

In Israel, a rabbinical plan to help Africans facing deportation

Susan Silverman has proposed the Anne Frank Home Sanctuary movement, calling on members of Rabbis for Human Rights to house asylum-seekers the prime minister plans to deport.

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [February 14, 2018](#) issue



Eritrean migrants at a demonstration January 17 outside the Israeli Knesset in Jerusalem against the Israeli government's policy to deport refugees and asylum-seekers to Uganda and Rwanda. Hebrew signs read "no for deportation, Rwanda equal to death" and "slaves for sale." AP Photo/Oded Balilty.

A prominent rabbi in Israel has asked her peers to provide sanctuary for nearly 40,000 African asylum seekers who could soon be deported by the government.

Rabbi Susan Silverman, the older sister of comedian Sarah Silverman, is a Jerusalem-based community activist who was once taken into police custody for demanding that women be allowed to read from a Torah at the Western Wall.

In December, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the government will deport all African asylum seekers by the end of March if they do not accept the government's offer of \$3,500 and a ticket out of the country. Most come from Eritrea and Sudan and entered Israel illegally via Egypt.

Advocates for the asylum seekers, whom Netanyahu calls "infiltrators," say their lives will be in danger if they are forced to leave Israel. Netanyahu has said that Israel, as a sovereign country, has a right and obligation to protect itself against illegal immigration.

Silverman unveiled her plan January 16 during a conference organized by the Israeli group Rabbis for Human Rights. Called the Anne Frank Home Sanctuary movement, the plan asks the organization's nearly 200 members to house asylum seekers if the government follows through on deportation.

The family of Frank, the teenage diarist, was sheltered by Christians before being deported to a Nazi concentration camp, where all but Anne's father died.

"This isn't a new idea; it's something people have done for a long time and that Jews in dangerous places have benefited from—now it's our turn," Silverman said. "Now we have our own state, and we have power and the ability to protect the stranger, as the Torah commands us 36 times."

Silverman said she and staffers of Rabbis for Human Rights compiled a list of rabbis, congregations, yeshivas, kibbutzim, and others who have expressed willingness to provide sanctuary. The organization's board was expected to formally approve the plan a few days later, said Nava Hefetz, its educational director.

Silverman said providing asylum follows the commandments: "As rabbis we're called by a vision of the prophets and the very *mitzvot* we claim to live by."

She said the fact that the Israeli government plans to evict thousands of people “means our society has its priorities upside down. If someone had told me ten years ago this would happen, I’d have said a Jewish state would never send desperate refugees away to their deaths. It’s our responsibility to prevent it from happening.”
—Religion News Service

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