

# The Peoplehood Papers 19

June 2017 | Sivan 5777

## **"For You Were Strangers in the Land of Egypt"**

Our Responsibility to Refugees  
in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



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in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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# From the Editor

**Shlomi Ravid**

Peoplehood Papers 19 set out to explore the Jewish responsibility to refugees in the 21st century in the context of Jewish history, legacy and commitment to Torah and Jewish values. We very intentionally explored the issue through the eternal yet very present Jewish lens: "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt".

We divided the publication into three chapters. In the first we asked: Why should Jews in particular care for refugees? **Rabbi Yuval Cherlow** from Israel and **Rabbi Marc Angel** from the United States respond to that question from an ethical-theological perspective. **Manny Lindenbaum**, a Holocaust survivor and refugees activist, offers his perspective with an article titled: "They are Us". Finally, **Mark Hetfield** from HIAS discusses the shift from helping refugees because they are Jewish, to helping refugees because we are Jewish.

Our second chapter highlights what Jews around the world are actually doing about the issue. This is not meant as a thorough representation of what is happening on the ground, but rather to provide examples of current Jewish activism in the service of refugees. **Rebecca Singer** from World Jewish Relief, a British based organization, reports on their work with Syrian refugees. **Rabbi Gesa S. Ederberg** from Berlin, shares notes about her congregation's involvement with Muslim refugees in Germany. **Rabbi Jennie Rosenn** from HIAS reports on the recent American Jewish mobilization around the refugee cause. **Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach and Karen Green** share the story and process of Temple Shalom of Chevy Chase, Maryland's response to the refugee crisis. **Amy Weiss** from Jewish Family & Community Services East Bay California highlights positive responses to the dire situation faced by many refugees. **Tamar Lazarus** from the Israeli NGO IsraAID reports about their activities throughout Europe and the Middle East. **Reut Michaeli**, the director of the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, a leading Israeli NGO that has worked over the last 15 years to protect migrant and refugee rights in Israel via legal means and public outreach, bridges between the second chapter and the last. She describes the predicament of refugees' treatment in Israel, offers a critical account of the government response and proposes concrete steps to improve the situation.

In the concluding chapter, we focused on the refugees and challenges in Israel and asked: What should we do differently? **Galia Sabar and Noga Malkin** offer a critical summary of Israel's policies towards non-Jewish refugees and an alternative approach of dealing with the refugee challenge. **Tomer Persico**, basing his article on Jewish sources, finds "the

way the State of Israel acts today devastatingly and dishearteningly disappointing" and calls for a different approach towards both African and Syrian refugees. **Elliot Vaisrub Glassenberg**, an activist with asylum seekers in South Tel Aviv, asks: "Why Do Jews Care about Refugees Everywhere – Except in Israel"? He ends his article with a call: "We Jews must use our resources and our global peoplehood to model a global approach to the refugee crisis". Finally, in the last article, **Maayan Ravid** and **Shlomi Ravid** remind us that the question about Jewish Commitment to refugees is really about who we are as a people.

The intent of this publication was to initiate a public conversation on Jewish responsibility to refugees and the nature of 21st century Peoplehood. We welcome your thoughts and responses to [info@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:info@jpeoplehood.org).

We want to thank our partners in this publication – HIAS, in particular Rabbi Jennie Rosenn and Mark Hetfield. We are grateful to the contributors of the articles and appreciate their important work. It is a testament that the issue continues to be on the mind of the Jewish people. We hope it will help change the reality on the ground as well.

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## WHY SHOULD JEWS CARE FOR REFUGEES?



### Our Obligation to Refugees: The Exodus from Egypt

**Yuval Cherlow**

The importance of the story of the Exodus from Egypt needs no proof in the world of Judaism. Remembrance of the Exodus is the headline of the Ten Commandments, and, as such, underpins the basic and fundamental commandment of faith. Rabbi Yehuda Halevy declared that acknowledgement of the Blessed One, Holy Be He, as the liberator from Egypt is the foundation of faith, and even Maimonides, who based the source of faith on the story of creation in Genesis, determined that the commandment of faith, as understood from the Ten Commandments, is the cardinal commandment. The Creator of the Universe did not create the world and then depart it, but rather He is ever present in the world, as the god of history. Moreover, we recall the Exodus from Egypt daily, and from the time of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariyah, we even recount the story at night. Numerous events during the yearly cycle derive from the Exodus from Egypt – from Passover and Sukkot in which the Exodus story is at the center, and through all of the Torah holidays, during which we are called “to remember the Exodus from Egypt.”

The Exodus has its place in the Sabbath too, since, in the wording of the Tablets that appears in the Torah portion V’Ethchanan, in the book of Deuteronomy, we find that the Sabbath itself is a day of remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” Our sages explained, in various ways, the connection between the Sabbath rest and the respite of the slave: one of the explanations is the obligation imposed on every person to share the prosperity he has received with others.

We should note that there is an entire system of commandments related to the Exodus from Egypt that is not connected to faith or the holidays, but rather to the societal and moral aspects of life. The Torah teaches us that one who has been a slave and has experienced the anticipation of a day of rest and respite from labor may not deny such

respite to his subjects and slaves. The Torah tells us specifically, “so that your male and female slave may rest as you do,” thus enjoining us that one may not ignore the need for rest that exists in the soul of his male and female slaves, and must grant them this respite, since they share an awareness of slavery. Indeed, he was once part of an enslaved people, and has therefore made a covenant with all slaves; therefore, he is obliged to provide for their respite on the Sabbath.

The societal aspect of the memory of the Exodus from Egypt is not restricted to the Sabbath day. In Exodus 22:20 we read, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” According to Halacha, this refers to the prohibition against wronging a proselyte (Ger Tzedek). But it is a well-known principle that a text may be interpreted. From the text we discern that the intent is also to the stranger (Zar), inasmuch as we were not proselytes in Egypt but rather strangers residing there (and this is the meaning of the text “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”). Thus, we see that the obligation to refrain from wronging the proselyte applies to every stranger residing among us, although the obligation is of a different degree than the prohibition against wronging a proselyte. Furthermore, even if the commandment formally applies only to a proselyte, in principle the Torah once again illuminates the moral obligation to remember our enslavement in Egypt, and the covenant between us and all who are oppressed.

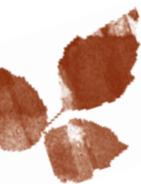
Is this principle specific only to Egypt or is it a general principle of Torah? Let us remind ourselves what was done to us seventy years ago: not only those who would destroy us, but also those who closed the gates, who provided no respite, who blocked our path on the way to the Land of Israel and sent us back there. Should we declare that Torah teaches us a principle that is broader than the narrow meaning of remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt? It seems to me that the Torah indeed teaches us the moral principle that all who have endured suffering and exploitation, marginalization and alienation, have entered into a covenant of solidarity with all oppressed of the world. And this is the basis of our obligation to refugees.

It is very important to emphasize that this moral obligation is not our only obligation. We have responsibility for other issues as well, and we should not focus only on this. We are responsible for the Jewish identity of the State of Israel; we are responsible for our security and the safety of its citizens; and we also have responsibility to refrain from tasks that are beyond our capability. The considerations are complex. Therefore, I do not believe that we must solve the problem of the refugees by ourselves. My intention is only to teach one of the central moral considerations according to the Torah, and our responsibility to consider it when we determine Israel's policy.

Remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt leads us in two contradictory but complementary directions. The first is expressed in the Passover which distinguished between the faithful, who sprinkled blood on the doorframe of their houses, and the others. This Passover is the foundation to understanding the choice of the Israelites and their separation from the nations of the world. Starting with the Exodus from Egypt, the People of Israel journeys forth on its unique path; receives the holy Torah; and gives it life in the Land of Israel, to which it has been bound since the days of our forebears. This understanding is the source of the Torah blessing unique to us: "who has chosen us from all nations and given us His Torah." The People of Israel was chosen to bear and hallow the name of the Lord in the world, and continues the journey of Abraham, forefather of the faithful, to the Land of Israel. The second direction leads to the moral responsibility inherent in this faith. The Lord of the Universe who took us out of Egypt is the Father of those at the fringes of society – the stranger, the slave, the maidservant and the bondsman, the orphan and the widow. Thus an integral part of the renewal of our eternal covenant with the Exodus from Egypt is the renewal of our recognition of this responsibility. "And God seeks those who have been driven away" is one of the most significant aspects of Divine Providence, and of our subsequent responsibility.

The actualization of these two sensibilities is also part of our obligation in every generation to see ourselves as though we were liberated from Egypt. We are also commanded in present days to renew the covenant with our Jewish national identity, separate and distinct from all nations. This identity should be expressed in myriad ways and it is an inseparable part of our vision. In a multi-cultural world that seeks to blur national boundaries and collective identity, we re-enact the Exodus from Egypt that distinguished us from these trends and commanded us to establish a kingdom of priests and to be a holy people. Simultaneously, and without contradiction, we each experience ourselves, personally, as slaves in Egypt, nurturing our moral sensitivity on several levels. We are obligated to provide a day of rest for the foreign workers among us and maintain respectful and honest relations with them as long as they reside among us; and we are obligated to provide those in need with a monetary grant to start a new life. The two lines drawn from the Exodus from Egypt converge into the essential core of our historical consciousness. Fortified by our memory of the Exodus from Egypt, we address the reality of our lives, striving to shape it with the decency to do what is right and just.

