

NEW YORK

The Jewish Week

SERVING GREATER NEW YORK / \$1.00 / JULY 20, 2001/29 TAMMUZ 5761



Bedouins: a kind of permanent underclass in Israel. JACK HAZUT

Israeli Official Slurs Bedouins

Supposed advocate for community calls them 'blood-thirsty' bigamists; his removal sought.

ROBBY BERMAN

SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH WEEK

Giving credence to persistent Bedouin complaints that Israeli officials are unsympathetic to their plight, the man charged with Bedouin affairs said those who carp about poor living conditions are "blood-thirsty Bedouins who commit polygamy, have 30 children and continue to expand their illegal settlements, taking over state land."

Moshe Shohat, who heads the Educational Authority for Bedouins, further questioned providing indoor plumbing in Bedouin schools.

Continued on page 44

Israeli Official Slurs Bedouins

Continued from page 1

"In their culture they take care of their needs outdoors," he said in a Jewish Week interview. "They don't even know how to flush a toilet."

Leading advocates for Bedouins are outraged and are calling on Shohat to resign. And they warn that if the government doesn't move to improve conditions, a fed-up Bedouin community could rise up violently.

"If Moshe Shohat said what is attributed to him, he is unworthy of the trust placed in a person occupying such a position and should be summarily dismissed," said Robert Arnow, a longtime Bedouin advocate in New York who last week dedicated a \$2 million endowment to the Center for Bedouin Studies and Development at Ben-Gurion University.

"His opinions are not only factually incorrect but are offensive in the extreme and an embarrassment to Jews everywhere," said Arnow, a Jewish Week board member.

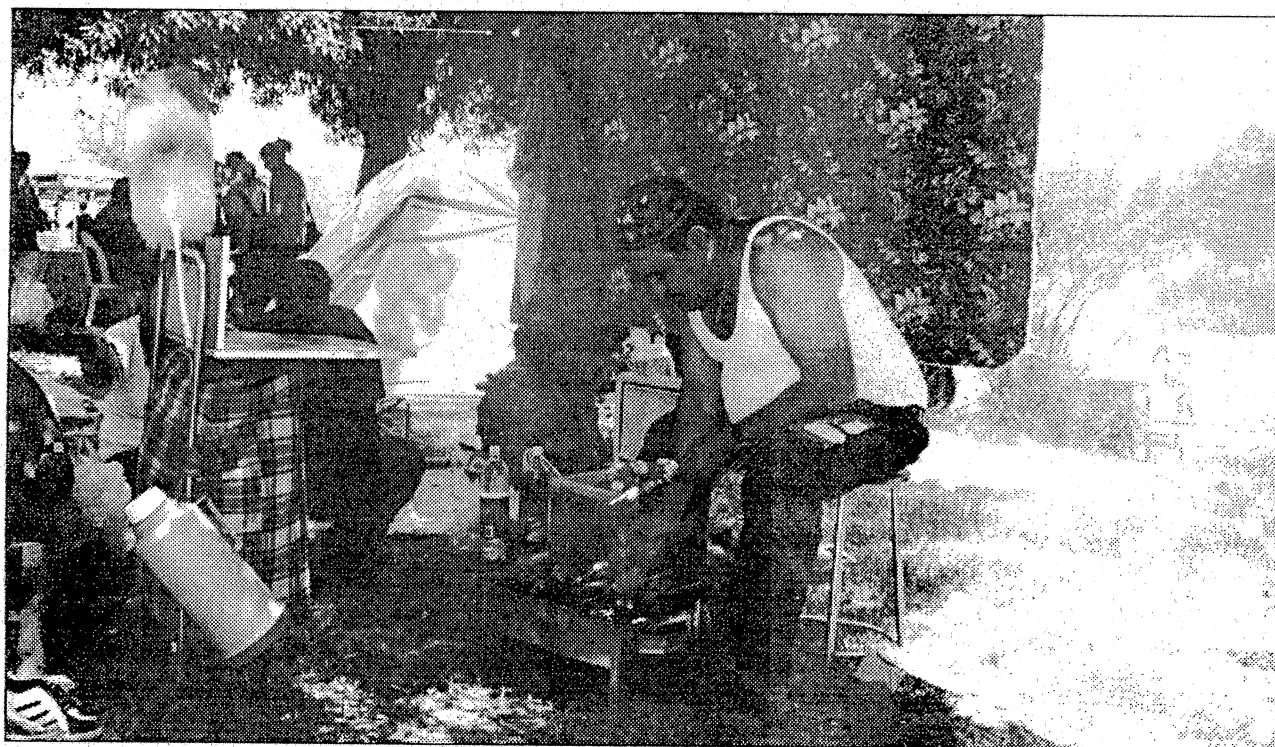
A spokesman for the Education Ministry, Orit Reuveni, said Shohat's comments about "blood-thirsty people referred not to Bedouins in general but to a specific group of Bedouins who are waging a personal war against him."

"This is who we are dealing with," said Amal Elsana-Alhjojo, a leading Bedouin advocate in Israel, referring to Shohat. "We are the invisible Bedouins."

