

# AJWS REPORTS

Fall 2009

## Fighting Hunger from the Ground Up

### INSIDE:

Grassroots Solutions to a Global Crisis  
Defending the Amazon  
Rep. Howard Berman Wants Reform  
Ten Ways YOU Can Fight Hunger!





### AJWS Reports

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## Dear Friends—

This past year, we witnessed an increase in global poverty and hunger at a magnitude not seen since the Great Depression. The United Nations reports that over a billion people are living with chronic hunger today. Poor nutrition contributes directly to half of all child deaths in the developing world, with numbers on the rise.

The problem of world hunger is not simply a lack of food. It is the result of deep social injustice and inequity, compromising the fundamental human right to life. Hunger deepens poverty by corroding people’s ability to work, to educate children and to secure basic human rights. As Jews and global citizens, we will not accept such a broken world.

This Rosh Hashanah, AJWS is taking on this most critical of global challenges by launching *Fighting Hunger from the Ground Up*, a campaign to promote grassroots solutions to hunger. This initiative will marshal AJWS’s expertise in grantmaking, education and service, and will augment our ongoing advocacy campaign for a more just and effective U.S. foreign assistance program.

Over the next two years, we aim to raise \$1 million to support nearly 60 grassroots organizations in 17 countries that are promoting sustainable, local solutions to hunger. Your support will directly help tens of thousands of farmers build sustainable livelihoods, gain access to land and markets, and increase their ability to feed themselves and their families. The campaign will raise awareness about the political causes of hunger and harness the collective energy of the American Jewish community to make a difference. I have the great privilege of having been appointed to the Obama administration’s newly formed Task Force on Global Poverty and Development, through which I will work to promote a human-rights based approach to hunger by our government.

Inside this issue of *AJWS Reports* you will find background on the politics of hunger, success stories from AJWS’s extraordinary grantees, an interview with Representative Howard Berman describing the urgent need for foreign assistance reform, and many ideas for ways that you, personally, can help end world hunger. We hope that you will join us in this important work. Together, we can stop hunger one community at a time, *from the ground up*.

Ruth W. Messenger  
President

*AJWS Reports* was printed on paper that was produced locally and contains 30% post-consumer recycled content material. This issue saved 2 tons of wood, 11 million BTUs of energy, required 5,000 fewer gallons of water, eliminated 2,400 lbs. of CO2 from greenhouse gas production and prevented 700 lbs. of solid waste from entering landfills. These estimates were made using the Environmental Defense Paper Calculator. For more information, please visit [www.papercalculator.org](http://www.papercalculator.org).



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**COVER** An Ethiopian man examines his crop in northern Tigray province. Ethiopia struggles to feed its fast-growing population of nearly 80 million, 85 percent of whom are peasants, amid recurrent drought and deep poverty. Radu Sigheti / REUTERS

**FACING PAGE** A farmer works on a rice field in Nischintapur village in northeastern India. Jayanta Dey / REUTERS

**ABOVE TOP** Dile Lolo, 60, takes a break from tilling a field with his family near the village of Magariya Koshimawai in southern Niger. Finbarr O’Reilly / REUTERS

**ABOVE RIGHT** Peruvian indigenous leaders gather outside Congress in June 2009 (story on page 10). Evan Abramson for AJWS



# Fighting Hunger From the Ground Up

## ***Introducing AJWS's campaign to promote local solutions to a global crisis***

By Leah Kaplan Robins and Josh Berkman

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights both declare that access to adequate food is a universal human right. So why does a typical family in the developing world have to spend 80 percent of its income on food?<sup>1</sup> Why are more than a billion of our fellow human beings undernourished?<sup>2</sup> Why does a child die every six seconds—that's nearly 10 lives lost since you began reading this article a minute ago—from starvation and hunger-related causes?<sup>3</sup>

The answer is that *hunger is political*. The news media would have us believe that there is a huge global food shortage, but we know this to be untrue. In fact, last year, the global cereal harvest was more than *twice* the amount consumed around the world. The problem is that not enough of it is being produced in the right places, for the right reasons, by the right people.

1-4 Footnotes: [www.ajws.org/ajwsreports](http://www.ajws.org/ajwsreports)

*Fighting Hunger from the Ground Up* is AJWS's campaign to help right this wrong. By learning about the root causes of hunger and supporting organizations working to overcome them, we can help create sustainable solutions.

### **Exposing the Politics of Hunger**

Hunger is the byproduct of our hyper-competitive global economy, where the world's wealthier governments and industrial powerhouses jointly use their leverage to maximize profit over human need.

The specifics of this power dynamic can be seen in the life of a basic grain: A bushel of corn grown in Kansas is bought and sold as a commodity on Wall Street and other global exchanges many times over before it makes its way to your local supermarket and pops up in corn-sweetened products like soda. Our government wants these

products to be affordable, so it provides subsidies—hundreds of millions of dollars—to incentivize large farming conglomerates to grow crops like corn and soybeans in bulk. The result is an enormous annual surplus of cheap grain—far more than Americans could ever eat ourselves.

The surplus is bought by our government and donated or sold cheaply to the world's poorest nations as food aid. This sounds good at first, but, in truth, by the time recipient governments take a profit and the food finally reaches the consumer market, it is still far too expensive for a family that survives on only a dollar or two a day to afford.

One mechanism that keeps this profit-driven food system running is free trade. In the mid-90s, for example, the U.S. entered into two major trade agreements—NAFTA, with Canada and Mexico, and CAFTA, with virtually all of Central America—which eliminated tariffs and quotas. Free trade was promoted

as a way for market forces, rather than regulatory policy, to determine price (not unlike what happened in the banking and credit industry), but the real effect was to give big businesses the ability to export unlimited amounts of their products directly to commercial markets at lower costs.