**Rabbi Yuval Cherlow is the head of the Orot Shaul yeshiva in Ra'anana and one of the founders of the Tzohar Rabbinical Association. He is a member of high level ethical committees in Israel.**



## Immigrants, Strangers and Us

**Marc D. Angel**

*“Do not afflict or oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”  
(Exodus 22:20)*

*“Do not oppress the stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, for you were  
strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9)*

*“When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not afflict him. As one of your citizens,  
the stranger who lives with you shall be to you, and you shall love him as yourself, for  
you were strangers in the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God.” ( Lev. 19:33-34)*

These and other verses in the Torah underscore our responsibility to not only be sympathetic to, but to identify with, those who are “strangers.” The Talmud (Bava Metsia 59b) posits that oppressing a stranger violates 36—and some say 46—Torah prohibitions.

The Torah obviously is teaching us to be compassionate and charitable. But in delineating the obligation to care for the stranger, it uses surprising language. The Torah could have said: have mercy on the oppressed, because you were oppressed in Egypt; or have compassion on slaves because you were slaves in Egypt. But it does not say these things. Rather, it invokes our experience in Egypt as an impetus for us to identify with and help the stranger.

Who is a stranger? In the biblical times, this was a non-Israelite who lived among Israelites. (In later rabbinic thought, the stranger was identified as a proselyte.) In our days, it applies to a person of different nationality—an immigrant.

What is the nature of being a stranger? The stranger is an “outsider,” someone not of our kin or clan, someone from another culture or religion, someone who is not “one of us.” We might naturally feel responsibility for our own group: but why should we be concerned with strangers?

The Torah—remarkably—commands us to love the stranger as ourselves. The Torah justifies this commandment: “for you know the soul of the stranger.” Because of our early experience as strangers in Egypt, we know first-hand what it means to be

considered an alien. We not only suffered physical abuse as slaves in Egypt; we suffered psychological abuse. We were considered as lesser human beings; we were thought to be unworthy of basic human rights. We know deep in our own soul what it's like to be a stranger; we are uniquely qualified to understand "the soul of the stranger."

This lesson from antiquity has had ongoing meaning for Jews throughout our history. During the modern era, there have been dramatic demographic changes throughout the world. Most of the Jews today are living in countries different from those in which our ancestors of 150 years ago were living. Indeed, a huge percentage of Jews are themselves immigrants, children or grandchildren of immigrants. We know the "soul of the stranger" because our families have been strangers. They have migrated to new lands to escape persecution or to find a better life for themselves and their children. They have made aliyah to Israel in fulfillment of Zionist dreams. They have had to learn new languages, adapt to new cultures. Our immigrant forebears often came to new lands with little money...but with great hope. They had to face physical hardships; and they had to cope with psychological sufferings.

Because we have been immigrants, we "know the soul" of immigrants. We have an inherent understanding of the challenges they face. We recognize the importance of helping them adapt to their new lands and to enabling them to overcome the psychological stigma of being outsiders.

If the Torah needed to issue 36 commandments about caring for strangers, it means that we have a strong tendency not to be concerned for them. Indeed, there are many voices in contemporary society that take a dim view toward receiving immigrants. After all, these "outsiders" may be criminals or terrorists. They will cost us a lot of money in order to provide them social, educational and health services. They may take away jobs from native-born citizens. They can change the nature of our society if they come in excessively large numbers.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 109a) suggests that the wicked city of Sodom was characterized by a policy that excluded immigrants. The Sodomites reasoned: why should we share our blessings with outsiders? Why should we make sacrifices for foreigners? It was this attitude that resulted in God's punishment of Sodom for its iniquity.

As a rule, people do not become immigrants unless there are compelling reasons for them to leave their own lands. They are fleeing wars, violence, or terrorism. They are fleeing from oppressive governments. They are escaping desperate poverty. They seek a better life for themselves and their families. Our instinctive response must be to lend a helping hand. We "know the soul of strangers" because we and our forebears were strangers.

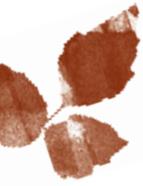
Yet, we are told that not all the immigrants seeking haven in our country are innocent refugees. There may be terrorists or criminals among them who wish to do us harm. While these claims cannot be summarily dismissed, neither should they create an exaggerated fear that endangers the vast majority of immigrants who legitimately need our aid. The government must have a humane and compassionate system of vetting that can detect the problematic individuals who wish to enter the country with bad intentions.

Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, a 19th century Italian Torah commentator, commented on the verse in Leviticus (19:18) commanding us to love our neighbor as ourselves. He pointed out that the verse should be understood to be saying: love your neighbor, because your neighbor is like yourself. Your neighbor is also created in the image of God.

The same comment applies to the commandment to love the stranger as ourselves. All human beings have a unique kinship. Instead of seeing others as “outsiders,” we need to see them as sharing a universal humanity based on all of us having been created by the Almighty.

The Torah knows that it is difficult to achieve this high level of understanding. That’s why it has underscored the obligation to care for the stranger 36 times. But it also knows that we are capable of achieving this level of understanding. And when we do, we not only fulfill God’s commandments; we fulfill our own humanity.

**Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals ([jewishideas.org](http://jewishideas.org)) and Rabbi Emeritus of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City. Author and editor of 36 books, he is past President of the Rabbinical Council of America, and is co-founder—with Rabbi Avi Weiss—of the International Rabbinic Fellowship.**



## They Are Us

**Manferd Lindenbaum**

I see the news from all over the world. I read the headlines: BORDERS CLOSED. Mothers, fathers, children and babies, all refugees, all fleeing. Even if they make it over the border, more trauma awaits them. Perhaps, in some places, a hand reaches out – a warm welcome amidst blatant animosity and xenophobia.

I know this story all too well. Seventy-nine years ago, my family was chased across a hostile border. Germany watched as 17,000 of its citizens –JEW- were taken to the Polish border, and forced across by guns and dogs.

Under the guise of help, with horse and wagon, some Polish peasants stole some people's luggage – a scene I see repeated today as others benefit off of the refugees' plight.

It was October 27, 1938. I had just turned six years old. My world was my mother and father, my brother and sister, and my blind Zayda.

We walked five miles to the nearest town of Zbaszyn. Some people had money, some had connections, and fled to temporary safety. We had neither. We found refuge on the fourth floor of a burnt-out flour mill, crowded together. It was called the "muhle" and it was to be our home for the next ten months. No heat nor water nor facilities, but we were together. Within 36 hours, the Joint Distribution Committee and HIAS arrived from Warsaw. They set up stations to give us food and supplies. They gave us bags to put straw in – beds, so we no longer had to sleep on the cold floor.

Two months earlier, at Lake Geneva in France, the nations of the world, (led by the United States and Britain) met at the Evian Conference to decide what to do to save the Jews. Hoping to get other countries to help, President Roosevelt had called the conference. However, the decision was made to close all borders. The Nazis took this as confirmation that they could do what they wanted. An insane search across Germany and Europe for anyone with a Jewish grandparent – first rounded up and then murdered.

I am here today because, in my darkest moments, people reached out and made a difference in my life. My story is not much different from the plight of sixty-five million refugees all over the world today. It may be hard to see – beneath a dark cloud of fear and xenophobia that is fed by falsehoods and exaggeration.

As, once again, HIAS advocates to protect refugees in America and reaches out to refugees all over the world, others are joining in. We must be active. There is great joy in making a difference.

Anyone who thinks or says that today is different, that this situation is unique, misses the point. When we deport a Syrian or a Mexican or an Iraqi, who has come here in search of safety for themselves and their children, there is no difference.

I remember my mother, Frieda, my father Otto, my sister Ruth, and my Zayda Tsvi. As my parents wanted safety and a life for their children, so too, do the mothers and fathers trying to save their families today. My family was murdered in a concentration camp. The borders were closed – no place to run. Some of my extended family found refuge in South Africa, Australia, and what was then Palestine. As they tried to save the lives of their children, they turned where they could, facing few and difficult options. There is no difference.

Arriving at Ellis Island in 1946, I remember passing the Statue of Liberty. Has that symbol lost its meaning? Have we forgotten what it means to be America, the free?

Just like my experience 79 years ago, if we turn our backs, things will get worse. If we open our arms and embrace the refugees, we will have a better world.

In 2014, together with most of my entire family, I returned to retrace the last steps that my family took. From Grodno, where my sister, mother, and father had run to after ten months as refugees – retracing the steps to where they were rounded up, marched to Auschwitz, and murdered.

We retraced our steps to where my brother and I boarded a Polish troop ship on August 29, 1939 which took us to safety to England on the Kindertransport. My sister was not allowed on the boat. Ten thousand other children had already arrived in England on the Kindertransport. The United States said, "NO".

One and a half million children were subsequently murdered.

We continued to Zbaszyn where we had been chased across the border, October 27, 1938.

