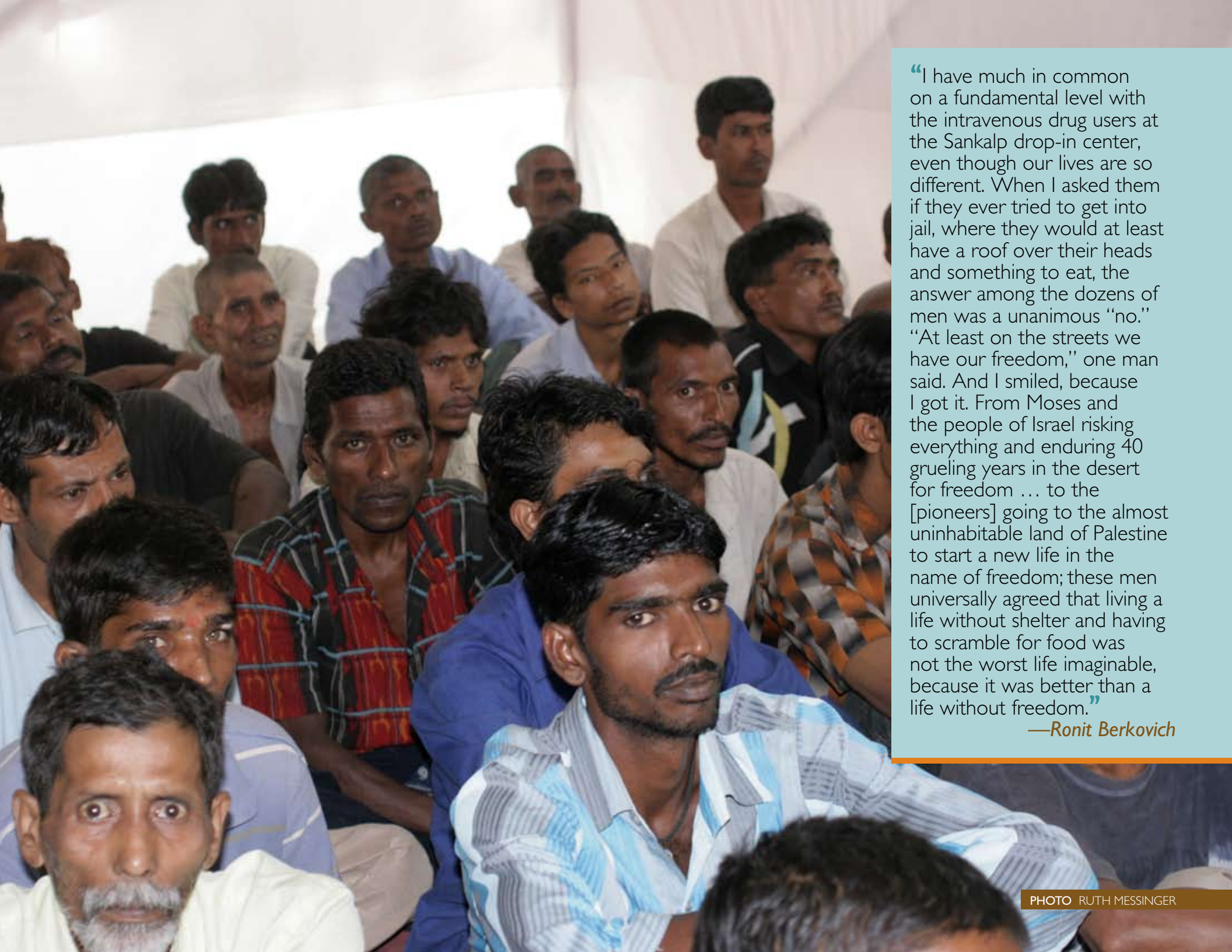
—*Rabbi Steven Leder*



“I asked the woman in the slums what she would ask for if she had one wish. I expected her to say a bigger house, guaranteed meals, or a miraculous cure for her dreadful disease. But what did this poor, deprived, sick

woman ask for? A better education for her children. I smiled. A universal reaction from a mother. After she said it, it made total sense to me that what she would want, more than anything, is a better life for her children.”

—Ronit Berkovich



“I have much in common on a fundamental level with the intravenous drug users at the Sankalp drop-in center, even though our lives are so different. When I asked them if they ever tried to get into jail, where they would at least have a roof over their heads and something to eat, the answer among the dozens of men was a unanimous “no.” “At least on the streets we have our freedom,” one man said. And I smiled, because I got it. From Moses and the people of Israel risking everything and enduring 40 grueling years in the desert for freedom ... to the [pioneers] going to the almost uninhabitable land of Palestine to start a new life in the name of freedom; these men universally agreed that living a life without shelter and having to scramble for food was not the worst life imaginable, because it was better than a life without freedom.”