This one-two punch of food aid and commercial imports has devastated local farming in developing countries. Small-scale local farmers simply can't compete with predatory pricing practices and the flood of subsidized American food. People who have farmed their whole lives are often forced to migrate to the cities or abroad, leaving a giant hole where there should be a thriving local agriculture industry.

Additionally, free trade prioritizes the rights of multinational corporations over those of local citizens. CAFTA and NAFTA both contain provisions that enable corporations to sue governments for the use of natural resources or land when their business interests conflict with local interests or policy.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, this has enabled corporations to pollute and dry up water sources and mine indigenous lands freely. All too often, peasants are displaced land that their families have farmed for generations.

This cycle leaves entire populations bereft of land and sustainable, local food sources, making them completely dependent on imports and food aid. When these sources dry up or global market prices rise, people starve.

Indeed, hunger is political.

## We Can End Hunger in Our Lifetime

Recognizing that hunger is a political problem is empowering: We can change politics and policies as we have throughout history. By organizing people and giving them the tools to use their own collective leverage and talent, we can bring an end to world hunger.

AJWS supports nearly 60 grassroots organizations that are securing their communities' right to food. Local experts

are working with hundreds of thousands of people—one community at a time—to use the ground beneath their feet to build sustainable agricultural economies so that local people, rather than foreign markets, can control the source and cost of food.

One AJWS partner, Red de Comercialización Comunitaria Alternativa (Red COMAL), has helped more than 16,000 rural Honduran families grow and produce food and sell their products in a network of locally-run marketplaces. Other AJWS partners are training farmers to grow larger, more diversified harvests using fewer chemicals, restoring natural resources and reversing land degradation. Communities are mobilizing to secure access to water and high quality seeds and are ensuring that small-scale farmers have the means to store, market and sell their harvests profitably. Grassroots organizations are also empowering peasants to advocate for their land and water rights and defend their property from imposed development.

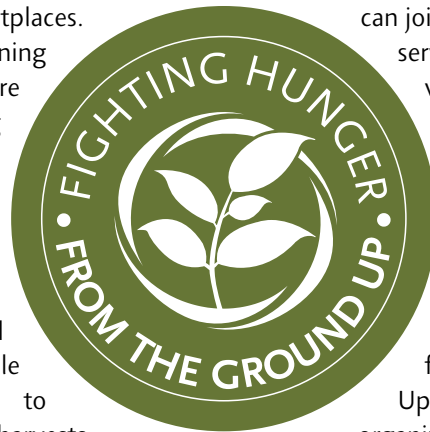
The need for these initiatives is not just a matter of staving off immediate hunger. Reintroducing local food production has a ripple effect: Because the vast majority of rural citizens in the developing world are farmers by trade, their commercial success is at the root of further economic development. If they thrive, over time, their communities will gain strength, capital and access to the broader economy, strengthening civil society.

## Help AJWS Fight Hunger

In 2000, world leaders established a global partnership committed to halving global poverty by 2015. The Millennium Development Goals have led to great progress in many parts of the world, but even as countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam are climbing the development ladder, one-sixth of humanity remains abjectly poor. Each one of us must

help move the world along towards ending hunger for everyone.

There are many ways to get involved. You can support AJWS's work to advocate for fair trade agreements, debt cancellation for impoverished nations and reform of the U.S. foreign assistance program. By raising your voice, you can help spread awareness about hunger in your synagogue, your JCC, your school and around your community. You



can join one of AJWS's service programs to volunteer with one of our grassroots partners and learn about hunger alleviation first-hand. And your donation to Fighting Hunger from the Ground Up will go directly to organizations like Red

Comal and others featured on our website, that are doing the on-the-ground work of building sustainable food economies. Together, we can build a world where food is a guaranteed human right.

## Hunger is a Jewish Problem

*Pirke Avot, Ethics of our Fathers, says: "Without sustenance, there is no Torah." This tells us that as Jews, we must respond to and address hunger before we get to anything else—even Torah study—because without food, it is impossible to thrive. To save lives in this most fundamental of ways is a core Jewish imperative and central to AJWS's mission.*

*We hope that you will join AJWS in our campaign to support grassroots organizations that are implementing sustainable solutions to hunger. To learn more about Fighting Hunger from the Ground Up and get involved, visit: [www.ajws.org/hunger](http://www.ajws.org/hunger).*

# Seeds for Sustenance

One innovative grassroots project sows food and independence in Haiti  
*An Interview with Josette Perard*

*Hunger is consuming Haiti. Malnourishment is so alarming and pervasive that a full 76 percent of Haitian people live in abject poverty, surviving on fewer than \$2 per day.<sup>5</sup> One in ten children dies before reaching age five.<sup>6</sup> Over the past two years, Haiti's people have plunged from one food-related crisis to another: first the food riots of spring 2008, when starving citizens took to the streets to protest skyrocketing food prices; and then last summer's fast succession of punishing hurricanes, which wiped out a year's crops. While the humanitarian community struggles to provide aid to the more than 3.3 million Haitians now in need of urgent food support, it is clear that longer-term solutions are desperately needed.*

By Leah Kaplan Robins

**H**aiti's dire poverty has spawned grassroots initiatives that look for creative solutions to hunger. AJWS grantee Lambi Fund of Haiti helps peasant organizations set up community-run agricultural enterprises. One such project has transformed the isolated mountain village of Bèlfontèn, one of the poorest in the country, by helping a local organization—Association of Young Peasants—establish a seed bank. With high quality seeds, tools and storage now at their disposal, the village's 250 families have launched a community farm project and many individual enterprises, and are reporting profits after their first harvest.