We crossed back into Germany and instead of boarding a train like I had 76 years before, we got on bikes so we could see Germany in a new light. Eighteen strong, we biked 200 miles to Unna, my birth town. There were many events that took the darkness from my mind thinking about Poland and Germany - riding alongside my grandchildren as a testament to life.

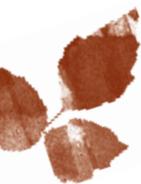
Roland Hendricks, a German friend from my hometown, joined us the last two days with his bicycle. He is now teaching German to refugees from all over the world. He sums it up by saying, "They are us."

I am proud of Germany's efforts to open their doors and the one million plus refugees they welcomed.

When we arrived in Unna, we were greeted by the Minister from the Church, who took us to the Jewish Synagogue and Community Center. His empathy made a difference as did the warm welcome we received.

We just cannot stand by as families all over the world are suffering as refugees. If we volunteer and welcome them, they will keep our country great. If we follow the lead of HIAS and encompass them, they and their children will become Americans of whom we can be proud

**Manny Lindenbaum escaped Europe on the last Kindertransport with his brother in 1939. Today, he and his wife Annabel, are dedicated to helping refugees find a safe, welcoming home.**



## Because We Are Jewish

**Mark Hetfield**

HIAS was founded in 1881 to welcome refugees because they were Jewish. Today, HIAS welcomes refugees because we are Jewish.

While the term “genocide” was not coined until 1944, HIAS was established at the end of the 19th Century in response to the genocide occurring in Eastern Europe – the pogroms targeting Jews which sparked the largest mass migration of Jews since the 15th Century, when Ferdinand and Isabella expelled all Jews and Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula.

HIAS was founded as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society by the members of the New York Jewish community. In HIAS’ first 40 years (**1881-1921**), the same amount of time for which Moses wandered in the desert, the American Jewish population grew from 250,000 to over 3 million. Most of these new Jewish-Americans were refugees from Eastern Europe who were assisted by HIAS in Castle Garden (known as kesselgarten to HIAS’ Yiddish speaking clients) and Ellis Island. HIAS fed them kosher meals, provided them legal counsel to ensure that the immigration authorities would not turn them away, sheltered them after they were allowed in, and paid for onward transportation to other cities. **The bottom line is that the American Jewish community today owes its very existence to those times when America opened its doors to refugees.**

America was very welcoming to Jewish refugees, until it wasn’t. With the **Emergency Quota Act of 1921**, Congress shut America’s doors to most Jewish refugees and immigrants by requiring visas prior to arrival and setting nationality quotas that were openly discriminatory against Eastern and Southern Europeans, forcing HIAS to become an international agency in order to find other countries that would take Jewish refugees. The legislation was originally set to expire after only one year, but instead was made even stricter by the U.S. Congress. These immigration restrictions continued to be in effect after the passage of the Nuremberg laws, Kristallnacht, the Second World War and the Holocaust, when millions of Jews were trapped inside a genocide. Canada, South Africa and Australia all followed the example of the United States and shut their doors as well, so HIAS had to find resettlement places and temporary asylum for Jewish refugees in Latin America and Asia.

In **1948**, two major events happened which made the work of HIAS easier: First, the establishment of the **state of Israel**, so Jewish refugees finally had a place to go; and second, the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** which, in Article XIV, recognized the right to seek and enjoy asylum. With this, people finally have the right to flee, and should never again be trapped inside of a genocide. This right was implemented by the 1951 Convention on Refugees.

From **1948 to 2005**, HIAS was largely focused on the resettlement – to the United States, Israel, and elsewhere - of Jewish refugees from the Middle East, the displaced persons camps in Europe, from behind the Iron Curtain, and Cuba.

Around 1970, HIAS resumed its assistance to Russian speaking refugees from the former Soviet Union, assisting over 400,000 Soviet Jews to find safety and freedom from the USSR from **1970 through the beginning of the 21st Century**.

Today, with few Jews left "in captivity", **HIAS has turned Jewish values and history into action** – moving from our "Exodus period" to our "Leviticus period" – helping refugees not because they are Jewish, but because we are Jewish. Working in close partnership with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), HIAS works with refugees and asylum seekers in the United States, Latin America, Israel, Africa, and Eurasia to provide them with **legal protection, psycho-social assistance, and livelihoods**. When HIAS cannot safely integrate refugees where they are, and when it is unlikely they will be able to safely return home, HIAS works to resettle them to third countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia.

In communities across the United States, HIAS welcomes refugees in partnership with the United States government and local partners, including both Jewish family service agencies as well as independent organizations. We welcome refugees of many faiths and ethnicities upon arrival at airports, bring them to furnished and food-stocked apartments which we found for them, enroll their kids in school, teach them English, help them find jobs, all so they can become employed and self-sufficient as soon as possible. Above all, we do our best to help them become new Americans, just like we did for Jewish refugees for well over a century.

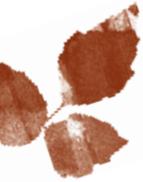
Today, with the rise of nationalism, xenophobia and Islamophobia across the world and in the United States, the work of HIAS has become particularly challenging. But we have faced those challenges before, fought them, survived them, and overcome them. HIAS will always be there to find asylum for Jews fleeing persecution. But we have learned the lessons from the Torah – where the commandment to love the stranger as ourselves, for we were once strangers in the land of Egypt, is repeated no less than 36 times – and from

our own history. HIAS is now there for anyone who is a refugee. In 2016, of the 4186 refugees welcomed by HIAS to the United States, 51% were Muslim. 4% were Jewish.

In 2017, HIAS drafted a statement, signed by over 2000 rabbis from 48 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, representing all major movements of Judaism, asserting that America must remain a welcoming country for refugees. Over 350 Jewish congregations in the United States have signed on to the HIAS “welcome campaign.” HIAS is not just a Jewish organization for refugees, it is truly the refugee organization of the American Jewish community. That is our greatest strength.

**Mark Hetfield is an attorney who serves as President and CEO of HIAS, which he originally joined in 1989 as a caseworker in Rome. He has also held positions with the US Immigration and Naturalization Service, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, and the law firm of Fulbright and Jaworski.**

## HOW ARE JEWS RESPONDING TO THE CALL?



### **Our responsibility as Jews for Refugees in the 21st Century: the View From a British-Based Humanitarian Charity**

**Rebecca Singer**

The Jewish history of being both migrants and refugees in a new land is as old as our people itself. As such, it's impossible to separate the Jewish response to refugees from our own collective history and memory. The experience of being a migrant or refugee, when traced back, is in the lifeblood of most people within the British Jewish community. My organization, World Jewish Relief, like the wider community, also has a profound and intrinsic connection to refugees.

Established as the Central British Fund for German Jewry (CBF), World Jewish Relief was formed after the Nazi party came to power in Germany in 1933. It brought together many leading British Jews, including Simon Marks who founded the retail giant Marks and Spencer's and Dr. Chaim Weizmann, the first President of the State of Israel.

They raised the enormous sum of £250,000, the equivalent of £16.8 million in today's sterling, to support Jewish refugees trying to leave Germany and Austria. They lobbied the British government to allow Jews fleeing war and persecution into the UK. In November 1938, when the devastation of Kristallnacht was felt across Germany, nearly 10,000 children, predominantly Jewish, were permitted to enter the UK on the Kindertransport, spearheaded by World Jewish Relief. It's a story frequently recounted: children leaving their parents and travelling by train and ferry to Liverpool Street Station to meet their volunteer foster parents, clutching only their most cherished possessions.

World Jewish Relief was also fundamental in bringing to the UK 732 orphaned concentration camp survivors known as 'The Boys' and helping them to build a life for themselves in the UK. These people – whether from the Kindertransport, one of the Boys or one of the tens of thousands of others who received our help before, during and after World War II, have grown up to love Britain and richly contribute towards it.

In September 2015, as the refugee crisis intensified, World Jewish Relief launched its second emergency appeal for Syrian refugees. At the time, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote a piece in which he discussed the moral and biblical imperative to love the stranger because you were once strangers. Referring to the refugee crisis, he said that “a bold act of collective generosity will show that the world, particularly Europe, has learned the lesson of its own dark past and is willing to take a global lead in building a more hopeful future.”

Jewish memory shapes our morality. When the pictures of a little boy Alan Kurdi, washed up lifeless on a beach, hit the news in September 2015, as waves of refugees and migrants were crossing the Mediterranean, the British Jewish community was jolted into action.

The response to World Jewish Relief’s Refugee Crisis Emergency Appeal was overwhelming and has now raised more than \$1.3m. The appeal was noteworthy because the money didn’t come in large donations from a small number of wealthy donors, but in small amounts from thousands of members of the Jewish community who felt morally compelled to do something.

The money was initially spent on aiding refugees who had fled war zones and had ended up in Turkey or Greece. From emergency first aid, medical care and supermarket vouchers for those arriving on Lesbos to winter blankets, sleeping bags, warm coats and school stationary for children on the Turkish-Syrian border. World Jewish Relief is currently providing exceptionally vulnerable unaccompanied minors in Greece with legal, social and psychological support.

Historically, World Jewish Relief has not worked in the UK, but when the government announced that it would allow 20,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees to be resettled in Britain, the international crisis became a domestic issue.