—Ronit Berkovich

Nov. 2008

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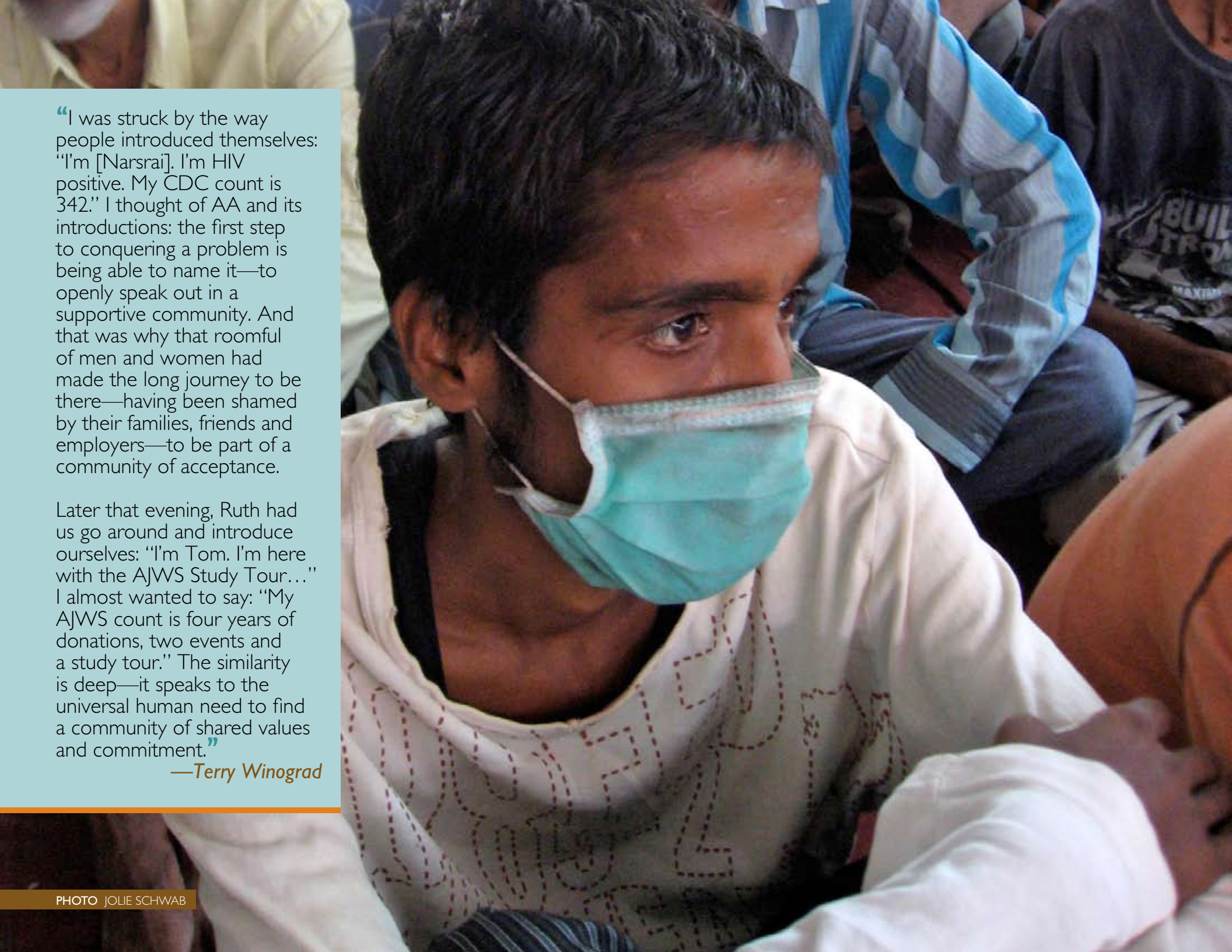
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“I learned that AJWS does ‘rights-based’ projects. Not giving out resources to the poor, but finding ways to educate people about their rights and support them in creating communities that

insist, against power, that those rights must be honored. They don’t just get aid from AJWS, but build a base to provide for themselves what they deserve as human beings.”