But the community of nomadic Arabs, among the poorest in Israel and known for being passive, is growing increasingly angry, she said. During the rioting of Israeli Arabs last fall, at the start of the new intifada, Bedouins in the south took to the streets, one of the only times they joined arms with the Palestinians against Israel.

"If no changes occur year after year, I can see the protests turning violent," Elsana-Alhjojo warned.

Elsana-Alhjojo, a graduate of Ben-Gurion who has formed six nonprofits all advocating on behalf of Bedouins, claimed the Educational Authority for Bedouins has been in operation for two decades and has always been run by a Jew. She also charged that after a Knesset investigative committee au-



The 130,000 Bedouins in Israel live in 52 towns, but only seven are recognized by the government. The community of nomadic Arabs is among the poorest in Israel. JACK HAZUT

thorized increased allocations for the Bedouins, Shohat returned much of it to the government — a charge he denies.

"If that did happen, I'm not surprised," says Yossi Sarid, the former minister of education, who criticized political appointees, like Shohat, "who haven't done much to help the community they ostensibly work for." Sarid said that during his tenure at the education ministry he sought to "undo the terrible injustices the Israeli government has perpetrated on the Bedouins, but to no avail."

The Bedouins (Arabic for "desert dwellers"), whose population in Israel is about 130,000, constitute a kind of permanent underclass in the Jewish state.

Only two out of every 1,000 Bedouins go on to university and there are 72,000 Bedouins not registered in schools, said Elsana-Alhjojo, 28, who was in New York last month as part

of her work with the Educational Authority for Bedouins. Alhjojo, who bristles at stereotypes of Bedouins as primitives "sitting around eating zatar and olive oil."

She wages her war on two fronts. First, to convince her own people "that they have rights."

"They have the right to demand from the government running water and electricity. I have to convince our women in particular that they have rights, to marry out of their tribe, to attend university," Elsana-Alhjojo said.

Her second front, she said, is with the Israeli government, and she lobbies in the Knesset at least twice a month for equality in citizenship and in education.

Elsana-Alhjojo knows firsthand about the hardships of her people. She and her 14 brothers and sisters grew up in a two-room caravan. "My brothers slept with my father in one room and my sisters and I slept with our mother in the other one."





Amal Elsana-Alhjoor, a leading advocate of Bedouin rights: "It is unacceptable that one of our schools, with over 1,000 students — all Israeli citizens — has only one bathroom and four faucets." *ROBBY BERMAN*

ment underclass in the Jewish state.

Only two out of every 1,000 Bedouins go on to university and there are 72,000 Bedouins not registered in schools, said Elsana-Alhjoor, 28, who was in New York last month as part of a speaking tour of Jewish communities throughout North America. He was calling attention to the Bedouins' plight by asking for financial and political help, particularly in lobbying the Israeli government.

Since there is no school transportation, she said, some children must walk miles to school in the hot desert sun. Others just don't go.

"It is unacceptable that one of our schools, with over 1,000 students — all Israeli citizens — has only one bathroom and four faucets," said Elsana-Alhjoor.

"If you move to one of the official Bedouin communities where they supply proper schooling and infrastructure," she claimed, "then you have to sign a document handing your desert land over to the government."

Israel only officially recognizes the existence of seven out of 52 Bedouin towns.

According to Shohat, who has been in his post for 10 years, if Bedouins forego ownership of their land in the unofficial towns, they can move into a recognized town with proper infrastructure (such as Segev Shalom, Likiya or Rahat), receive 20 percent of the size of land they relinquish and financial compensation for the other 80 percent.

"But they don't want to give back land they usurped and then pay city taxes," he said.

For Elsana-Alhjoor, her crusade is to recast the image of Bedouins.

"We want education, we want a future," said Elsana-Al-

Elsana-Alhjoor knows firsthand about the hardships of her people. She and her 14 brothers and sisters grew up in a two-room caravan. "My brothers slept with my father in one room and my sisters and I slept with our mother in the other one."

Her situation, not uncommon among Bedouins, spurred her to obtain a social work degree from Ber-Sheva University and recently a master's from McGill University in Montreal.

"I was 23 years old when I first heard the word 'feminist,'" she recalls. "I was so relieved, I finally knew what to call myself."

Over the past year Elsana-Alhjoor has been interviewed over a dozen times on Israeli television and radio as part of the "Bedouin Campaign," a program sponsored by the New Israel Fund. The purpose of the campaign, she said, is to gain media exposure intended to help Bedouins gain more influence in government decisions concerning their community.

But, she said, patience is wearing thin in the Bedouin community, and that while she promotes democracy and is opposed to violence, if improvements do not come quickly, she can foresee the kind of violent demonstrations among Bedouins that Ethiopians staged a few years ago, calling national attention to their complaints.

"I don't want to minimize the pain and suffering of the Ethiopians," she says, "but they came from outside the country and we, who have been living here for generations as citizens, did not get the money investment in infrastructure as they did."

With Arab identity stirred by the intifada, Elsana-Alhjoor warns that it is in Israel's best interest to help the Bedouins.

"If the government doesn't move more swiftly" to fully integrate the Bedouins and afford them their rights as citizens, she says, "it may miss this window of opportunity." □