Given our experience assisting Jewish immigrants before, during and after the war, we know that refugees need intensive support once they have been resettled in order to gain sustainable employment and support themselves in the long term.

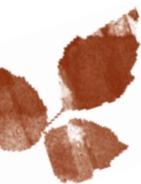
World Jewish Relief has committed to helping 1,000 of those 20,000 arriving in the UK by launching a unique Livelihood Programme. The pilot year in Bradford in north east England, is just coming to an end and offers the refugees psychological, vocational, social and language support with the aim of helping them secure paid employment.

The 50 people who have completed the course have benefited from the opportunity to improve their English language skills to a sufficient level for employment, gain vocational

training and receive assistance when applying for work experience and jobs. Eleven are now fully employed and another eleven have secured work placements. The programme is due to be rolled out across the region this year as we work to ensure 1,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees get the chance for a fresh start in their new home.

The Talmud (Shavuot 39a) tells us that all Jews are responsible for one another but it also guides us morally to appreciate the responsibility we have beyond our own community. It is the Jewish value of 'darchei shalom', the paths of peace (Gittin 61a) that guides our work and commits us to assisting refugees regardless of race, creed or nationality. We have the experience and the expertise to make a difference to refugees arriving in Europe today and we are privileged to have the support of the British Jewish community behind us.

**Rebecca Singer is World Jewish Relief's communications officer. She holds responsibility for the organisation's synagogue engagement, working with Rabbis and synagogue communities across the UK to raise awareness of the charity's history and current work in the Former Soviet Union and around the world, including the programme supporting Syrian Refugees in the UK.**



## **German Jews in Response to the Refugee Crisis in Germany – Notes from a German Rabbi**

**Gesa S. Ederberg**

As Jews, we know all too well the tragedy of our grandparents and parents who needed to flee persecution in Europe prior to and during World War II, when the world turned its back against them. Today, the world is again facing a massive refugee crisis, and history is repeating itself. Here, in Germany – in an ironic twist of history – the German government has taken leadership in the world and made a declaration that this is an opportunity to “do the right thing” this time.

The refugee crisis is a daily story on the front page of every American newspaper, but what is not well known are the stories about how refugee shelters cope with this influx of desperate human beings and how the Jewish community in Berlin is engaged in the process.

The Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue and Masorti Germany have built a powerful partnership with a refugee shelter, run by the Berlin City Mission and a Christian NGO. Located in Spandau, an area in northwest Berlin where Jews lived dating back to the 1300's, the Mertensstrasse Flüchtlingszentrum (refugee shelter) was opened in the fall of 2015 in an empty, former tobacco factory. As refugees arrived, beds were built and partitions installed. There were minimal sanitary facilities, no kitchen, no laundry, and no organized space and equipment to meet basic needs. Nevertheless, within three weeks, 1,000 refugees called this home.

This shelter was chosen as a pilot project due to the personal relationship between IsraAID, an Israeli disaster relief organization, and the director of the shelter, who had worked in peace projects in Israel. The rabbi of the Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue and several lay leaders quickly organized a Mitzvah Day in mid-November, and 50 congregants showed up. This was just the beginning. Every week, people continue to volunteer. One rabbinic student comes dressed in a clown costume to entertain the children. Others are helping to sort clothing and donated goods, assisting with German-language classes, braiding ribbons into girls' hair, and even helping the medical staff

check for lice. Once a month, the synagogue organizes a day of cultural activities, with singing and dancing, arts and crafts and German lessons for the adults. IsraAID provides training for volunteers and trauma care directly for the refugees.

The **Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue in Berlin** was cooperating with a refugee shelter housed in the Catholic Hospital just behind our synagogue. When they finished building a new wing, they decided not to use it for the hospital for the next couple of months, but to offer it as a refugee shelter. Immediately, they sent out letters to all the other religious communities and other social institutions in the neighborhood, asking for cooperation.

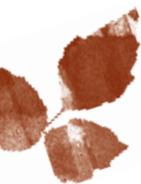
Just as a side note: The hospital is located on "Grosse Hamburger Strasse", next to the Jewish High School and the former Jewish Home for the Elderly that was used by the Nazis as a collecting point before deportation to the camps. Some people managed to escape and the nuns at the Catholic Hospital took them in, wrapped them in bandages, put them in beds, simulating intensive care and so saved their lives! And today, we are cooperating for new refugees.

Teenagers and parents from the synagogue and the Jewish High School helped set up the rooms, assemble furniture, carry mattresses, etc. Other volunteers help refugees deal with the bureaucracy, teach German, spend leisure time together, organize sport events and other outings. We collected clothing, bags, books to learn German and more. At another refugee center, volunteers from the synagogue renovated and furnished a playroom for children.

Last year the synagogue invited Syrian refugees as guests for our Chanukka party and went with our kids to another shelter (next to the Jewish primary school) to do arts and crafts with the children there.

At our party, we had somebody from our Muslim sister congregation helping to translate my Chanukka explanations and the berakhot for candle lighting into Arabic, and later we taught them to play with dreidels and useful German words. One of our guests asked our Muslim friend (recognizable through her head covering): "Is such a relationship as we see here normal between Muslims and Jews in Germany?" and she answered (and told me so afterwards with a smile): "Yes, that's normal." This is the normalcy we want to create – and it would be great if you become part of it!

**Gesa S. Ederberg is the Rabbi of Synagogue Oranienburger Strasse, in Berlin, Germany.**



## The American Jewish Community: Awake and Mobilized

**Jennie Rosenn**

In September of 2015, a photograph of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy whose body washed up on a Turkish beach, shocked America. Our eyes were opened, and we woke up to a crisis that has been going on for years.

Over time we learned that refugees are risking their lives and fleeing from many places: The Democratic Republic of Congo, Honduras, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Colombia, Sudan, Burma, Ukraine.... The list is long.

We saw photographs of families in rickety boats making the perilous journey to Europe and heard of the thousands of refugees who lost their lives en route. We saw footage of refugees on trains in Europe trying to cross borders – eerily resonant images for Jews.

Just a few generations ago, it was us on those boats being turned away. It was us making the unbearable choice to send our children into the woods or onto trains in those final moments as we were herded into camps. And, of course, thousands of years ago, it was us, the ancient Israelites, who wandered in the desert after fleeing from the Egyptians.

We are a refugee people, and this is why we cannot simply turn away.

The Torah teaches not once, not twice, but according to the Talmud, thirty-six times to welcome the stranger, to protect the stranger, even to love the stranger. Why? **כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים**. “Because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

As American Jews we owe our lives to a time when America was true to its founding values and welcomed us. But we are painfully aware of more shameful times in our nation’s history when we, and others, were turned away and sent back to danger and death.

So, when the American Jewish community awakened to the magnitude of the refugee crisis, we swung into action. The Jewish community has been at the forefront of the voices saying our nation must do more, and is a leader not only in advocating for refugees, but also in creating welcoming communities.

Across the country, hundreds of synagogues are helping to resettle refugee families, and more than 360 have joined the [HIAS Welcome Campaign](#), committing to take action.

Synagogues in places as varied as Albany, Chicago, Los Angeles, Kansas City, Houston, St. Louis, and San Francisco are helping newly-arrived families rebuild their lives in the United States.

Thousands of volunteers are tutoring refugees in English, helping them find housing and enroll their children in school, serving as cultural orientation and employment mentors, collecting furniture, and raising funds.

Jewish communities are changing the geography of welcome.

Congregations are also advocating, calling on their members of congress, mayors, and governors to stand up for refugees. Rabbis are exerting their moral leadership. In 2015, when a particularly egregious bill to stop the US Refugee Admissions Program was brought to the Senate, 1200 rabbis signed onto a national letter opposing it. In early 2017, more than 2000 rabbis of all denominations and from 48 states signed [HIAS' National Rabbinic Letter in Support of Refugees](#), telling elected officials that America must keep its doors open to refugees of all ethnic and religious backgrounds. Many rabbis have told us that while they have not previously spoken out on "political issues," they are compelled to do so now.

In the wake of President Trump's Executive Order to halt resettlement, thousands of Jews gathered for [HIAS' National Day of Jewish Action](#) to protest the slamming shut of America's doors. The action – which took place in 20 cities around the country – garnered extensive coverage in the Jewish and mainstream media and was co-sponsored by dozens of national and local Jewish organizations. [Candlelight vigils](#) just took place across America in early June to commemorate the anniversary of the day that the MS St. Louis was sent back to Europe. The Jewish community gathered and called on our elected officials not to make the same mistake of confusing our enemies with the victims of our enemies. Tens of thousands of American Jews are advocating on behalf of refugees, and we have received multiple indications that it is making a difference.

Additionally, hundreds of Jewish communities across the country have hosted speakers and programs about the refugee crisis. Even the Jewish holidays have offered opportunities for deeper understanding, with [Hagaddah supplements](#) connecting the plight of today's refugees to our own Exodus and displays of photographs and stories of refugees in [Sukkot](#).

Finally, many have given *tzedakah* to help save lives and enable people to find safe haven and begin to rebuild their lives with dignity both in the United States and around the world.

