

14. Familial Obligations

Amir is an immigrant to the United States, and has been living in Denver, Colorado, for just over ten years. Both he and his wife work very hard, sometimes holding down multiple jobs each. However, these jobs are low-wage, and the family's expenses are high, especially the medical bills for one of their children, who has a number of health issues. As a result, Amir's family is poor, and they often feel like they are just barely able to make ends meet.

Amir's sister, Yusra, is still in their home country of Lebanon, where she lives with her four children. She is a widow, and Amir and Yusra's elderly mother also lives with her. The poverty they live in is much more severe than any poverty Amir has experienced in the United States and has grown especially dire as the country endures a financial crisis.¹ Yusra was thrilled when her brother was finally able to move to the U.S. She was happy for Amir's family, but also her own. She imagined that he would be able to send some money back home to help her larger family there. They all understood that it might take Amir a few years to establish himself, but now that ten years have passed, they are confused and frustrated because he has not sent money. They tend to think that he doesn't sufficiently care for his extended family back home, and they have remarked that he must think he's too good for them now that he has a new life elsewhere.

Everyone back home believes that Amir is quite wealthy because he lives in the U.S. Thus far, he has done nothing to contradict their impression. He would feel embarrassed and humiliated if they found out how much he was struggling financially. He also thinks it would deeply upset his mother to know that her son and grandchildren are suffering. So, Amir continues to let his family believe that he's well-off and thriving in America. At least this way, he reasons, his mom is happy for him and proud that her son is so successful. Amir does sometimes feel terrible for giving his mother a false impression, but he tells himself that there's no point in breaking her heart with the hard truth. He's resigned himself to the thought that when his children want to visit their family back home, they can bring gifts for everyone, but otherwise, he can't contribute much. He certainly won't be sending money regularly. Amir often wonders if he's doing the right thing.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Has Amir done anything wrong?
2. Does Amir have an obligation to share details about his financial situation with his sister or mother?
3. Is Amir morally obligated to help his family back home financially? Would a change in his own financial situation change your answer?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/04/world/lebanon-crisis.html?searchResultPosition=8>