

SUPPORTING THOSE WHOSE HANDS HAVE FALTERED

A commentary on *Parashat Behar*

By Rebecca Singer

The cavernous space soars high above your head as you come through the oversized front doors of the factory. Tall brick walls are whitewashed and topped by an enormous lattice of steel beams and crossbars which extends across the huge ceiling, holding up the corrugated metal roof. Having been minus 30 C for most of the winter, the snow is starting to thaw, leaving puddles of slush and mud outside and the thermometer has hit a balmy zero degrees. But this is a stark industrial space, a previously abandoned factory with no heating and single pane glazing and although the worst of the weather is held at bay, after five minutes standing inside your toes start to feel the chill and you certainly do not consider removing a layer.

Vardan greets us with an illuminating smile and a strong handshake. He is thrilled to show us his small enterprise, talking animatedly about the metal parts his team of six workers manufacture, as spirals of metal offcuts fall lazily from the machines and lie glinting on the floor around us. A huddle of industrial activity, tucked away at the far end of the factory floor, dwarfed by the scale of the building.

But this is not the story of a typical small business owner. This is Krivoy Rog, a tough industrial town in Eastern Ukraine and Vardan is an Internally Displaced Person - essentially a refugee in his own country. He grew up in the thriving city of Donetsk and had plans to open his own metal manufacturing business.

But he was forced to flee his hometown when the fighting between Ukrainian and pro-Russian forces threatened his family's safety. He is one of the thousands of Jews caught up in the violence.

Parashat Behar introduces the idea of *Shemitta* and the Jubilee year, opportunities for us to put our

faith in G-d and for G-d to provide. But it also touches on the topic of destitution and the responsibility we have as a community to assist people who, for whatever reason, find that they are unable to support themselves. *"If your brother becomes destitute and his hand falters beside you, you shall support him... so that he can live with you."* (*Vayikra*, Leviticus 25:35) This goes beyond the obligation to provide for the poor and infirm. This is a warning that when it seems like someone is struggling and a crash is inevitable, step in and help out, before they hit rock bottom.

Vardan found himself in Krivoy Rog, with few possessions and no way of earning money to support his family. Unemployment in this town is high and jobs are very low paid. Facing destitution and with his hand having faltered, World Jewish Relief stepped in to support him. Vardan had been working in the metal industry in his home town of Donetsk and he was enthusiastic about pursuing this. Through our Livelihood Development Programme we provided Vardan with business training, including HR management, as well as legal support and we helped him access grants to purchase specialist equipment.

He set up his own metalwork business which has gone from strength to strength. His new premises mean he can start expanding his business and not only is he able to support himself and his family, but he is extremely proud to be able to employ a small workforce: he has created new jobs for other Internally Displaced People who have had to leave their homes in Donetsk and is able to offer them secure employment, in turn supporting his 'brother' whose hand had faltered. They

are now all able to be guaranteed a certain standard of living and provide for their family.

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rights law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25) states that everyone has the right to a standard of living that ensures the health and well-being of themselves and their family - including the ability to provide adequate food, clothing, housing and medical care.

People throughout Ukraine are struggling to attain this standard of living. They may be unable to heat their homes in the depth of winter, or cannot afford to buy the medication they need for a sick parent. They have been forced to flee their homes and have lost their savings and pensions in the process. By giving them the opportunity to get a job, set up their own business and earn a living, World Jewish Relief's Livelihood Development Programme enables them to

regain their human rights and fulfils Maimonides' highest level of charity "to support a fellow Jew by endowing them with a gift or loan...or finding employment for them, in order to strengthen their hand until they need no longer be dependent upon others." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Charity, 10:7-14)

At the door to the factory, Vardan proudly displays a photograph of the huge space in its heyday with row upon row of machines and workers filling the factory floor. He smiles broadly as he says he hopes to replicate that picture in the coming years. "Even in the most difficult times, you shouldn't give up", he says.



*the town of Krivoy Rog