The robust response in the Jewish community is notable for both its depth and diversity. From rabbis to lay leaders, mainstream Jewish organizations to bar and bat mitzvah students, congregations to millennials, American Jews have been mobilizing. While congregation-based activists and volunteers are largely baby boomers and older, people of all generations are joining the movement. More than 500 young Jews in their 20s and 30s attended a recent HIAS program in Washington D.C., and programs co-sponsored with young adult organizations like Repair the World, Avodah, and Moishe House are common. *B'nai mitzvah* across the country have focused on refugees in their *divre torah* and organized *mitzvah* projects. Mainstream Jewish organizations have issued powerful statements in support of America welcoming refugees, including the American Defamation League, American Jewish Committee, and the Orthodox Union.

**The sum of these parts is nothing short of a powerful, growing American Jewish movement for refugees. It is an all too rare moment in which the Jewish people – from the margins to the mainstream – are taking action as Jews.**

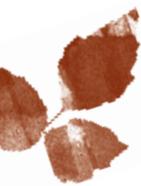
Certainly, there have been voices of caution and even objections to Jewish support for refugees. Given the powerful backlash against refugees that was ignited by the terrorist attack in Paris and that gathered momentum throughout the Presidential campaign, this is not surprising. But most American Jews' fears are quelled when they learn about the extreme vetting already part and parcel of the US refugee admissions process. Others have been moved when reminded that the majority of Americans did not want to welcome Jewish refugees, because of fears about security, infiltration, and unfavorable ideologies. Still others remain uncomfortable, but then ask themselves *Who do I want to be as an American and as a Jew?* While there remains a small segment of the American Jewish community that is unsupportive, the vast majority understand welcoming refugees as profoundly Jewish.

While the Jewish community is hardly alone in these efforts and participates in, and even leads, multi-faith initiatives and coalitions, we also have a unique role to play. Our advocacy has particular power as we bring not only our religious values, but also our history as Jews and, more specifically, as American Jews. Furthermore, our elected officials, sadly, do not expect that American Jews will be on the front lines of advocating for Muslims and when we are, they take notice.

Our challenge in the coming months and years is to have staying power and commit to the long road ahead. We must not get distracted or weary or discouraged or simply go back to sleep. We are a people who knows what it means to stand strong, to endure, and to not give up; we know that the arc of history is long.

This, in fact, is a historic moment. Never before have we, a refugee people, not been refugees ourselves, but instead been in a position to change the future for today's refugees. We have awakened, and now it is time to honor our history, live out our values, and act. Nothing less than the future of human life and the future of our nation depend on it. This is a moment for the Jewish people.

**Rabbi Jennie Rosenn is the Vice President for Community Engagement at HIAS. She previously served as Program Director for Jewish Life and Values at the Nathan Cummings Foundation and as Rabbi at Columbia/Barnard Hillel.**



# How Can We Not? Temple Shalom Responds to the Refugee Crisis

**Michael L. Feshbach and Karen Green**

## **1. View from the Bimah – Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach**

There are times when we are, it seems, energy in search of a cause. We “want,” but we lack a “what.” But there are moments in time when everything seems to flow together, when different forces flow together and the moral moment calls and the need to act is more than obvious; rather, it becomes almost unavoidable. It is moments such as these – the fight for marriage equality, a few years ago, and the cause of refugees now – which not only make a difference for others, they also serve to bring our community together.

I remember a textbook used in many Reform synagogue religious schools called *Searching the Prophets for Values*. Satirical reaction to the book called it, instead: “*Searching the Values for Prophets*,” jokingly accusing us of placing our political values front and center, and only afterwards looking for religious validation.

Maybe – maybe – this was a fair call in some cases. In our response to the refugee crisis, however, the values of our tradition, command and compel our involvement, loudly and clearly. Obvious examples include:

- Hachnasat Or’chim: welcoming guests.
- V’ahavta et HaGer: loving the stranger.
- Hav’a’at Shalom Bein Adam L’Chaveiro: working to bring about peace between people.

But there are other threads of text and tradition at work here as well. We feel called, and moved, by the following insights and experiences:

- Mitzvah Goreret Mitzvah (Pirkei Avot 4:2): one commandment leads to another.

Overwhelmed by the depth of problems around us, unable to wave a magic wand and solve anything easily, we are at risk of despair. How can we make a difference in the

world? In baseball, great hitters get out of a slump by concentrating on hitting singles. By doing one thing, by tackling one problem, by helping one family, we feel movement, and action, and hope. It is our formula to fight frustration: just do the right thing, and more will follow.

- Al T'hiyu Kh'Avadim HaM'shamshim et HaRav Al M'nat L'Kabel Pras; do not be like those who serve in order to receive a reward. (Pirkei Avot 1:3).

We step into this work out of a sense of service. It is meant to address the needs of others. But, as is the case of true altruism, of selfless acts, in the end we find... we get so much more out of it than we could have imagined. Our own growth, our understanding, our sense of connection and meaning and purpose is, for most of us, more than worth the effort, the time, the resources we put in. Found in a Chinese fortune cookie: "If you continually give, you will continually receive."

- Da Lifnei Mi Atta Omeid; Know Before Whom You Stand. (based on the Talmud, Berachot 28b).

We think these words apply not only to a deity we may feel but cannot see, but to the real people before us, whose faces we see and whose pain we come to feel and whose stories we take into our hearts. Social science research and the experience of our own lives teach us: when you come to know the "other" as a human being, the earth shakes and the world changes. Prejudice against Jews, against blacks, against gays all diminish... when someone comes to know real human beings who defy the stereotypes with which we may have been raised. Make a connection, build a bridge and walls fall down. Many of us have never been close with a Muslim family before. And this family we work with... they had never even met a Jew... before they found us, waiting at the airport, filling their apartment, bringing them to their new home.

In this crisis, we don't have to look long or hard for Jewish values to jump out at us. For us, the question is not why do we do this work. It is this: how can we not?

## **2. View from the Congregation – Karen Green, Co-chair Refugee Response Team**

During the High Holy days of 2015, Rabbi Feshbach called on Temple Shalom to support Syrian refugees. He taught that the injunction to welcome the stranger is commanded thirty six times — more than any other in the Bible. He invited a number of us to organize, knowing our passion for the cause. Being called by the Rabbi to repair (even a miniscule corner) of the world was an honor. We began the effort as strangers to the refugee infrastructure. We familiarized ourselves with the US government's 18

month (and 19 agencies!) vetting process to pitch sponsoring a family to the synagogue board and respond to congregants' concerns, resulting in the board's unanimous vote of support. Believing in HIAS' purpose to resettle refugees "not because they are Jewish but because we are Jewish," we hoped to resettle a family through HIAS. However, for efficiency's sake, the US government authorizes only two or three of the nine resettlement agencies to work in any given metropolitan area. Thus, mentored by Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church (CCPC), which welcomed a family before us, our Jewish synagogue partnered with Lutheran Social Services to welcome a Muslim family, a genuinely interfaith endeavor!

Within the shul, our team began as strangers as well, drawn together solely by Temple membership and the impulse to assist refugees. Soon we were spending hours discussing concerns vital to this family of new Americans. Where should they be housed? How should we spend our limited funds to assist? What systems should we use to organize dozens of volunteers to furnish the apartment, teach English, enroll the kids in school, search for jobs, learn the community, drive six people around, and meet ongoing – and emergency – healthcare needs? We constantly struggled to balance gifts of compassion with the family's need to become self-sufficient. In the process, we plumbed our own backgrounds and values as well as those of fellow volunteers'. Through refugee work, I am less a stranger at shul. With these wonderful people, and in this meaningful work, I found my spiritual home.

As one of the first congregations in the region to cosponsor Syrian refugees, Temple Shalom became an accidental leader. As the refugee crisis intensified, and President Trump issued the executive order colloquially known as the "Muslim ban," more faith congregations galvanized to sponsor families. We are consulted frequently and interviewed often by the media. We found myriad ways to partner with HIAS as a Welcome Campaign congregation, speaking at gatherings large and small about our experience and advocating for humane refugee policy. Our entire Tikkun Olam focus expanded, enriched by a new-found focus on refugees. We now have a rapid response crew ready to protest anti-refugee action at a moment's notice. We're exploring how we might support the inter-faith sanctuary movement.

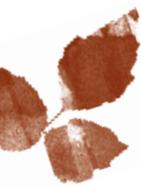
Speaking up and acting in an atmosphere of increasing intolerance provides purpose and fortitude, individually and collectively, in this difficult time.

Perhaps most significantly, our Syrian family is indeed family for many of us. Walking alongside them through the crucible of adjusting to a new life, language and livelihood has forged unbreakable bonds. Here's how it happened for me: Mom sat ashen as she listened to her young children wail as each received five vaccines in a row. I asked "How

are you doing?" She began to weep saying, "I miss my sisters for this." She had fled from war, lived for four years as a refugee in Jordan with her family, immigrated to a new country, and still had the emotional reserves to deeply feel her children's passing pain. We joined hands, "I don't have a sister," I said, "would you be my sister?" And so we became sisters, and always will be; strangers no more.

**Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach served as Senior Rabbi of Temple Shalom in Chevy Chase, MD from 2001-2017. In the summer of 2017 he moved to the United States Virgin Islands, where he now serves as Rabbi of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, the oldest synagogue in continuous use under the American flag. His writing, articles and blog posts can be found at [www.michaelfeshbach.net](http://www.michaelfeshbach.net).**

**Karen Green is a consultant who works with nonprofit boards (in the Jewish world including synagogues, historical societies and family foundations) to improve organizational governance. She serves on the national boards of HIAS and Art & Remembrance.**



## From Empty Pockets to Silver Linings: Jewish Family & Community Services East Bay Resettles Refugees

**Amy Weiss**

Home

*no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well*

*your neighbors running faster than you  
breath bloody in their throats  
the boy you went to school with  
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory  
is holding a gun bigger than his body  
you only leave home  
when home won't let you stay.*

Excerpt from poem by British Somali poet Warsan Shire

JFCS East Bay was founded in 1877 as the Daughters of Israel Relief Society, with a focus on helping vulnerable women, children, and community members. Early in our history, we developed expertise in resettling refugees in the San Francisco East Bay: Jews coming from Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century, earthquake survivors coming across the bay from San Francisco in 1906, Jews escaping Nazi Germany in the 1930s, Holocaust survivors after the war, and Jews fleeing anti-Semitism in the former Soviet Union during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s.

Our resettlement program currently serves refugees from around the world, particularly focusing on those who have experienced persecution based on their religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity. We have extensive expertise in resettling refugees who are vulnerable and fleeing violent and dire circumstances.

JFCS East Bay is currently resettling Afghan refugees who served as translators for U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Because of their cooperation with the United States military, former translators and their families are now being targeted by the Taliban and other fundamentalists. These brave young men are able to obtain Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) in order to bring themselves and their families to safety. Because they arrive having recently been in grave danger, these families are often highly traumatized and need intensive, individualized support from our Dari/Farsi-speaking case managers and psychologist to start their new lives in our community. Our resettlement team includes Farsi, Dari, Arabic, and Russian speakers, many of whom were themselves refugees or immigrants. In addition to Afghans, we are also resettling Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, and people from African countries and the former Soviet Union. JFCS East Bay is also the lead organization in the United States [resettling LGBTI individuals](#) persecuted for their sexual orientation or gender identity. These refugees come mostly from Africa, the Middle East, and the former Soviet Union. Most of the refugees we serve are Muslim.

Since September of 2015, the world's attention has been drawn to the plight of refugees and our resettlement work has become even more vital. As Avi Rose, Executive Director of JFCS East Bay, says, we are now "immersed in images of people fleeing, escaping war and persecution, crowding into barely habitable places where they aren't welcome, casting their fate to flimsy boats crossing dangerous waters, crowding across borders, risking everything for an uncertain future. This is not a new story. For many of us, we need only go back a generation or two, if that, to recall similar stories in our own families. And for all of us who are Jews, we go back to the core narratives that have shaped us as a people, starting with Abraham migrating away from his home to a place he does not know, continuing to the formative experience of our exodus from Egypt, and then, so many centuries of wanderings and expulsions and seeking refuge, a place to live and to be."

JFCS East Bay is blessed to be part of a community that wants to open doors and provide sanctuary. Here in our community, we have seen a significant surge of interest from people wanting to help, support, and welcome refugees. Since the election of Donald Trump and in particular since the anti-refugee Executive Order was issued, we have been overwhelmed with offers of support from community members wanting to volunteer their time and talent. We've received messages like this one: "In 1939, my great-grandparents sponsored the visas of three young men who were fleeing persecution in

Germany. I would like to work directly with a refugee family so they too know they are welcome in our country.” And others talk about feeling paralyzed and needing to do something active and positive to help newly arrived families. Many of these volunteers draw on their Jewish faith in reaching out to refugees, including one rabbi who said, “We’ve had family members who have relied on the help of strangers. We know what it feels like to be religious outsiders. This is our central story, our duty, and a full expression of our Jewish values.”

To more deeply engage our community, JFCS East Bay has developed partnerships with many of the local synagogues. Congregants come together to form welcome groups around each refugee family, creating small villages of support. With training and support from our volunteer services staff, the welcome groups offer practical help and friendship to newcomers. We now have twenty-two welcome groups from various synagogues, all of them working actively to support refugees.

Because housing is extraordinarily expensive in the Bay Area, many community members have also stepped up to offer hosted housing to new refugees. Until a refugee has found work, it’s almost impossible for them to afford housing costs in this area. When we appealed to the community to help address this crisis, we received a tremendous response. Many people responded by opening their homes to “strangers.” For example, a Jewish family responded within a day, and then welcomed an Afghan family of nine into their home.

Another Jewish family has made the remarkably generous commitment to house a Syrian family of four for an entire year. Along with a welcome group, the host family also helped the father of the family find employment and secured a pro-bono space in a wonderful neighborhood preschool for the oldest child. The children became fast friends and the housing host, Lilah Kendall reports, “my dad is a Holocaust survivor from Germany. He was 13 when he alone got on a train to France. He came to the US when he was 16.” Lilah felt compelled to help in some way but didn’t expect to fall in love. The housing host says that the unexpected benefit of her family’s act of generosity will be a lifelong friendship between these two families from different worlds.

Despite the desperation, intense grief, and trauma that refugees experience on their journeys to their new land and lives, we have seen glimpses of shining silver linings. Refugees are resilient and our community is warm and embracing. We have seen new interfaith coalitions and alliances sprouting to support refugees, building bridges between faith communities in the service of the vulnerable. A particularly beautiful example of this was when the local Franciscan monastery responded to an urgent appeal

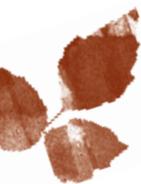
we made for housing refugees<sup>1</sup>. It is a powerful alliance indeed that a Catholic Franciscan monastery is working with a Jewish agency to support Muslim refugees. All parties of this unlikely group (including the Muslim refugees) felt deep pride in this partnership. Brother Mike Minton, the director of San Damiano Retreat Center continually thanks JFCS East Bay for giving his community the opportunity to provide service to refugees and in the process the hearts of the brothers broke open. Active compassion requires of us to stretch in completely unforeseeable ways. Who knew we could love strangers so deeply and receive so many gifts and blessings? Who knew I could adopt an African LGBT refugee and take him so deeply into my heart and family? Who knew we could have so many opportunities to put our cherished values into action and teach those values to our children? How could we have imagined the healing that would happen between the Muslim and Jewish communities? Who knew how resilient our refugee and immigrant families would be and how they continue to weave their particular cultural blessings into the fabric of our country.

Precisely because the refugee experience is so challenging the silver linings are so treasured. This is the America we see day in and day out: gritty, hardworking, compassionate, generous, warm, and welcoming.

**Amy Weiss, MS, LMFT is the Director of Refugee & Immigrant Services at the East Bay JFCS. She oversees all the programs related to serving refugees and immigrants at the agency, including the resettlement work with refugees, psychological services as well as legal and immigration services it provides to people on the path towards citizenship. The agency resettled 150 people this past year in the two counties it serves.**

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<sup>1</sup> HIAS made a 4-minute video about this that can be viewed [here](#).



# Israeli Humanitarian Aid Agency IsraAID Responds to the Global Refugee Crisis

**Tamar Lazarus**

**IsraAID** is an Israeli non-profit, non-governmental organization that responds to humanitarian crises, providing life-saving disaster relief and long-term support. Since its inception in 2001, our medical teams, search and rescue units, post trauma experts, community specialists and other professionals have led international responses to natural disasters and civil strife around the world. Our mission is to efficiently support and meet the changing needs of populations as they strive to move from crisis to rehabilitation, and eventually, to sustainable living. As of 2017, we had responded to crises in 41 countries, and currently have on-going programs in 18.

**Our responses to global humanitarian challenges utilize Israeli expertise and innovation**, such as water and agricultural technologies, specialists in post-trauma counselling and field hospitals building and management.

**Our teams reflect Israel's diversity** and include a mix of Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Druze professionals, who live and work together side by side; many are Arabic-speakers which has proven to be imperative during the current Middle East refugee crisis.

**Our work builds bridges**, crosses cultural, ethnic and faith barriers, and changes perspectives on a national and global scale. All IsraAID's programs are based on forging close working relationships with local affected populations, many who often have no/limited/antagonistic relations with Israel. Many of the Syrian refugees arriving on the shores of Greece were astonished to be welcomed by Israeli volunteers.

**'Tikkun Olam – repairing the world'** is an inherent part of the psyche, culture, and values of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. IsraAID's relief work continually provides a practical and global application of this important value.

## **The Middle East Refugee Crisis**

The Middle East refugee crisis is currently one of the world's largest humanitarian disasters. Since 2015, we have witnessed an overwhelming influx of refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan fleeing violence and atrocities, and seeking passage and refuge in Western Europe. The sheer volume of displaced persons

arriving after treacherous journeys has swamped national and local authorities, who face the overwhelming challenge of absorbing and integrating a diverse and traumatized population. IsraAID has responded and deployed specialists to the most affected areas. We currently have teams in Greece and Germany, and in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. For IsraAID, as an Israeli entity, there is a clear and innate imperative to help this generation of refugees.

