“The Garden Library is like our mother,” says Sudanese asylum seeker Najmeldien (Nadeem) Ahmed. “It felt like my life in Israel started when I found the library.”

The Garden Library is a nonprofit initiative founded by Israelis in 2009. It started with two bookcases in the center of Levinsky Garden, a public park in one of Tel Aviv’s poorest neighborhoods, now home to many African asylum seekers. Escalated levels of homelessness, substance abuse and crime stigmatize the area. Tensions between migrants and Israeli residents periodically erupt into violence.

Artistic Director Eyal Feder calls the library community art intervention. “It was one of the only neighborhoods in Tel Aviv without any art, education or community center,” says Feder.

According to the Israeli Population, Immigration and Border Authority, approximately 40,000 asylum seekers in Israel are from Eritrea and 15,000 are from Sudan. “They call us infiltrators,” says Ahmed. “Israel has a big legal problem with defining who is a refugee.”

Israel approves less than one percent of asylum applications, dramatically less than any other developed nation. Ahmed believes widespread ignorance cripples the Israeli legislative system.

“We need to work together, talk, understand what is going on,” says Ahmed. “It all starts at the Garden Library.”

Today the library has over 3,500 books in 16 languages. It also hosts diverse public events. It operates with the help of 120 volunteers, including a few part-time staff members. “We have almost no sources of constant funding,” says Feder.

On an average day the library engages 40-60 children. There are currently 300 adults enrolled in its educational programs, 40 enrolled in arts programs and over 50 additional active cardholders.

Feder says these numbers are conservative estimates. “People can just come by. Many of our clients don’t sign up for a card,” he says. It draws individuals from all of Tel Aviv’s communities, engaging Muslims, Christians and Jews from such diverse backgrounds.

This summer the Garden Library sponsored a play, “One Strong Black,” which premiered
in June on World Refugee Day with an audience of around 1,000 people. Six Sudanese asylum seekers, including Ahmed, developed the play. It combines sharp satire with a mosaic of personal narratives from migrants in Israel. It was produced with the help of library volunteers and directed by Israeli theater experts Yael Tal and Naama Redler. It was such a success that they were invited to perform in other cities across Israel. Then the boundaries between art and reality blurred together.

Babiker (Babi) Ibrahim, who plays an Israeli police officer who arrests a Sudanese man under false allegations in “One Strong Black,” was himself arrested for alleged possession of stolen goods.

According to the Anti-Infiltration Law, asylum seekers charged with a crime could be detained without any evidence or due process. Feder says asylum seekers are often accused of theft merely for having something expensive, like a bicycle or a phone. “If you don’t like a particular asylum seeker, you just accuse him of a crime and he’d be locked away,” says Feder. Last month the Israeli High Court of Justice deemed this law unconstitutional and ordered the immediate release of around 1,700 migrants, including minors, held in prison without trial.

In detention, Ibrahim stayed in constant contact with library members. “Then the police were going to transfer me,” he says. “I thought this is the place where you sign an agreement to return to Sudan or you stay in prison indefinitely. I would rather die in Sudan than rot in Israeli prison.”

International law forbids Israel to deport Eritrean nationals, although numerous individuals have been returned as part of ‘willful emigration’ directives. Hundreds of Sudanese also left Israel in similar initiatives, sometimes without the knowledge or supervision of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

“We tried to stay away from politics because we serve diverse communities,” Feder says. “But what happened with Babi pushed us to the forefront of a very public struggle. He’s part of our family.”

The Garden Library started a Facebook page called “freeBabi.” Within four hours the new group had over 300 “Likes.” It quickly grew to over 1,000. People across Tel Aviv, even some Israelis abroad, posted images with supportive slogans.

Ibrahim was released on July 24. “I wouldn’t be free today without the Garden Library community,” he says.

On July 29, the Garden Library team staged a comeback performance of “One Strong Black” outside Habima Theater, the White City UNESCO heritage site in the cosmopolitan center of Tel Aviv. Ibrahim’s role took on a new significance for him.

“In detention, I saw a lot of people who didn’t understand why they were arrested.” says Babi. “I was lucky. The library community supported me,” he says. “Until now I still feel like I’m in a dream.”

The actors stayed after the performance to talk with the audience. “They didn’t know anything about our situation. They asked a lot of questions,” says Ahmed. He believes the library provides a crucial platform for conversation and interaction, a creative solution to the lack of government accountability.
The same night the actors performed and celebrated Ibrahim’s return, many Israeli residents protested his release. Last week dozens of Israelis also came out to protest the Supreme Court’s landmark ruling. Tel Aviv’s poorest communities are still divided by fear and estrangement, while Israel’s policies ignore the deteriorating situation in disenfranchised urban areas.

The library’s members learned a lot from the journey of “One Strong Black.” Participants utilize public spaces and social networks to engage neighbors across ethnic, political, socioeconomic and religious divides. They believe that focusing on accessible art and literacy creates a non-threatening platform for community building. Public awareness and engagement are the first steps towards solving the neighborhood’s challenges, exacerbated by government neglect. “If you address a need, people will gather around you,” says Feder. “Our strength is people.”