Lambi Fund's Haitian director, Josette Perard, explains how the seed bank has replaced a bleak, hungry future with one of hope.

*Q: What are the most critical challenges that the people of Bèlfontèn face?*

**Josette Perard:** Bèlfontèn is one of the poorest communities in all of Haiti, mainly because of its isolation and lack of services

5-6 Footnotes: [www.ajws.org/ajwsreports](http://www.ajws.org/ajwsreports)

and support from the government. The community, which is a several-hours' drive from Port-au-Prince on mountainous roads, followed by a two-hour trek on foot, depends principally on agricultural production for its livelihood. Farmers had been forced to travel long distances to buy seeds, often paying double or triple the profit made on the crops they sold. Since they had no storage facilities, at harvest time they had to sell crops at cheap rates to wealthy farms, and not enough food remained within the community.

*How has Lambi Fund's seed bank project impacted life in Bèlfontèn?*

Today, the people don't depend on the big farmers anymore, because they are in control of their own farms and have the means to buy seeds and store the harvest. Food can stay within the community to feed people and then it can be sold at the right time for a good price in nearby markets. All of these things have improved the work—the people feel better, they're responsible, and they can grow more and get more in return. That's food security. This has changed the life of the people.

*Have you seen a visible change in the health of the community?*

Yes, there is less malnutrition. The families have more food, and that food stays in the community. Lambi also provides them with good water, so the children drink clean water and eat better and their health improves a lot. The parents have money to send their kids to school, pay for drugs and healthcare. We see a lot of letters from beneficiaries telling us that.

*Why are organizations like Lambi Fund important even when Haiti receives millions of dollars in foreign assistance? What can local responses achieve that larger-scale projects can't?*

Lambi doesn't impose what we want; before we start an activity we visit the organization, talk to the people about what they want to accomplish. We help them financially, we give training, but they are doing the activity. This is a good thing because the people take their lives into their own hands.

With large-scale foreign aid, the organizations go and say "I'll put

something there,” but maybe it’s not what the community wants. And sometimes these million-dollar initiatives fail because they don’t involve the people in the doing of the activity. How could I sit in the capital and tell a rural community what it should do? But when you sit with the people and help them envision and carry out a project, they succeed because they are in charge and they know best what will work.

*Has the community felt the impact of free-trade policies on its ability to sell local goods?*

Yes. Free trade is killing agriculture in Haiti. Last year, for instance, the government imported rice, and it was selling cheaper than the rice that the Haitian community was selling. They almost destroyed that market. The people have started protesting against those agreements, making demands to the government. This is why organizations like Lambi are supporting local agriculture.

*Hurricanes Fay, Gustav, Hanna and Ike decimated much of Haiti’s farmland last year. What has Lambi done to help communities recover and how have the people prepared for this year’s storm season?*

The impact was terrible everywhere in Haiti, but the hurricanes are much worse for the poor. There are those who live in weak houses; those who live in the fields. The environment is so degraded, and deforestation has made it so the land slides away with the floods. Every time there’s even wind threatening a storm, the people are scared!

Last year, for each project that had a problem because of a hurricane, Lambi’s emergency program helped farmers rebuild their fields and restart their activities. We held meetings to prepare people for what to do when the next storms come. We have helped build greenhouses so people can plant seedlings whose roots will secure their structures and their land in the



PHOTO PAWEL GAUL

future. But we alone can’t change the environment. There has to be a unified initiative by the state to organize groups like Lambi and the people themselves. People have to work together.

*How does Lambi’s agricultural work promote the Haitian people’s struggle for human rights?*

Human rights means having food; having others respect and recognize your right to exist and your rights as a human being. This is one of the things that Lambi does. We not only help financially but we work with the people and support all their struggles. When we conduct our agricultural trainings, we also talk about women’s rights; the right of the people to attend school; to

access everything that a human being should have. This is an integral part of our work.

*What is your vision for the future?*

The next step is always to help more, to empower the people, to help them make their own decisions, to be part of the decisions in government. They have to be part of it, because if not, change will not come. The conch shell—Lambi Fund’s logo—is a Haitian symbol of togetherness. The hope of the community is to work together and to make decisions together to change their situation, and in the communities where we work, and where our colleague organizations are, people understand that. ■■■

# IMAGES OF THE AMAZON AT RISK

*Photographer Evan Abramson visited Peruvian communities at the epicenter of a bloody struggle for land rights. His photographs, taken days after a massacre of peaceful protesters in Bagua, depict a people who are defending their territory with their lives.*

Text by Evan Abramson, Sara Hahn and Leah Kaplan Robins



*In Peru,* oil drilling and mining threaten the very existence of the Amazon rainforest's rich flora and fauna—and the well-being of the indigenous peoples who have lived there for hundreds of years. The government of Peru supports these projects with little regard for the impact they have on the environment or the human rights of its inhabitants. For decades, indigenous peoples have suffered the effects of deadly pollution and have been forcibly and violently removed from their lands, while the rainforest's fragile

ecosystems are degraded by the plunder of transnational corporations.

But indigenous communities have recently begun to fight back. On June 5-6, 2009, indigenous peoples' groups, organized by AJWS grantee Inter-Ethnic Association for Development in the Peruvian Amazon (AIDSESEP), organized a peaceful protest near Bagua, Peru, to show their opposition to two new laws that would open up 70 percent of the resource-rich Amazon to extraction of oil and timber. The Peruvian police brutally attacked the unarmed protesters, killing an estimated 25 to 40 people (the final

death count remains unconfirmed) and detaining at least 150.

