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Leadership as Legacy

Elias Sussan

I joined the House of Grace twenty-three years ago when I was looking for a job as a social worker and, very soon after, I found myself taking part in important and fulfilling social and community work, in an ever-renewing and developing institute — a house that is a home for people in distress.

I chose social work and not one of the professions because I had a strong desire and a need to do something for the community: to work with prisoners, women survivors of violence, the homeless — with underprivileged and disadvantaged people. In my childhood and youth, I experienced poverty and distress, and I had an intimate acquaintance with the hardships experienced by underprivileged people. Several of my friends had found themselves entrapped in the vicious circle of delinquency and crime, but I was determined to break free and bring change into my life. I joined a supportive and empowering organization that works with people to help them regain their deprived honor, a place that motivates people to make a change and improve their lives and futures.

Joining the House of Grace, managed by Kamil Shahade and his wife Agnes, fulfilled my personal and professional aspirations. Working alongside this couple, whose life and work for the benefit of disadvantaged and underprivileged populations is my inspiration and motivation, deepened within me the values of compassion, social responsibility, community involvement, humanity, and selflessness.

Kamil Shahade grew up as a member of the Christian minority, surrounded by an Arab-Muslim community, in the midst of the multicultural Israeli society. Such a background, of course, made it hard for him to ascertain his personal, religious, ethnic, and social identity. Moreover, growing up in a neglected neighborhood afflicted with crime, Kamil also experienced hardships and destitution.

Kamil's humanitarian outlook is rooted in his childhood education and

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upbringing. The simple and modest house of his mother's family was always open for girls at risk and the homeless. His family shared a house with a Jewish family, with whom they lived a life of harmony and mutual respect; this strengthened in young Kamil the values of love, faith, and tolerance. He grew to believe that with tolerance, accepting the other, and working for the general good, all hardships could be overcome. Together with some of his neighborhood friends and under the leadership of a Protestant cleric, he founded a social youth club for the neighborhood youths, to help them escape a life of crime.

In 1972, Kamil was sent to Canada to study community work. After a year and a half, he returned to Haifa, in order to realize his vision of bringing a change to underprivileged populaces. He chose to focus on helping rehabilitating prisoners as a means for bringing about social change.

Several years later, he met Agnes, a Swiss girl, and their relationship tightened later when she was working in the Sacred Heart, a hostel for mentally challenged children in Haifa. Kamil and Agnes felt bonded by their mutual desire to help others and, not long after, they got married and started a family.

The tragic story of the prisoner Elias Namuz and his mother, who had both committed suicide, was the spark that ignited and started the mission of establishing a home for ex-prisoners, who have nowhere to go and who need love and support in order to escape the vicious circle of crime. Kamil and Agnes's small rented apartment was where the House of Grace started. Together with two rehabilitating ex-prisoners who were living with them, they renovated an old, neglected building across the road, which belonged to the church, but was then serving as a meeting place for criminals. In 1982, after extensive renovations, it became the House of Grace.

Many obstacles were put in the way of the kindhearted couple by the religious establishment in their community, but their belief in their cause, their enthusiasm, and their determination incited and inspired their community members to help them realize their vision. They believed in Kamil and Agnes's power to succeed in making a change where nobody else had yet succeeded, to contribute to the welfare and wellbeing of the whole community and those of its members who had become criminals.

In 2000, at the age of forty-six, Kamil died of a terminal illness. But his lifework continues. The staff at the House of Grace and I have absorbed and assimilated Kamil's moral and social values — love of the other, compassion, endless giving, and humility — and under the guidance of his widow Agnes, we carry on his legacy. His children, who lost a charismatic and compassionate father, view the House of Grace as their home. Within its walls they absorbed values and ideals that few children are exposed to. They will carry on Kamil's way of giving without expecting anything in return — only the light in the eyes of people who through love and support have regained their hope for a better life.

Kamil will be remembered as a charismatic leader, driven by a vision, a sincere passion, and kindness to others. His enthusiasm and determination have swayed the people in his community, who believed in his ability to bring about change, and have encouraged them to take part in realizing his vision of a better society. His bequest to his successors, his children and the house's staff, is to continue the work of the House of Grace. We believe in his vision — in the mission of helping the defenseless in order to strengthen the whole of society.

Translated from the Hebrew by Yoram Arnon

