

Tough Love in Tiberias

TIBERIAS, ISRAEL | AUGUST 2012

Varda Sohan runs a soup kitchen in Tiberias, a city in Northern Israel. She prefers to call it a “free restaurant.”

“There is a myth all Jews are wealthy, that every Israeli is a Rothschild,” Varda told me, the first morning we met. “On the contrary, many people in this country are in nearly desperate straits.”

These are difficult times in Israel. Nearly a quarter of the country’s population lives below the poverty line. On a daily basis, it’s estimated that one out of every four adult Israelis goes hungry, and two out of every five children.

An estimated 400,000 people gathered for a recent march along Tel Aviv’s Rothschild Boulevard; there have been angry protests in many other cities across Israel, too. So deep is the despair that at one of these rallies, two men — one of them was the son of Holocaust survivors — set themselves on fire. Both men died as a result of their injuries.

“A Buddhist monk in Saigon, maybe,” Varda said, shaking her head. “But for a Jew to pour gasoline on themselves and light a match? It’s unthinkable.”



Varda and I were seated together inside her sunny and clean restaurant, which is part of an organization called Meir Panim. Founded in 2000 to help alleviate suffering caused by poverty, Meir Panim (Hebrew for “Lighting up Faces”) is Israel’s leading relief agency, and operates over 30 food and social service centers throughout the country, including nine free restaurants. Meir Panim feeds nearly 5,000 people each day.

“We serve people with dignity and respect,” said David Birnbaum, the Executive Director of American Friends of Meir Panim, a non-governmental organization based in New York City. Most of the funding for this N.G.O. comes from Jewish communities and wealthy individuals who live outside of Israel; Mortimer Zuckerman, the Manhattan publisher and real estate tycoon, is a major donor. “It’s not about a soup line, and a piece of bread along with a bowl. We want our guests to feel like we really care for them. This will help them gain self-confidence,” Birnbaum said.

I’d arranged to visit, and cook at, Meir Panim locations in central Jerusalem, as well as at Dimona, which is south in Israel’s Negev Desert. My first stop, however, during a few sultry days at the beginning of August 2012, was in Tiberias, which sits on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. So-called “Holy Land” tours, which are primarily marketed to American Christian groups, tend to focus on Galilee’s eastern shore, where Jesus preached his famous Sermon on the Mount.

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In Tiberias, many ancient stone columns remain that were erected two thousand years ago by Roman pleasure-seekers who came here to relax in the area’s natural hot springs. Following the exile of Jews from Jerusalem in the 1st and 2nd century AD, however, Tiberias became a center of Jewish life, and academies of Talmudic study flourished here. A Tiberian system of grammar and punctuation for the Torah eventually became standard for all Hebrew. In honor of this living history, Tiberias is today considered one of Israel’s (and so, Judaism’s) holiest cities.

The Meir Panim facade is all glass, and looks out onto Hagilil Street, one of downtown Tiberias’ best avenues; it is handsomely landscaped with palm trees and well-tended flower beds. The restaurant’s interior is a long, tall-ceilinged space, which for most of the day is so filled with sunshine, no electric lights need to be switched on. Completing the decorative good cheer is a break-

Tough Love in Tiberias

TIBERIAS, ISRAEL | AUGUST 2012

front cabinet filled with *tchotchkes* — stuffed animals, teapots, and other bric-a-brac — as well as vases full of silk flowers.

You'd never guess it was a soup kitchen, an observation that, when made to Varda, pleases her enormously.

“When I first opened it, I said I wanted people to feel happy, not like their coming here to eat was a shame or something to be embarrassed by.”

“When I first opened it, I said I wanted people to feel happy, not like their coming here to eat was a shame or something to be embarrassed by,” she said. “We ask no questions. People show up by mistake sometimes, and I will have to explain what Meir Panim is. I am proud this place looks enough like a regular restaurant that people might not know the difference. Besides, I never know from how someone looks, how needy they might be. We feed whoever comes in: Jews, Christians, Arabs, Muslims. Everyone is welcome.”