Outraged and empowered, on June 11, more than 10,000 protesters flooded Lima in a nation-wide strike organized by AIDSESEP and other civil society leaders. Peru's indigenous congresswoman Hilaria Suppa led a parallel protest in Congress, for which she was suspended by the government.

These efforts paid off: The offending laws were revoked in mid-June, earning a temporary reprieve for the rainforest and its people. But this was a muted victory—tinged with mourning and bitterness.





#### DIVIDED ACCORD

(ABOVE) Members of the Peruvian cabinet and indigenous Amazon organizations (led by AIDSESEP) convened on June 17 for the signing of an agreement that recommended the abolition of Laws 1090 and 1064 and recompensation for the deaths of protesters.

(LEFT) Indigenous leaders gathering their spears after leaving Congress. Though the pro-development laws were revoked, the government has yet to account for the killings. Although some saw the abolition of the laws as a victory for indigenous rights, others were critical of such quick willingness to negotiate following the Bagua massacre. They want the government to take responsibility for abuses against citizens and they demand representation in future planning for development projects on their territory.

Acting president of AIDSESEP, Daysi Fasabi Zapata, addressed her community on June 18:

*“Today is a historic day. We are grateful because the will of the indigenous peoples has been heard and we only hope that in the future governments listen and attend to indigenous peoples, that they not legislate behind their backs.”*

## PROTECTING HOME AND FAMILY

Children in Copal Urco, Peru.

*(BELOW)* An aerial view shows the small Kichwa community of Copal Urco, where local indigenous communities organized a nearly two-month-long blockade of the Napo River in June in response to increased oil exploration and illegal logging on their territory.



## BLEEDING THE EARTH

*(ABOVE)* Crude oil seeps out of the ground after a spillage at a drilling site just two kilometers from San Cristobal, where Argentine oil company Pluspetrol has contaminated local water supplies and caused several deaths. AJWS partners Racimos de Ungurahui and Amazon Watch have taught members of the community to monitor the environmental impact of oil drilling and defend their legal rights.



## WINNING THE RIGHT TO CLEAN WATER

*(LEFT)* Alfonso Sandy, an indigenous leader in the Achuar community of San Cristobal, participated in a June blockade of the Pluspetrol airport defending his territory from oil drilling. “The oil company and the police threatened to kill us when we were protesting,” he said. “They shot at us, piercing the banner that a young boy was holding. The police told us, ‘You have no territory. This all belongs to the State.’”

*(BELOW)* Up until 2007, Pluspetrol was dumping millions of liters of chemically treated salt water directly into the Corrientes River near Achuar, but has since been forced to stop through repeated activism on the part of San Cristobal and other local indigenous communities. Today, the water is safer for communal use.

*(BOTTOM)* The community of only 40 families suffered two deaths due to water contamination in 2007. Pluspetrol recently conceded to local pressure and gave the people of Achuar access to clean, treated tap water.



*AJWS grantee Amazon Watch is working to raise awareness locally and internationally about threatened land in the Peruvian Amazon. To contribute to letter-writing and petition campaigns and to stay abreast of developments on this issue, please visit:*  
[www.ajws.org/ajwsreports](http://www.ajws.org/ajwsreports).

# WOMEN'S WORK

Indian women are gaining power and sustenance through agriculture

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROSE



**GROWTH**  
Newly trained farmers transplant seedlings.

***Sixty to eighty percent of the food produced in developing countries is grown by women, yet women own less than 10 percent of the land.<sup>7</sup> As the global food crisis continues, this paradox is becoming a deadly threat, undermining food security and costing lives around the world.*** By Sara Hahn

When women are given the tools to succeed in agriculture, they prove to be an exceptionally productive workforce,<sup>8</sup> yielding prolific crop output, stronger families—studies show that women are more likely than men to invest income in their children and households—and more equitable communities.<sup>9</sup>

Yet in many societies, women are hindered by their lack of access to land, resources and agricultural education. Policy-makers, businesses and governments often fail to recognize the importance of women in agricultural economies, and do not invest in building women's farming skills. In many societies, the law prevents women from owning land; in others, women's education and success are less

7-9 Footnotes: [www.ajws.org/ajwsreports](http://www.ajws.org/ajwsreports)

valued; and all too often, agricultural work is viewed as a man's job.

## Agricultural Empowerment

In the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, women are learning to become agricultural leaders. AJWS grantee Rural Social Organization for Education (ROSE) has been organizing landless women and marginal landholders into farming collectives. ROSE's training programs help women gain access to land and high-quality seeds, share resources and teach one another to cultivate herbs and vegetables through organic farming. Since its inception in 1993, ROSE has provided in-field training to more than 23,000 participants, leading to profits and increased self reliance.

ROSE helps women who normally have little control over their access to food or its production gain food security. They learn to irrigate crops, improve soil fertility, compost, raise livestock and plant kitchen gardens to cultivate medicinal herbs. ROSE also arranges for newly-trained women farmers to disseminate their knowledge to other members of their villages.

"It's important to rural communities since we have less money and income," says M. Chitra, a ROSE-trained farmer who lives in the village of Poovampatty. "I can make medicines out of local herbs. These are simple techniques, but they have made our lives better and sustained our livelihood in the countryside."

"I am happy that I am raising a garden," says P. Veerammal, a mother of four children, whose thriving small business now

yields food to eat and traditional medicine to sell. “My family members are getting vegetables and herbs. I am becoming an earning member of society and a role model to fellow women, as they are replicating the same model in their own backyards.”