### **Greece**

Since September 2015, we have deployed in total over 100 medical and psycho-social professionals to Lesbos Island and the (now closed) northern border between Greece and Macedonia. Our mobile unit, staffed by many Arabic and Farsi speakers, welcomed literally thousands of refugees as they arrived in overcrowded rubber boats, following precarious journeys across the water. Once safely on shore, the team welcomed them and provided immediate medical assessments and treatment. They also distributed urgent provisions – food, clothing, baby items - and orientated the groups with information and maps explaining where they are, and the next steps in their journeys. Most registered as asylum seekers and continued to Germany.

However, in March 2016, following the closure of the Greek-Macedonian border, the situation has become increasingly static and Greece has become a longer-term transit spot for refugees. Many are now in a challenging state of a limbo; they are unsure of the duration of their stay and when they will be resettled.

Working with local partners, our teams assessed the changing needs and shifted our focus from medical and psychosocial triage on the shore, to longer-term programs that deal with the emotional and psychological impact of the situation. They look at stress reduction, resilience building, community empowerment and positive coping mechanisms.

### **Germany**

Following a request from the German Government in 2015, we sent a team of Arabic, Farsi and English-speaking psychosocial specialists to Germany to provide long-term holistic support to refugees awaiting resettlement. Our team operates in 10 refugee shelters in Berlin, Frankfurt and Brandenburg, which are inadequately equipped and insufficiently experienced to deal with the refugees' breadth and depth of psychosocial issues. We train shelter staff and give direct support to over 9,500 refugees.

As well as dealing with the cultural shock of relocating to Western Europe, many refugees carry deep physical and emotional scars from years of violence and unspeakable atrocities; the most vulnerable are women and unaccompanied minors. They are also facing an ongoing stressful and unpredictable wait to be rehoused.

Our approach includes setting up mobile specialist trauma units, support programs for women and girls who experienced sexual gender-based violence, and building the capacity of shelter staff with culturally-sensitive psychosocial training. Our work in Germany focuses on the long-term impact, and supports the most vulnerable individuals as they prepare to transition from temporary shelters to permanent residence – processing their pasts and rebuilding their lives.

### **Kurdistan Region Iraq**

Since August 2014, the Yazidi minority in northern Iraq suffered a genocide at the hands of ISIS, which involved the forced conversion, massacre, expulsion, sexual exploitation, slavery, and torture of the Yazidi people. Since its start, over 5,000 women have been captured and enslaved by ISIS. To date, 3,500 women and children remain incarcerated and over 400,000 Yazidis are displaced and in need of critical assistance. The persecution of the Yazidi people was qualified as a genocide according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as of March 2015.

The Yazidi survivors now mostly live in internally displaced persons' camps in the northern province of Dohuk in the Kurdistan Region. Life in these camps is tough and many live in dire conditions. Since January 2014, the Kurdistan Region has absorbed more than 1 million internally displaced persons fleeing unrest in other parts of Iraq in addition to over 200,000 Syrian refugees. So the camps face a huge pressure on resources and a constant lack of necessities. The camps' refugees suffer unfathomable psychological and physical scars, many of the female victims of gender-based sexual violence remain stigmatized, and there are a limited number of NGOs providing psychosocial support, particularly for women and girls.

Since 2014, IsraAID has worked in the displaced persons camps in the Kurdistan Region building the capacity of local partners. Our specialist team provides training to staff and NGOs to help them manage the acute psychosocial needs of the affected population. We have also distributed essential provisions to thousands of Yazidi families, ranging from hygiene packs, to seasonal clothing and bedding, particularly necessary during the harsh winter months.

For the last few years, IsraAID has been at the forefront of the response to the Middle East refugee crisis. Today, we remain as committed as ever to this ongoing humanitarian crisis. Our experienced, professional teams continue to operate in the most affected sites, providing the emergency and long-term support so urgently needed by this highly vulnerable population.

**Tamar Lazarus is the Director of Development of IsraAID**



# For you were strangers in the land of Egypt

**Reut Michaeli**

**The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants** is Israel's leading organization protecting the rights of refugees, migrant workers and victims of human trafficking. For over 15 years Hotline staff and nearly 750 volunteers have been visiting Israel's immigration detention centers to monitor their conditions, meet with detainees and provide paralegal intervention and legal representation. We represent some of the most vulnerable people in Israel and advocate for government policies consistent with a just, equal and democratic Israel. The HRM assists vulnerable individuals, particularly those held in immigration detention, to uphold their rights. Since our inception, we have served over 60,000 people. We have been successful in passing significant legislation regarding refugee issues. Our work has been internationally recognized, and we were proud to receive the National Medal for Combatting Human Trafficking from President Shimon Peres.

I am writing these words shortly before Shavuot, a time when we read Megilat Ruth. Ruth is known as the first convert to Judaism. Ruth, the migrant, who married Boaz and will be the great grandparents of King David, is welcomed by the Jewish people. She is honored and respected. Unfortunately, this is not the way Migrants, Gerim, are treated in the State of Israel today. Whether they are Olim who converted in a non-orthodox congregation, migrant workers or refugees. Those who were not born Jewish are not treated with the kindness and respect that the Torah teaches us. The discussion of the Jewish state is so focused on demography and numbers that we have forgotten about Jewish values and heritage.

Jews have a long history of migration. We have been a migrant nation from the time we left Egypt, running away from oppression and slavery. We were migrants in exile from Eretz Israel for 100 years after the destruction of the first temple. And after the destruction of the second temple we spent 2,000 years in exile moving from place to place to find safety and freedom. For me personally the story of Jewish migration is the story of my grandparents who together ran away from Romania in 1941 and came illegally to British mandate Palestine. They were held in a detention center in Atlit for

over a year and only then released to the community with no help and no rights. It is precisely this history that obliges us, as a migrant nation, to show kindness to the strangers amongst us.

The *mitzvah* to protect the stranger appears in one form or another a total of 36 times in the Torah, the most famous in Leviticus Chapter 19, "When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. You shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (33-34). This is why we, at the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants choose to defend the rights of migrants and refugees in Israel and to combat human trafficking. We believe that one of the things our society will be judged upon will be the way we treat migrants – "Gerim".

Unfortunately, we as Jewish people living in the Jewish state fail to protect the strangers and to welcome them to our society. There are currently 39,000 African asylum seekers residing in Israel. Approximately 70% of them are from Eritrea and less than 20% from Sudan. Eritrea is a closed-off dictatorship ruled by one of the most repressive regimes in the world. Human rights organizations and a U.N. special rapporteur for Eritrea testify that Eritrea has become a "giant prison". Eritrean asylum-seekers who've been deported (refouled) were arrested immediately and tortured or simply executed. As for Sudan - the majority of refugees from Sudan who arrive in Israel are members of different African tribes that reside in Sudan's periphery and are persecuted by the central government in Khartoum. Most of them escaped from the genocide in Darfur.

Israel is a signatory to the Refugee Convention that was drafted as a lesson from the Holocaust. Despite that, over the years, Israel has recognized less than 1% of asylum claims. While in other developed countries, between 10-50% of applicants receive refugee status. Until 2013 most people did not have access to the asylum system. Being deprived of this basic right, they lack many other rights that go hand in hand with the recognition: they have no work permits, they receive no state allowance, or health services. As described above, asylum applications were not accepted for many years, and many who recently submitted claims were either rejected or received no answer. Only 10 Eritreans and one Sudanese have been recognized as refugees to date.

At the same time, asylum seekers are being detained: any man can be summoned to Holot detention facility near the Egyptian border, for 12 months. A lot of pressure is being used to convince this community that they should leave. In detention, they are pressured to voluntarily leave for a third country (Rwanda and Uganda), and if they refuse to do so – they risk indefinite detention in harsher conditions. Most of them prefer to stay in Israel fearing torture, death and additional plight in their homelands or on their way from Israel to Africa and then to Europe.

Israel needs to fulfill its obligations, legal and moral, and implement different solutions. For many years the government claims that detention is needed in order to remove the refugee population from South Tel Aviv, where many have congregated over time, a phenomenon the government itself created. There was a deliberate policy to concentrate them in the poorest part of Israel. This was a way of marginalizing them by pushing them to the periphery of society. It has the effect of moving them out of sight of most Israelis, so that Israelis stop thinking about them as people and rather they are perceived as 'infiltrators'. It is much harder to hate someone who is your neighbor and whose son studies with your own son. If we do not know them it is easier for us look away when the Government acts against them.

Israel knows how to absorb migrants. Starting in the early 90's over a million immigrants or Olim were absorbed into Israel, and that was not the first time Israel increased its population by more than 20% in less than ten years. The knowledge and experience to integrate this population exist, but there is no political will to do so. There are many different alternatives to the current policy of mass detention. We need to finally take steps to normalize their lives in Israel.

The first step would be to grant asylum seekers work visas. Under the current system, asylum seekers in Israel do not have formal work permits, and this results in them being exploited by employers. Opening up the legal labor market will also have the secondary effect of dispersing much of the asylum seeker community into different parts of the country. Many Israeli employers are facing a shortage of workers so there is the potential for a win-win outcome. The Government could decrease the poll tax on employing foreigners or offer to subsidize employers in the periphery of the country who employ asylum seekers. Dispersing and integrating the community into different cities around the country, will ease the burden on South Tel Aviv.