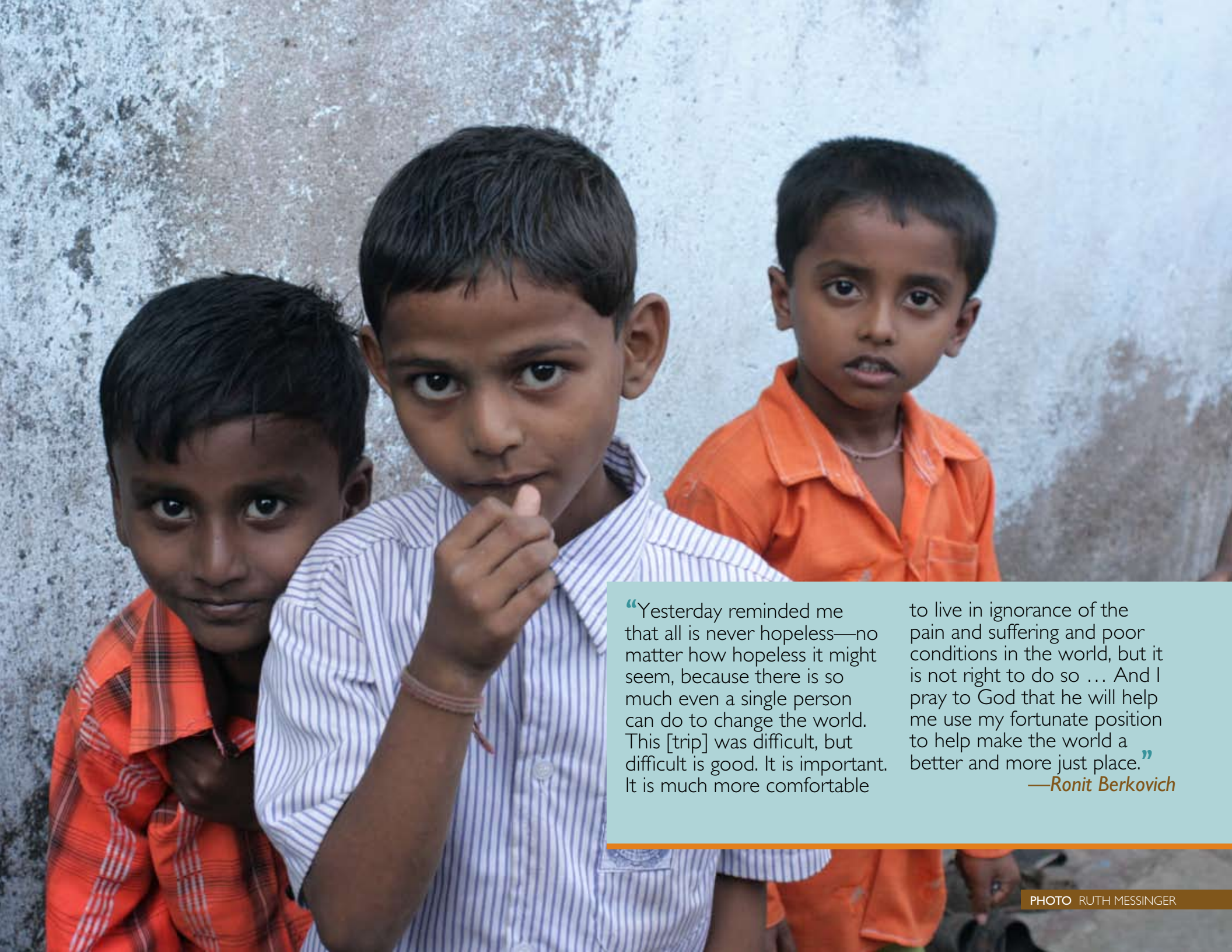
—Terry Winograd



“I was struck by the way people introduced themselves: “I’m [Narsrai]. I’m HIV positive. My CDC count is 342.” I thought of AA and its introductions: the first step to conquering a problem is being able to name it—to openly speak out in a supportive community. And that was why that roomful of men and women had made the long journey to be there—having been shamed by their families, friends and employers—to be part of a community of acceptance.

Later that evening, Ruth had us go around and introduce ourselves: “I’m Tom. I’m here with the AJWS Study Tour...” I almost wanted to say: “My AJWS count is four years of donations, two events and a study tour.” The similarity is deep—it speaks to the universal human need to find a community of shared values and commitment.”

—Terry Winograd



“Yesterday reminded me that all is never hopeless—no matter how hopeless it might seem, because there is so much even a single person can do to change the world. This [trip] was difficult, but difficult is good. It is important. It is much more comfortable

to live in ignorance of the pain and suffering and poor conditions in the world, but it is not right to do so ... And I pray to God that he will help me use my fortunate position to help make the world a better and more just place.”

—*Ronit Berkovich*

“I will always remember the amazing degree of openness and friendliness we experienced again and again as we wandered into places where we were strangers. This is the India I'll most remember.”

—Terry Winograd





American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is an international development organization motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice. AJWS is dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world regardless of race, religion or nationality. Through grants to grassroots organizations, volunteer service, advocacy and education, AJWS fosters civil society, sustainable development and human rights for all people, while promoting the values and responsibilities of global citizenship within the Jewish community.

www.ajws.org/studytours



PHOTO JOLIE SCHWAB