The gardens, on average, ROSE reports, yield 140 percent increase in income for women growers. Improved soil health is also a welcome byproduct of its farming projects: “We used to put a lot of chemical fertilizer and pesticide in our fields,” says Mrs. Pappathi, a mother and farmer in Vadaseripatti village. “But they would release poisonous odors. I would find frogs and earthworms dead the next day. This project changed things, and renewed our hope in farming.”

## From Disaster to Opportunity

When the Indian Ocean tsunami struck Tamil Nadu in 2004, ROSE used

its networks and resources to help rural people get back on their feet.

The organization recognized that the severity of the devastation was not merely the result of the tsunami itself, but of decades of environmental degradation that destroyed natural flood barriers like mangrove forests. ROSE supported the replanting of mangroves in local coastal communities and set up 112 community task forces for disaster preparedness. Simultaneously, the organization bolstered the role of women as leaders in their communities.

“Before the tsunami, women were solely homemakers and stayed at home,” says Karthik Kadiresan, a coordinator for ROSE. “The organization now provides a forum for women to come out and speak up, go places and participate more.”

ROSE’s approach to hunger, gender equality and disaster empowerment embodies the notion of effecting change from the ground up. “The reason ROSE’s

model of exchange has been so successful is that communities are teaching other communities,” says Deval Sanghavi, who heads Dasra, an AJWS grantee that has consulted with ROSE for many years.

“Learning happens much more quickly because communities are talking to one another,” says Sanghavi. “Barriers such as language and religion are all broken down because people are able to relate to other communities that faced similar challenges.” He says that peers tend to be more successful at imparting ideas than outside donors or experts. “Because they are community to community, these teaching models can sustain themselves going forward.” ■

### » Online

A short film produced by ROSE shows Indian coastal communities preparing for future natural disasters.

View it at [www.ajws.org/ajwsreports](http://www.ajws.org/ajwsreports).



AJWS’s dear friend and grassroots partner, Gustavo Marcelo Rivera, was a well-respected and devoted community leader, teacher, environmental rights and democracy activist in the municipality of San Isidro, Cabañas in northern El Salvador. In order to serve the educational, health and cultural needs of his community in one of the country’s poorest areas, Rivera founded and led Asociación Amigos de San Isidro (ASIC), a

## AJWS Calls for Justice in the Murder of Activist and Friend, Gustavo Marcelo Rivera

grassroots community-development NGO and AJWS grantee. ASIC and Rivera were leaders in the community’s opposition to the activities of Canadian mining company Pacific Rim, as well as members of the National Roundtable Against Mining.

As an activist for democracy and fair elections, Rivera participated in protests highlighting serious irregularities in municipal and legislative elections in January 2009. As a result of these activities, he received repeated threats to his life and safety, which he reported to the police. He disappeared on June 18, 2009, and his body was found in early July at the bottom of a well, showing clear signs of torture.

Rivera worked closely with many AJWS staff and volunteers since AJWS first partnered with ASIC in 2006. He was a leader among other AJWS grantees in El Salvador, and in the months prior to his

murder, helped coordinate the first-ever collaborative meeting of all AJWS partners in the country. As one member of AJWS’s staff delegation to El Salvador wrote of Rivera: “He had a personality as strong as his voice, a voice for justice. I hope his family and community have confidence that the world will become a better place as a result of Marcelo’s work.”

AJWS deeply appreciates all the ways in which Rivera went above and beyond what was necessary in his work with us, and we send our deepest condolences to his family and our colleagues at ASIC. We strongly condemn this killing of a colleague and social activist, and urge the Salvadoran authorities to fully investigate the case and bring the perpetrators of the crime to justice. ■

—Diego Merino

# Time for Reform

*Representative Howard Berman talks about his new bill and the need for a more just, efficient foreign assistance program.*

Interview by Josh Berkman

PHOTO: FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/MUSICFIRSTCOALITION/1115568281



Through its foreign assistance program, the U.S. government provides vital services to people around the world; however, conflicting goals, lack of coordination and an increasingly burdensome bureaucratic system limit the effectiveness of foreign aid. But there is a movement afoot, led by activists and members of Congress who believe the time has come for an overhaul. Representative Howard Berman (D-CA), chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, recently introduced the Initiating Foreign Assistance Reform Act of 2009, which proposes broad-based reform of the program to more effectively reduce world-wide poverty and help communities of the developing world build sustainable economies. He recently spoke with AJWS about the need for reform.

*Q: What are the major problems with the status quo?*

**Rep. Berman:** The basic law governing our foreign aid programs was written in 1961, and though it has been amended frequently, it is largely out of date and poorly suited to responding to today's global challenges. Foreign assistance programs are fragmented across 12 departments, 25 agencies and nearly 60 government offices. As a result,

our programs suffer from inadequate coordination, unclear objectives and competing or overlapping mandates.

*How will your proposed legislation improve upon this model?*

The foreign aid reform bill will define a limited number of clearly-stated goals for our foreign assistance programs, strengthen civilian capacity within our government to provide effective assistance

and improve coordination among departments and agencies. It will elevate the role of development in our foreign policy, provide greater flexibility for the administration and ensure increased transparency and accountability for Congress and the American public.

*What do you believe should be the principal goals of our foreign assistance program?*

In general, our assistance should further U.S. foreign policy and national security by meeting basic human needs, advancing peace and mitigating crises, supporting human rights and democracy, building and reinforcing strategic partnerships, combating transnational threats and expanding prosperity through trade and investment.