Varda's parents emigrated in 1950 to Israel from Arbil, Iraq which, she tells me, has a history dating back to 6,000 BC, and is considered one of the oldest continuously-inhabited cities in the world. Aged 54, Varda is a heavy smoker, and has a raspy voice to prove it. She has dark brown eyes, which are deep-set, and nearly lost in dark shadows. A pile of gold bangles clatter about at one of her wrists.

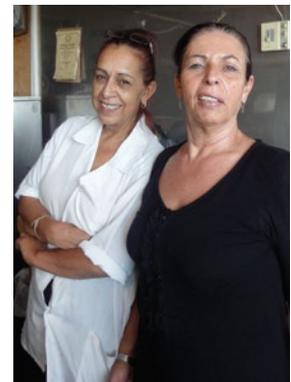
She'd been working as the manager of a food storage facility, which shipped ingredients to restaurants and cafes all across Northern Israel. Then, nine years ago, a friend who is in local government of Tiberias asked her to help open a soup kitchen for hungry people, and Varda agreed to take on the challenge. This location on Hagilil Street was already a restaurant, so the initial task was relatively easy, she said. “At first, it was one by one. But pretty soon, we were a full house. The restaurant feeds between 150 and 250 people a day.”

“It is very hard in Israel now. The price of bread is up! Petrol, up! Alcohol, up! Cigarettes, up! It's all up and up and up and UP!” After Varda speaks, she smacks the table between us with her palm, and the bracelets at her wrist sound like a dropped platter of silverware. It's one of her standard gestures of emphasis, yet in the two days I spend with Varda, I never get used to it. I jump each time.

“Some people eat here, others, especially if they have kids, will bring along some sort of plastic container, and we'll put food in that for them to take home. There are a few street people, and a few who drink or do drugs. Most of our diners, though, are old people who just don't have enough money to live on,” she said.

The food is free, but if someone can afford to give any money, they are charged two shekels, about 50 cents, for an all-you-can-eat meal. “For some people, giving this money is a way of maintaining their dignity.”

Varda has one paid employee, Ziva Sharon, a woman who is her best friend. Ziva is in her mid-sixties, and has her still-dark hair pulled back from her face, and tied into a ponytail. She, like Varda, likes to wear Capri pants, and gaily colored sandals. Ziva has a crooked smile, that makes any expression of joy she makes look more quizzical, than truly happy. Varda and Ziva are assisted by a cadre of youngsters they call “the criminals.”



Because Meir Panim is a Kosher restaurant, a man comes from the rabbinate every few days to make sure Varda is following dietary rules as decreed by the Kashrut. Of these, the most important is a prohibition against any mixture of milk and meat. Not only should these items never be blended in any recipe, but additional rules dictate how separate a person must keep them inside their own body. For instance, those who eat meat must

Tough Love in Tiberias

TIBERIAS, ISRAEL | AUGUST 2012

then wait six hours before drinking any milk. Conversely, milk drinkers must wait two hours to eat meat.

“I’m not Orthodox, but I respect the idea of kosher,” Varda said. Although she knows all the rules — no pork, no shellfish — she admits there are still some she doesn’t completely understand, but adheres to nonetheless. “For some reason, I’m not allowed to serve cauliflower. I don’t know why it’s not kosher, but I don’t cook it.”

Varda furthermore explains there are various levels of the Kashrut. “There’s kosher, and there’s Kosher, and there is KOSHER,” she said, slicing her hand horizontally in ascending heights. “The top-top level of Kosher is very expensive, and we can’t afford to do that here.”



On the menu for today are chicken drumsticks, schnitzel, hot dogs, rice, roasted potatoes, pumpkin soup, beet salad, carrot salad, bread, and water. There’s usually a piece of fruit for dessert. Fresh produce is occasionally given by nearby growers; the Upper Galilee is something like the

Salinas Valley of Israel, and has many farms growing fruits and vegetables, not to mention grapes for wine. Most of the prepared food, like today’s drumsticks and schnitzel, is donated from nearby hotels.

The morning quickly passes as the Meir Panim team works to get these various menu items ready. Soon enough, lunchtime guests begin to arrive.

Many people dine here because they are lonely, Varda believes. She points out a woman who appears to be in her late sixties; she wears a brightly-colored tunic top, over a long skirt. Her hair is bundled up into a knitted cloche, a type of head covering which is popular with Orthodox women.

