The faces I saw in the Eidomeni refugee camp were now so much more real than a photo in the newspapers or on social media. We were really there at the Greek/Macedonian (a.k.a FYROM) border at a refugee camp just next to Eidomeni, a tiny town in northern Greece, south of the Macedonian border. The countryside is beautiful. We are in a large flatland (once farmland) surrounded by low mountains.

To be more accurate Eidomeni is not a camp where refugees stay overnight but a transit camp where people are 'processed' on their journey making their way over the Greek-FYROM border. Up to ten thousand refugees can pass through the camp each day which is an astounding number.

We are meeting these refugees towards the beginning of their long and treacherous journey as they try to make their way to a safer destination Europe.

Some have a fixed idea of where they want to go.

Two Eritreans I spoke to - a brother and sister- were very clear they would make it to London.

The brother had been conscripted into the Eritrean army for the past 21 years and had nothing to show for his service. The state had failed them both. As we parted ways the sister said to me with an upbeat optimism "see you in London!"

I was worried for her safety on this difficult journey. Her chances of making it into the UK are surely very low but in our brief encounter I felt I could not dash her hopes.

Others were filled with deep uncertainty. One person asked me advice as to which country they should attempt to gain entry to.

Others had family already in a country in Europe and so they were filled with an extra measure of hope as they dreamt of a warm and loving embrace that would welcome them.

The journey these refugees have taken so far was life threatening and traumatic.

From Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and Eritrea and other states they made their way into turkey to a camp with currently around 2 million refugees and growing. The conditions in turkey are so awful. People are desperate to leave and this leads them to make the extremely dangerous crossing to the Greek islands off the cost of Turkey. Most make it to Lesvos on dinghies that are fit for only 10 or 20 people. They are exploited by people traffickers who squash over 50 onto these dinghies.

Shahab from Afghanistan told me his boat contained over 70 men, women and children. His voice shook as he recalled the night time crossing from Turkey to Lesvos. “a journey that should take 1 hour took 5 hours”- he quivered. “that journey was like ten years; the women and children crying, the fear of drowning, thanks to God that we survived”.

People pay the smugglers between 1-3 thousand Euro to cross this small stretch of water. When they finally get to the shores they still have to walk another 70km to reach the refugee registration reception on the island! Apparently this is a converted military base.

The question is begging to be asked; why can’t the registration reception be moved to near the shore so as to shorten their journey and suffering?? I don’t have an answer.
Refugees then make their way by Ferry to mainland Greece from the Greek islands at a cost of only 60 Euros. That is the difference between being an ‘illegal immigrant’ and once you are registered as a refugee.

I am on this trip as part of a mission with our Chief Rabbi and fellow colleagues led by World Jewish Relief.

WJR work with local partner NGOs on the ground. In Greece they work with NGO Praxis providing them with both funding as well as advice and expertise.

The Jewish community can be really proud of the sterling work being done by WJR spending the £700k raised in the latest appeal for the refugee crises.

We were shown a mobile medical unit with a WJR sign on it and were introduced to a doctor who spoke to us about his work. They have doctors rotating 24/7 [1] on 8 hour shifts. Later that day we saw a father enter the unit with his young daughter for treatment.

One story really moved me. A Praxis member of staff described the horrific scenes at the Lesvos shoreline as the dinghies come in. She described people needing first aid treatment for hyperthermia and shock and how the international community needs to be doing more to save lives. Some have lost family members on the crossing. I look at photos of this grim scene on her mobile phone. She told me of a heavily pregnant lady who had just arrived and who was in no fit state to walk a further 70 kilometre trek.

To help her with a lift is technically illegal. You can be arrested and prosecuted as a people trafficker!

But this member of staff ‘looked left and right’ to ensure no one was looking and drove her to the registration point.

At the camp apart from medical assistance there is shelter, food and water being supplied.

Free Wi-Fi as well as mobile charging are also provided. For a refugee a mobile phone is as important as food and water. It enables them to call home to tell family they are safe or to call on ahead to those family members who have already reached their destination.

Refugees arrive in Eidomeni by coach with around 50 per group. The group are issued a number and after going through the camp they find themselves waiting at the border between Greece and Macedonia (a.k.a FYROM).

The border crossing is marked by two thin trees with Greek police on one side and Macedonian special forces on the other (who look rather grumpy). I could not see but apparently another 15-minute walk on the Macedonian side there is yet another registration centre where they again register to become ‘guests’ of Macedonia for a limited period.

We sat down on the stony and dusty floor to speak to a group of refugees as they waited their turn to walk through the border. I was not sure what to expect. But the atmosphere was remarkable calm. I was amazed at how willing people were to tell us their stories. Of course those with English found it easier. Although we had no answers the mere fact we were willing to listen seemed to be tremendously cathartic for them.

These refugees had lost almost everything. They were stateless with few possessions. Perhaps we represented the ‘world’ that they were reaching out to for a helping hand.

The stories were terrible accounts of persecution and suffering.

One Syrian described how ISIS had come to conscript him and so a friend hid him away for 2 nights until he felt safe enough to flee. I wanted to hear more of his story but the group had been called. He was the leader of the group. It was their turn to make their way over the border. It was only a brief encounter but I felt a connection to those who had shared their stories of upheaval with me.
Personal reflections of my trip to Greece
Published on United Synagogue (https://theus.org.uk)

It was almost biblical as I watched the group (as twilight approached) slowly move across the border in two single files. There may have been no miracles like the splitting of the sea of reeds but there was another miracle I did witness – human compassion and the desire to help those in desperate need of help.

I returned from Greece with many more questions than answers; the lack of coordinated response from European countries which leads to unnecessary additional suffering.

Hearing the stories, the line between economic migrant and refugee seems more blurred than before. Is an individual running from war torn Syria any different to a person coming from Iran who because they are Afghani are given no help by the state and are struggling to survive?

And now with the despicable and awful attacks in Paris there is the real fear that some terrorists may be posing as refugees and coming through Greece.

But despite all this uncertainty, having seen the suffering with my own eyes I am deeply moved and know that come what may we must find a way to help these people find a secure place to live.

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