*Why do you feel we need to establish a global strategy for development?*

There seems to be very broad consensus that the U.S. must have a clear statement of goals and objectives for our assistance to developing countries, and a rational plan for how to achieve them. In the past we have tended to equate development with development assistance, omitting consideration of some of the other factors that have a major impact on global poverty, such as policies and programs in the areas of trade and finance, agriculture, arms sales and climate change. We also have not stressed host country ownership and accountability in devising our development strategies. If we are to contribute toward meeting internationally-recognized goals, it is essential that all the agencies and departments sit down together and come up with a coordinated plan for reducing global poverty and contributing to broad-based and sustainable economic growth.

*What are some of the benefits to the American people?*

Overhauling our foreign assistance apparatus is critical to safeguarding

America's long-term national security, augmenting our diplomacy, stimulating global economic growth, confronting transnational threats and ensuring that U.S. foreign assistance echoes the values and priorities of the American people.

*What kind of role do you see for local NGOs in lifting communities out of poverty?*

One of the things we have learned over the past thirty years or so is that foreign assistance programs don't work

very well without local ownership. It is absolutely essential that individuals and communities receiving assistance—including women—be involved in the decisions that affect their lives. That means participating in every stage of project planning, development, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. Where there are no host government institutions that are capable of soliciting local input and responding to local demands, we need international and local NGOs to perform those functions and to help build that capacity. ■■

**Join AJWS in advocating for change—**

**Just Aid: A justice-based vision for foreign assistance reform.**

[www.ajws.org/justaid](http://www.ajws.org/justaid)

## LAUNCHING GLOBAL CIRCLE

*Young leaders take the reins in AJWS's newest social justice initiative.*



(ABOVE) Cliff Sabbag, Leah Hirsch and Dena Blank

PHOTO DAVID ROTBARD

AJWS Global Circle—a new program for globally-conscious young professionals—is up and running in New York and Washington, D.C. The early attention garnered by the initiative after just a handful of events is thanks, in large part, to its grassroots leadership. The group's staff liaison, Jenny Goldstein, works with an active volunteer steering committee and its dynamic committee chair in New York, Dena Blank.

Blank joined Global Circle in fall 2008 to help energize young Jews ages 25-to-40. Her vision of a community where young professionals serious about

global justice can network and socialize and discuss their philanthropic interests has bloomed, due to what she believes is the natural sensibility of her generation:

"I think this generation is incredibly attuned to global issues. Borders that once seemed distant are closer, and as a result we have a global perspective and feel a sense of obligation to others in the world, both within and beyond the Jewish community. Global Circle presents the unique opportunity to be a part of a community where global consciousness and Jewish engagement can come together." ■■

At the official launch of Global Circle in May 2009, hundreds of young New Yorkers convened at the James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea for hors d'oeuvres and a multimedia presentation by award-winning photojournalist and humanitarian Ron Haviv. That same week, Ruth Messinger joined a group of Washington, D.C. supporters at a party to kick off Global Circle in the capital.

"The energy that we've already seen in our first two events shows that there's an unbelievable amount of untapped potential," says Blank. "My hope for Global Circle is that we successfully create a forum for young Jews to express their belief in global citizenship, find meaning in Judaism in new and fresh ways, and inspire each other and others to give and get involved."

Currently vice president for alumni affairs at Teach for America, Blank is a graduate of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and has worked with an array of empowerment-oriented initiatives, including GirlVentures, Forward Progress, Girls Incorporated and Meet the Wilderness. She encourages others with a commitment to global change to get involved. ■■

*For information about an upcoming Global Circle event near you, visit [www.ajws.org/globalcircle](http://www.ajws.org/globalcircle) or contact Jenny Goldstein at [jgoldstein@ajws.org](mailto:jgoldstein@ajws.org).*

*—Leah Kaplan Robins*

# HUNGERING FOR CHANGE

By Rabbi Brent Spodek

**Yom Kippur**, the most somber day of the Jewish calendar, carries with it the reminder of the fragility of life. The life-affirming practices of our physical existence—washing, perfuming, having sex, drinking, and most famously, eating—are shuttered away, creating a 24-hour meditation on our mortality, character and purpose.

Fasting is a particularly powerful spiritual tool: The discomfort of hunger reminds us of our bodies' instability, forcing us to confront the ephemeral nature of our existence. Food deprivation refocuses our wandering minds on the most elemental components of life, demanding that we examine how we will use our limited time on this planet. Some traditional practices encourage us to refrain from speaking anything other than words of prayer on Yom Kippur, so that the day, bereft of food and conversation, truly cuts us off from human life as we know it.

But of course, our hunger ends when the sun sets and the shofar is blown. Ultimately, our fasting is a metaphor, not starvation itself.

The Rabbis are careful to reinforce this idea, prohibiting deprivation that might be life threatening. In one memorable case, during a 1848 cholera epidemic, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter posted notices in all the synagogues instructing people not to fast on the holy day. He took bread into his synagogue, and in front of the whole congregation, made blessings and ate, to make sure the community understood the importance of eating so as to resist the disease. Rabbi Salanter wisely wanted to ensure that nobody died from a metaphor.

**F**or 1.02 billion people—more than the combined populations of the United States, Canada and the European Union—hunger is neither a metaphor nor a spiritual tool. It is a painful, debilitating reality, and most alarmingly, it is caused by unjust man-made systems, not a lack of food. People are starving today because of structural inequities and profit-driven industry, which have robbed their villages and towns of land and a sustainable agriculture infrastructure, making nutritious food scarce and unaffordable.