“See her? She looks after herself. She’s clean, but she probably gets no more than 1300 shekels each month from the government (a little more than \$300), and what sort of life can you have with that?” Varda leans forward and drops her voice. Now I’m going to get the real story. “This woman has one son, and her daughter-in-law doesn’t like her, and doesn’t want her around. So, she has three grandchildren that she’s never even seen!”

“People will be hungry, but they claim to be unable to eat certain things as it might upset their stomach. I tell them, what really upsets your stomach is when there is no food there!”

An obese man waddles in the front door. He is wearing the full garb of an Orthodox Jew: a black overcoat, vest, pants, and a broad-brimmed black hat. Out of the side of her mouth, Varda muttered, “O.K., let’s see what this one wants...”

As it happens, he demands to know just how kosher the food is. When Varda tells him, he leaves, apparently not satisfied.

“It’s a funny thing. Some poor people try to maintain their self-esteem by being fussy eaters. You’ve maybe heard the expression that beggars can’t be choosers? Well, I see it all the time! People will be hungry, but they claim to be unable to eat certain things — tomatoes, say, or onions — as it might upset their stomach. I tell them, what really upsets your stomach is when there is no food there!”

Boom! She drops her hand to the tabletop again with a clatter of her bracelets. I flinch.

Varda is a shrewd judge of character. Her head jerks up as the door opens, and she gives a quick glance of surveillance to anyone who enters. She seems to know everyone’s story. And what she hasn’t yet learned, she will ascertain in the not-too-distant future. What is the secret of her rapport, that all these strangers easily share their life stories with her? My question causes Varda to let loose a snort of impatient laughter. “It’s pretty simple,” she replied. “If people look sad, I talk to them.”

Tough Love in Tiberias

TIBERIAS, ISRAEL | AUGUST 2012

Lunch is served from 11:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., and diners can drop in whenever they like during this time period. All the while, Varda works the room, as if she's the hostess of an especially swell cocktail party. She gives hugs, and shoulder rubs, as well as offering words of comfort and advice. Most often, she merely listens, nodding her head with interest. Her phone rings constantly, and several times it is her four-year-old daughter, Leah, who is calling. Varda, a single mother, proudly shows me the child's picture.

“Meir Panim is kind of like their jail, too, but I always tell them, they'd rather have me for their warden, than what they'll get behind bars.”

As the crowd begins to thin, she invites me to sit with her again. Varda lights a cigarette, and tells me the story of how she became pregnant. “At a certain point, I said to myself, ‘O.K., I guess I am not going to get married. So, I'll have a baby on my own.’” From the ages of 39 to 50, Varda underwent 21 different attempts at artificial insemination, and endured 21 miscarriages. “I did not give up. I was going to be a mother! Finally, just as I was about to turn 50, God says to me, ‘here is your birthday present!’”

Varda shows me another picture of Leah. Twenty one miscarriages! The story is so improbable, nearly miraculous, I hardly know what to say.

Instead, I ask about the young men who are working as volunteers — serving up food, washing dishes, and cleaning the kitchen. They pretty much keep to themselves, I'd noticed, preferring to sit and talk only with each other. Sometimes they horse around, or arm wrestle; at other moments, they stare straight ahead, eyes blank and sullen.

“They're criminals, all of them,” Varda replied, with a shrug.

I laughed, nervously, assuming this was just a figure of speech. This turns out, however, to be an accurate assessment. These guys are working at Meir Panim as part of a “community service requirement” because they are each guilty of some minor crime or misdemeanor. They are assigned lengths of service from one

month to six months, and they have to show up here at Meir Panim (or at hospitals, police stations, old folk's homes) where they work for seven hours each day.

“No one is a murderer — at least that I know of!” Varda said, with a scratchy chuckle. “Maybe they were driving without a license, or got into a fight with their parents or wife. A lot of them are married, and have children.”

If an Israeli youngster has any sort of criminal record, Varda tells me, they are ineligible for Israel's mandatory draft into the Army. She feels military service is an important rite of passage for many youths, as they are forced to become responsible. “We hand them guns. They are given the power of life or death. That makes you grow up pretty fast.” But her volunteers, the “criminals,” as she calls them, haven't been drilled with Army discipline. It falls to Varda to help them straighten out their lives.

