Reflection:

Working to help an Israeli woman return to her newborn child in the West Bank after being deported to Gaza, Sari Bashi found herself at a crossroads. The government had agreed to allow this woman to reunite with her family, on the condition that she would be given a permit that would restrict her entry into the West Bank to a maximum of ten days. Unfortunately, this would be at complete odds with Bashi’s larger goal of delegitimizing the government’s efforts to restrict freedom of movement between Gaza and the West Bank. Bashi was faced with a tough decision; should she help this one individual woman despite the implications of this case on her larger line of work?

I left Bashi’s talk with questions about her dilemma still lingering in my mind. In which situations is it ethical to prioritize a movement over a person? How do we navigate situations where the long-term goals of a human rights movement contradict the short term needs of the people? The answers to these questions remain unclear. Historically, a large number of human rights campaigns have been propelled forward by the sacrifices of individuals. A utilitarian perspective would assume that the movement should always be placed before a person, because it would ultimately benefit the most amount of people. In practice, however, this perspective appears to be problematic. Human rights were created to promote and protect the inalienable rights of all people. It therefore seems paradoxical that the human rights movement ever require us to compromise an individual’s needs for the needs of others.

Bashi ultimately defended her client’s right to see her family and helped her obtain a permit to visit the West Bank. Reflecting on her decision, Bashi attributed it to a conversation she had had with a colleague who urged her to reevaluate the impact that this incident would have on the larger movement. She remembers being asked, “do you really think any of this is even up to us?” Bashi’s takeaway was that her ambivalence was naïve. Although she had assumed she would be setting up a damaging precedent by promoting the use of a travel permit, her colleague argued that the greater tide of the movement would be largely unaffected by Bashi’s choice.

When framed by this particular situation, her colleague’s argument is understandable. Denying one woman a chance to see her family and return to her home in order to make a symbolic gesture against the human rights violations endorsed by a government could easily be seen as the wrong choice. However, the reasoning behind her colleague’s assertion appears questionable to me. It seems almost too convenient to argue that an activist’s small-scale work has no effect on the more ambitious goals of a human rights movement. Individual actions are the reason we are able to create successful campaigns that mobilize the general public and create tangible change. Conversely, rhetoric that encourages us to weigh our own actions lightly can quickly lead to ethical transgressions. Regardless, Bashi’s colleague’s claim undoubtedly holds some truth. Perhaps the more pertinent question should then be how we can turn individual case successes into actions that impact larger communities.