In Mexico, for example, an onslaught of megaprojects—dams, wind farms and mines—has been the result of the rising

demand for energy and natural resources in bordering U.S. regions. The companies that run the projects often seize indigenous land, pollute rivers and aquifers and destroy farmland. Our own free trade agreements condone the “re-appropriation” of land for industry, and further destroy the market for small-scale agriculture on which most of the world’s poor depend. The people who live on land that has been ravaged for its resources are hungry because we—and the governments that represent us—have failed to prioritize the human right to food.

It is unlikely that this kind of hunger will be the source of spiritual insight. As Gandhi said in 1938: “It is fine to talk theology over this lovely meal, but to the poor, God can only appear as bread and butter.”

For those of us who have the luxury to use fasting as a spiritual practice, Yom Kippur brings with it the opportunity to contemplate our role in this global, interconnected world; to recognize our complicity in the political and economic landscape that fuels hunger. With this recognition, the pangs of our metaphoric starvation can drive us to take action on behalf of those who hunger today and every day against their will.

We must urge our political leaders to challenge unfair trade policies and protest inequitable food distribution and exploitation of small farming communities. By supporting grassroots organizations that are defending indigenous lands from exploitation and working to reverse malnutrition and disease, we can help ensure that the human right to food is fulfilled for more people in the year to come.

*For centuries, the Yom Kippur fast has been a productive hunger, its mortal grip jolting us to introspect, reflect and transform our own lives. Let our fast this year motivate us to transform the lives of others, becoming a spiritual tool for global change.*



## REFLECTION

An Ethiopian girl sells carrots on the roadside.

PHOTO RADU SIGHETI / REUTERS



# Ten Things YOU Can Do to Fight Hunger Today

By Ruth W. Messinger



- 1. Speak out!** Even though the UN has declared that food is a universal right, many countries still reinforce a global system that shuts out more than a billion people on society's margins. Learn more about the politics of hunger and write, blog, tweet and spread the word!
- 2. Volunteer.** There is no better way to learn about the complex challenges communities face in fighting poverty and hunger. A textured understanding of hunger's root causes will make you a better advocate and also show people in the developing world that they have global support. AJWS offers programs for teens and adults of all ages to make a difference in people's lives and become true voices for change.
- 3. Educate others with a solidarity plate.** This holiday season, set an empty place at your table to raise awareness about those who live with hunger every day. As you give thanks for the food you are about to eat, take a moment to talk with your guests about the politics of food distribution and global hunger.
- 4. In lieu of flowers...** Consider making a donation to *Fighting Hunger from the Ground Up* next time you give a hospitality gift, or ask your guests to do the same. AJWS will notify recipients that a donation to fight hunger has been made in their honor.
- 5. Dedicate your Yom Kippur fast to alleviating hunger.** Put your fast in perspective, and think about people around the world for whom hunger isn't voluntary. Consider donating the money that you would normally have spent on food to support solutions to global hunger.
- 6. Make your voice heard in the news.** Write a letter or op-ed to your local news source in support of a hunger-related cause. Urge the media to cover hunger in a way that focuses on economic rights rather than food scarcity; educate readers about grassroots solutions to hunger. Whatever you're passionate about, exercise your right to freedom of the press!
- 7. Write to your Representative.** For decades, our tax dollars have funded government subsidies of corporate agriculture, leading to unnecessary surplus. Their surplus crops are dumped on developing countries, squeezing small-scale producers out of their own local markets and ultimately placing poor communities at the mercy of volatile global commodity prices. Tell your Representative that you want your money spent elsewhere!
- 8. Buy "fair trade."** Free trade policies overwhelmingly benefit wealthy nations and multi-national corporations over small-scale farmers. In many cases, free trade has been used to justify labor exploitation and seizure of indigenous land. When a product is "fair trade," it means that it was produced using equitable business terms and sustainable and environmentally-friendly production techniques. Some of the proceeds help promote market access for marginalized people, community empowerment and advocacy for land rights.
- 9. Advocate for renewable energy that doesn't use food for fuel.** As demand for ethanol has grown over the past few years, farmers world-wide have begun to allocate disproportionate amounts of their cereal harvests for corn, degrading the environment and making less food available for human consumption. Pressure the Obama administration to develop a renewable energy policy that helps the environment without increasing global hunger.
- 10. Support foreign assistance reform.** Our government's current foreign assistance program sends a large percent of aid in the form of American-grown food rather than cash and training for local farmers. Sending food to impoverished nations is not a sustainable way to fight hunger. Farmers in the developing world know how to grow food but lack the resources, inputs and tools to farm effectively and enter the system of global trade on reasonable terms. Visit [www.ajws.org/justaid](http://www.ajws.org/justaid) to join AJWS in advocating for "Just Aid" today.

#### » Online

*The Nation* featured AJWS's action items against hunger in its May column, *10 Things*.

Read it at [www.ajws.org/ajwsreports](http://www.ajws.org/ajwsreports)

# Finding New Vision in Ghana

A meditation on humanity, justice and why alleviating global poverty is a Jewish cause

PHOTO: DIANE ASSEO GRILICHES

## By Rabbi Gordon Tucker

When I traveled to Ghana on an AJWS Study Tour in February, I had the experience of the “scales falling from my eyes.” That is, that which has always been there as part of our bond with humanity suddenly became not only visible, but my place in it became more intuitively clear.

On thinking about poverty in the developing world, most North American Jews tend to ask themselves: “Why should these be my issues?” I asked that of myself before I came on this journey. After having seen what we saw, I cannot even entertain it any more. My challenge now is to teach why that is to those who have not yet come.

The third chapter of Pirkei Avot says the following in the name of Rabbi Akiva:

“Human beings are beloved, because they are made in the image of God. But even greater love inheres in the fact that they can be aware of the fact that they are made in the image of God.”