“I tell them it is shameful to steal, it is no shame, however, to do dishes!”

She continues, “Their probation officers come each week, and we go over their cases. They each have a card. I make notes, and I record if they are late, or don't show up, or are lazy. If they don't do their jobs” Varda claps her hands together, her bracelets jangling. “....Then, they're off to prison! Meir Panim is kind of like their jail, too, but I always tell them, they'd rather have me for their warden, than what they'll get behind bars.”

This is tough love, Tiberias-style.

“Ziva and I care about this place, and the people who eat here. We want to keep our restaurant very clean, and we get nervous that sometimes the boys won't do things right, but will take shortcuts. I tell the boys, if one of our guests gets sick, it will be their fault. You'll see,” Varda says with a wink. “Ziva and I scream at them a lot.”

Varda is not exaggerating, as I will soon learn.

Tough Love in Tiberias

TIBERIAS, ISRAEL | AUGUST 2012

That afternoon, after leaving Meir Panim, I wander along Tiberias' beach front for a while. My movements are slow, as the promenade is crowded with families, youth groups, and what seem whole temples full of Orthodox Jews who've come here for vacation. Their sober attire is in marked contrast to the lurid beach scene. Shops are selling scanty bathing suits in acid shades of orange and chartreuse, while blaring the latest songs by Rihanna and Nikki Minaj, yet this crowd dresses only in black and white, their bodies full covered, even when they go swimming. It is perplexing to see teenagers splashing about in the water. The boys have on long sleeve white tunics, worn over long black pants. Girls are clad in voluminous black bloomers. All this fabric appears to be something of a health hazard, especially for those who don't know how to swim. More than once, I see a girl knocked over by the tiniest of waves, who then must be helped to stand upright again, as the sodden folds of cloth weigh her down and upset her natural balance.

I am also shocked at the size of the average family. It is not unusual to see groupings of eight or more, with toddlers pushing baby carriages which hold their younger siblings. Orthodox Jewish law commands married couples to have sex every *shabbat*, and frowns on the use of contraception. Is it really possible these women are happy to be forced into such non-stop fertility?

The next morning, I find Varda in Meir Panim's kitchen, counting foil-wrapped trays of food. Yesterday, someone had gone on what's called the "hotel run," and returned with these donations.

Seeing all this begged-for bounty, I'm reminded of something I'd learned from Rabbi Jeremy Kalmonofsky, who is the spiritual leader of Congregation Anshe Chesed on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. While I was planning this trip to see Israeli soup kitchens, I'd met with Rabbi Kalmonofsky, to ask about the role of charity in Judaism.

"What you need to understand," he said, "is that for most of pre-modern Jewish history, until the 20th century in some cases, Jews tended to live together in near-complete isolation from the

dominant culture, be it Christianity or Islam. Jews lived in *shetels*, or ghettos, where they only associated with other Jews. As such, Jewish communities were almost like Indian reservations. They had their own elders, and their own law."

"It's a little like Chanukah every day," she replied. "We never know what we'll be given; it's always something of a surprise."

"An important part of this set-up," Rabbi Kalmonofsky elaborated, "was how the town's governors acted as the police authority, or nearly a parallel judicial system. They would visit each family regularly, sometimes every week, sometimes daily, and they would place a charitable assessment on each household. Giving to the poor was not optional. It was mandatory. Those who were richer were expected to help support those who were less fortunate."

It occurs to me that a Meir Panim truck pulling up to the kitchen of a luxury hotel along Tiberias' waterfront was something similar to this — a kind of enforced form of charity. I wasn't sure Varda was in the mood to muse philosophically, however, so I contented myself with asking, "What's for lunch today?"

"It's a little like Chanukah every day," she replied. "We never know what we'll be given; it's always something of a surprise. So, we open up all the packages first, to see what we've got. If there is fish, this must be the first thing to go. Anything with tomatoes, we can't keep for longer than a day, as it goes sour right away." Today, once all the foil is removed, there are many trays of roasted potatoes, others containing green beans mixed with sliced carrots, as some with pieces of poached salmon.

Varda bends over to smell the contents of every pan, taking a pinch of this, a nibble of that, to see how things have been spiced, and to make sure her nose isn't deceiving her into thinking something might taste good, when it doesn't. A magician when it comes to re-purposing left-overs, she deploys many tricks to cheer up food that may be a day or two old. Varda doesn't deliberate long, but quickly decides which ingredients will be

Tough Love in Tiberias

TIBERIAS, ISRAEL | AUGUST 2012

combined, or kept separate. The salmon goes into a warming oven, while she begins sauteing a large pan full of cut-up hotdogs, to blend with the roasted potatoes.



I chat for a moment with one of Varda's volunteers, eventually working up my nerve to ask what was the crime he committed, so that he's working at Meir Panim. He's a good-looking man, maybe

22 years old, with long eyelashes and shining, dark hair that curls gently around his ears.

"I did funny things with Visa, selling access to stolen credit card numbers over the Internet." He cocks an eyebrow at me, as if to say, "you probably would have done the same, if you were smart enough to know how."

He was in prison for three years in Tel Aviv, and is now serving the last six months of his sentence with Varda. I want to ask him which was harder — jail or Meir Panim — but from the way he keeps nervously darting glances at Ziva and Varda, I already have an answer to my question.

The day is getting hotter and hotter. Through the glass front of Meir Panim, I see troops of tourists trudging past, on their way to Gai Beach, where they will pay 80 shekels to swim for the day. I suddenly realize this same amount of money would buy a poor person 40 meals — a month and a half of freedom from hunger — here at the restaurant.

Around 10 a.m., there is a lull. Ziva and I are serving up small plates of carrot salad, to have them ready for the lunch rush.

Ziva tells me she's a second generation Israeli; Ziva's parents came from Syria (her Mom) and Morocco (her father). She'd formerly worked selling cosmetics and "natural" skin products at a hot springs resort a few miles farther down the beach. She'd also volunteer from time to time here at Meir Panim. Ziva knew how hard Varda worked, and how difficult it was for her to be alone

all day, surrounded by young men who were in trouble with the law. One day, Varda's father asked Ziva if she would also work full-time at the free restaurant.

"He said Varda and I were not only good friends, but we were like sisters. Sisters will have fights, sure, but they will make up, too. He convinced me to take this job. That was seven years ago."

But why did she come here, I ask. Wasn't it much easier to sell cosmetics?

Ziva sighed, and explained more of her background. She was born in 1950, when there were worse problems for Israel and its neighbors, than exist today. Back then, she says, the east side of the Sea of Galilee still belonged to Syria, and life around the lake, even over here in Tiberias, could be dangerous as a result. Her father was a policeman on a boat, and one day, the other cop on this boat was shot and killed by a Syrian sniper. Ziva's mother panicked, and insisted her husband quit and find some safer line of work. He tried various things, all relatively unsuccessfully, but to keep food on the table, he moonlighted as a fisherman.

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"In April, the St. Peter's fish, which is the most plentiful kind of seafood in the Sea of Galilee, all go over to the eastern shore to lay their eggs. They become scarce here on the west side, and their price goes up. My Dad had a friend who said to him, 'It's Passover. Early in the morning, we will go a little bit further out into the middle of the sea, closer to the east bank, throw one net, and come back. There won't be any problems.'"

Ziva pauses, and smiles one of her crooked grins.

"I was eight at this time," she continued. "My Dad and this other guy, they row out. They toss one net. Then, a Syrian shot my father right between the eyes," Ziva says, pointing a finger

Tough Love in Tiberias

TIBERIAS, ISRAEL | AUGUST 2012

at her own forehead. “He fell into the boat. That was it. He was already dead.”

With five young daughters to care for, Ziva’s mother was a widow. It was a terrible struggle, each day, to keep the family clothed and fed.

“The mentality then was, you didn’t get remarried,” Ziva says. “You must also realize that in those days, the Israeli government didn’t think of the person who killed my father as a ‘terrorist.’ He died, that’s it. It wasn’t until 1973 that the government finally began to recognize the significance of deaths like my father’s, and started giving financial support to people who died from terrorism.”