I experienced the full truth of this aphorism many times during my few short days in Ghana. Sitting in a relatively remote village in the Volta region and looking into the hopeful eyes of the beautiful, attentive and life-filled children there, I understood intuitively that the seemingly vast things that separate us are mere accidents of history, and that the essentials of life and its meaning are what we share. I found that to discover that shared image—to become aware of it—is in fact a great generator of love, not only for those farthest away from us, but for those close to us as well.

Knowing how much chance there has been in our coming to possess all

that we have, there is an inevitable sense of responsibility that enters the consciousness and the conscience upon witnessing such injustice. How is it that we can have so much, when so much less—indeed, often a tiny fraction of what we have—would change another family’s life so profoundly? And yet, it is easy, after all, to succumb to despair about how much there is to fix and how little each of us seems to be able to contribute.

It is precisely here that AJWS’s work becomes so important and empowering. Its accomplishments in places like Ghana demonstrate that the sense of responsibility of which Rabbi Akiva tried to teach us is not misplaced or quixotic. Seeing through the eyes of the community-based organizations that our group encountered and their staff and volunteers, it was obvious that small steps do matter, and that the human spirit is stronger than we imagine. It is so strong, in fact, that that spirit—that divine image—can rise to what one remarkable grassroots organization in Ghana called the “challenging heights” of fulfilling the human destiny of living lives of dignity, compassion, covenant and love.

But you can’t fully understand that until you come to see it yourself. ■■■

*Rabbi Tucker is senior rabbi of Temple Israel Center in White Plains, NY. He joined AJWS’s Study Tour to Ghana in February, 2009, as scholar-in-residence.*



PHOTO: DIANE ASSEO GRILICHES

# Join AJWS on an upcoming Study Tour!



PHOTO DAVID ROTBARD

## PERU

On a journey that spans city and rainforest, rural villages and centers of urban activism, we will traverse the Peruvian countryside encountering indigenous cultures and grassroots activists. We will fly to Iquitos, home of the famed “Lost Jewish Communities” of Peru, then wind our way up the Amazon River, meeting AJWS’s extraordinary partners who are employing innovative approaches to fair trade commerce, sustainable agriculture and human rights advocacy.

**October 19 to 25, 2009**

**Cost, excluding international airfare:**

\$3,900 for double occupancy (single supplement \$930)

**Optional extension to Machu Picchu available.**

## UGANDA & KENYA

Experience the power of grassroots activism up close in Uganda and Kenya! We will visit AJWS grantees in urban Uganda and rural eastern Kenya working tirelessly to combat HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence to improve the quality of life for some of the most disadvantaged communities in the region. We will learn what it takes to overcome poverty, hunger, disease and discrimination from the ground up, effecting change at the grassroots level.

**February 7 to 17, 2010**

**Cost, excluding international airfare:**

\$4,950 for double occupancy (single supplement \$1000)

**Optional extension to Safari game park available.**

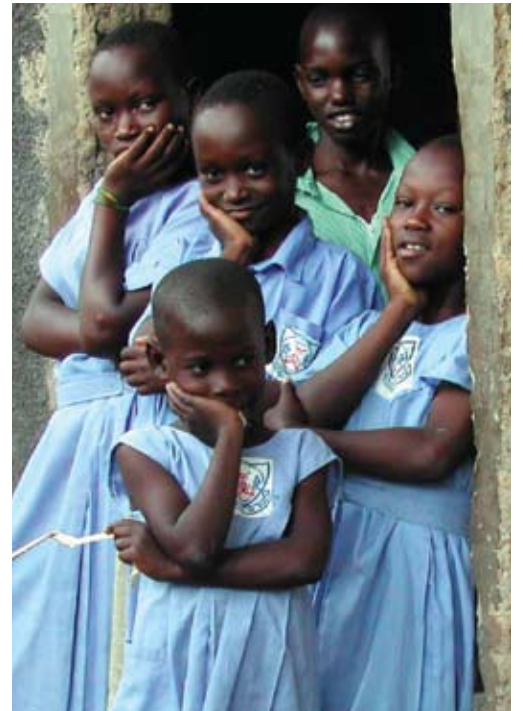


PHOTO JUDI ANGEL

For more information about AJWS Study Tours, please contact Rena Dascal at 212.792.2829, [rdascal@ajws.org](mailto:rdascal@ajws.org) or visit [www.ajws.org/studytours](http://www.ajws.org/studytours).



Pursuing Global Justice  
Through Grassroots Change



## Have you made a gift to AJWS in 2009?

Your contribution helps empower grassroots leaders and organizations around the world to advance human dignity, civil rights and self-determination. For your convenience, there are several ways of giving:

### Online

Use our secure online form at [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org) by following the "Donate" link.

### Phone or mail

Call 800.889.7146 to speak with a member of the AJWS staff or mail your contribution to:

American Jewish World Service  
45 West 36th Street  
New York, NY 10018

### Matching gifts

Your donation can be doubled—even tripled—with a matching gift from your company. Contact your human resources department to see if this option is available.

### Planned Giving

Bequests are a meaningful gift to make to AJWS. By remembering AJWS in your will, you leave a testimony to your commitment to global justice for years to come.

### Appreciated stock

Support AJWS by making a gift of appreciated stock. (Consult your financial planner or tax advisor to determine your specific tax advantages.) Stock gift forms are available at [www.ajws.org/stocks](http://www.ajws.org/stocks) or by calling 800.889.7146.

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**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.

*AJWS has received an "A" rating from the American Institute of Philanthropy since 2004.*