“Yes, and that’s when you make mistakes in your life ... when you are young,” she replies.

Did this experience make her more sensitive to others in need? Does she think this is why she’s come to work full-time at Meir Panim?

If Ziva is insulted by my armchair psychoanalysis, she doesn’t show it. In fact, for a long time, she did not respond at all. When she did speak again, my questions were politely ignored.

“Sometimes, we take people in to work here that no one else will. We try to help everyone. As you can see, we don’t coddle these boys. We want them to understand that they’re coming here to WORK! For some, this message gets through. After they leave, they come back to see Varda and me. If they have a wedding, they call us. They kiss us, and show us pictures of their babies. For other people, though, they can’t learn to come on time, or to show up at all, and they are sent back to prison. I feel terrible for them.”

“They are all so young!” I exclaim.

“Yes, and that’s when you make mistakes in your life ... when you are young,” she replies.

A few of the earliest diners have begun arriving. It’s now 11 o’clock, and Ziva begins serving lunch from behind the counter.

And then, completely without warning, a loud argument breaks out between Ziva and a young woman (is she a “criminal,” too?) who is ladling out bowls of vegetable soup. Whatever caused the disagreement is a mystery,

as the women are yelling in Hebrew. What I can understand, however, is once the altercation starts, neither is willing to back down. Both keep trying to get the last word, which only starts the argument up again. Ziva continues to hand out plates of food; the girl, bowls of soup. All the while, they take potshots at the other. Their bickering goes on and on. It dies down. Then, reignites. Finally, it flickers out. Then, it really, *really*, begins to rage. Ziva and the girl are standing toe to toe, their faces quite literally inches from one another’s as they scream wildly, and at incredible volume.

One of the young men rushes to separate the women, trying to establish peace, as he interposes himself between them. But they simply scream over, through, and around him. It never becomes physical. There’s no shoving or slapping. It is strictly a war of words. But what a battle it is! This is, by a wide margin, the most raw, full-throated fight I’ve ever witnessed, and I’ve seen rival gangs of teenagers threatening each other on the New York City subway system. This skirmish was much scarier.

Finally, a delicate truce begins to settle. It feels fraught, though, as if it may not last. My heart is racing, and behind my eyes, there’s a sharp pang of pain due to the tension I’ve experienced by eavesdropping on this dispute.

What amazes me, then, is the non-reaction of the other guests at Meir Panim. There must have been thirty or so people, eating lunch, or being served food, while this shouting match raged, and no one seemed to take any particular notice of it. I guess



Tough Love in Tiberias

TIBERIAS, ISRAEL | AUGUST 2012

when you live in Israel, you exist with the constant possibility of terrorists attacks, or sniper fire. When you live in Israel, your house is legally required to have a bomb shelter, which must be equipped with water, tinned food, and an air-filtration system, where you are to hide when nuclear or biochemical weapons fall on your country. When you live in Israel, you've seen worse than a couple of women screaming at each other.

I haven't, though. My life is largely free from such overt hostility, and even being a bystander to it has upset me deeply.

A few minutes later, Ziva stops by my table, and asks me if I want to have some food. The salmon is very good, she suggests. I look up at her, surprised. Only a few minutes ago, her face was contorted in rage, and she was producing sounds I scarcely knew the human voice was capable of. Now, she was purring with the sweet concern of a grandmother.

"Thanks," I said, "but I guess I'd better go."

I gave her a hug, and went to say goodbye to Varda, too.

Then, I got in my car, and drove away. I was still shaken, and traveled for quite some distance, unaware of anything but my thoughts. Gradually, though, I began to notice a smell. Ziva had insisted on giving me a plate of food before I left Tiberias, which was wrapped in foil, and sitting on the back seat. It was baking in the afternoon sun coming through the car's window, and beginning to stink. Seeing a trash can, I pulled off the road, and threw the plate away.

When you live in Israel, you've seen worse than a couple of women screaming at each other.

Back on the highway again, I began to feel guilty. I'd wasted perfectly good food that might have been eaten by someone who was hungry.

After the unsavory scene I'd just witnessed, however, I didn't have much of an appetite.