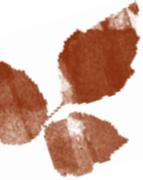
The public health system will also benefit if the asylum seekers could work legally. If the government included the asylum seekers in the national health system, the monthly payments would be deducted from their salaries and become part of the pool making up the overall Israeli public health system. The refugees would benefit from having access to health care that is their right as workers in Israel, and the system benefits overall from their participation.

In addition the Government should immediately invest more resources into South Tel Aviv itself. The money that has been used to build and run the biggest detention facility for migrants in the world, (over 75 million dollars) would be better spent improving the conditions and infrastructure in South Tel Aviv for all its residents. This should include

community centers, low-cost housing, improved transportation, and health and welfare services to the benefit of everyone.

**Adv. Reut Michaeli is the executive director of the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants.**

# REFUGEES AND CHALLENGES IN ISRAEL: WHAT SHOULD WE DO DIFFERENTLY?



## The Jewish State's Responsibility to Refugees

Galia Sabar and Noga Malkin

In this short expose, we examine the response of the State of Israel to non-Jewish refugees within the context of global insights on refugees in the 21st century, Jewish values, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Jewish refugee history. This broad context will enable us to better present and critically analyze Israel's response to non-Jewish refugees. The vision for the Jewish response to refugees that this issue explores does not, in our opinion, necessitate a focus on the Israeli state per se as Israel, which, after all, does not represent all Jews nor Judaism as such. Nevertheless, since Israel is built on the Jewish collective ethos and does claim to act in this spirit, its response is crucial to the broader debate. Moreover, since refugee policy is contingent on a nation state for its execution, and as Israel is a state purportedly founded as a safe haven for refugees (even if its founding precipitated another, by now protracted, refugee crisis), we believe it should have a clear vision for its treatment of those seeking safety in its territory. Its response is therefore crucial to the broader debate over Jewish response to non-Jewish refugees.

Relevant to our topic, we identified three major insights that inform our understanding of the global refugee challenge. First, immigration is not a new phenomenon, nor is it transitory; people will always seek better lives elsewhere, and survival instinct will continue to push people to seek refuge when they are in danger. Second, refugees are not inherently an economic burden; rather, many of them contribute to economic development. With the right policies in place, they do not necessarily drain resources, nor take jobs away, but rather add purchasing power, create employment, and provide motivated, often young, human capital. Studies have shown that whether refugees are a benefit or a burden depends not just on who the refugees are, but on the policies of the host states: when they are given the right to work, access to capital, and educational

opportunities, they are likely to have the greatest impact.<sup>1</sup> Finally, refugees are not the helpless mass of hungry children and women once broadcast on our screens; rather, many of them are people with agency, motivation, skills and zeal to succeed, who use social networks and information flows, and know how to demand their rights.

As for Judaism's relationship with refugees, Judaism, both in its textual sources and in Jewish tradition, teaches its followers about the commitment to protect refugees. The 36 biblical reiterations of the commandment to love the stranger, Emmanuel Levinas' reminder that we are responsible for others, and of course much of Jewish history, with its recurring episodes of persecution and exodus, reveal as much. In fact, the 1951 Refugee Convention – the first articulation of the international responsibility for refugee protection – was drafted through heavy advocacy from the Jewish representatives of the Israeli state, and was prompted by the persecution of Jews and others in the Second World War. Indeed, Israel was one of only 13 countries whose representatives sat on every committee that drafted the Refugee Convention and one of the first states to ratify it upon completion; Dr. Jacob Robinson, Israel's representative to the UN conference that drafted the refugee convention, was a member of all five drafting organs of the convention. In 1967, when the Refugee Convention was expanded to include refugees from every part of the world, the Israeli state was among the first to sign on. 1967 was, of course, a consequential year for Israel in other ways, as thousands of additional refugees were created after the war. Throughout these international processes, Israel made a clear distinction between "refugees" and Palestinian refugees, excluding its obligations towards the latter and ensuring that the international organizations founded as a result of the Refugee Convention exclude Palestinians, who remain under UNRWA's jurisdiction.

Israel has not always stood by the obligations set forth in the international law it helped craft, even when dealing with non-Palestinian refugees. While Israel has taken in a large number of Jewish refugees, the State has historically accepted a very limited number of non-Jewish refugees. Over the years, Israel granted citizenship to a few hundred Vietnamese escaping the Communist regime between 1975 and 1979 and gave temporary visas in 1993 to eighty-four Bosnian Muslims who had fled the former Yugoslavia.<sup>2</sup> Yet the real challenge to the State of Israel's policy towards non-Jewish refugees began in 2006, when an influx of tens of thousands of Eritreans and Sudanese began crossing its border with Egypt in search of asylum. Unprepared to deal with refugee status determination (RSD) processes, Israel issued a Group Protection Visa

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1 Alexander Betts, 2014, *Refugee Economies: Rethinking Popular Assumptions*

2 <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugee-law/israel.php>

granting temporary protection from deportation – but offering no other rights. In 2008-2009, the Israeli Ministry of Interior issued unique visas to 600 Sudanese from war-torn Darfur, enabling them to work, but since then the State has accepted only 45 out of the 17,778 who applied for asylum.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, in a highly controversial move, the Israeli government passed an amendment to its border control law – originally issued in the 1950s as part of its struggle against Palestinians – mandating three-year imprisonment without trial for any person entering the country illegally, regardless of asylum status. This was one of several laws and procedures the State passed in contradiction to the international law protecting refugees that it had pushed to create. De-facto, these draconian procedures restricting non-Jewish asylum seekers and positioned the State of Israel in clear opposition to its basic commitments to human rights under international law.

Thus far, Israel's response has been driven both by its version of real-politik, which claims to act in accordance with international law (by not deporting Eritreans and Sudanese), and in conversation with Jewish values (or at least not in clear opposition to them). As the above summary of Israel's policies towards non-Jewish refugees clearly shows, Israeli policies today reflect a belief that the refugee convention undermines the Jewish identity of the State. Some have argued that Israeli policy-makers rely on "Israel's very existence as the state of asylum of the Jewish people" to maintain compliance with its obligation under the Convention.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, there is no one just policy for the State of Israel. Yet Israel, like many states, has to find a way to comply with its international obligations within the complex challenges posed by influxes of asylum seekers and refugees, and maintain a humanistic and compassionate mode of conduct based on its own unique history.

What seems to us to be missing from the Israeli and global conversation, however, is a holistic understanding that mass influxes of refugees are the outcome of global doings and misdoings, and that, therefore, the response has to be accordingly global. Wealthy countries like Israel must push to tackle root causes for displacement, rather than looking the other way while the world's poorest countries conveniently host 80% of the world's refugees. The Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam, Repairing the World, is a sharp reminder of our shared social and environmental responsibilities, and urges Jews to take a leadership role in assuming those responsibilities. Israel, as the self-selected spokesperson for Judaism, should lead the moral charge, by actively pushing

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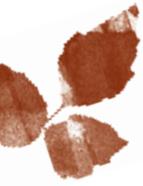
3 <http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiw1520.pdf>

4 Rotem Giladi, [The International History Review](#) Vol. 37 , Iss. 4, 2015. A 'Historical Commitment'? Identity and Ideology in Israel's Attitude to the Refugee Convention 1951–4.

for international development, burden sharing, poverty reduction, ethical treatment of refugees, and open doors – to all refugees, without discrimination, non-Jews and Jews alike.

**Galia Sabar is a scholar in African Studies, specializing in the study of migration. She is the former Chair of African Studies at Tel Aviv University and currently the President of Ruppin Academic Center. Over the years, she has published 6 books and dozens of academic papers. Parallel to her scientific work she is a leading social activist. She is a board member of : Hotline for migrants; NALA - Center for Neglected Tropical Diseases and IRAC - Israel Religious Action Center. In 2009 she received the “Unsung Heroes of Compassion” award from the Dalai Lama. She was the first Israeli to win this award.**

**Noga Malkin is a humanitarian aid worker and researcher focusing on refugee protection in the Middle East. She holds an M.A in Arab Studies with a focus on refugees and humanitarian emergencies from Georgetown University and a certification in Arabic language through the CASA fellowship program at the American University in Cairo. She has worked for Human Rights Watch, UNHCR, Oxfam, International Medical Corps, and other organizations in various countries including Turkey, South Sudan, and Israel/Palestine.**



## Among You He Shall Dwell, In That Place Which He Shall Choose

**Tomer Persico**

Debates around national issues in Israel often reach a point where the matter of "the Jewish image" of the state is summoned. This is proposed habitually in order to justify the view of a more traditional and orthodox approach. Thus, when speaking, for example, of introducing public transportation on the Sabbath, such an initiative is negated because it would harm the state's "Jewish image".

Invoking Israel's traditional Jewish image, it must be noted, is itself a traditional Jewish thing to do. As far back as the bible we find not only concern with the Jewish character of the Israelites themselves, but also with their appearance in the eyes of non-Jews. The gentiles who will see the people of Israel in their land will supposedly be impressed and exclaim "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!" (Deut. 4, 6), and Maimonides in his Guide to the Perplexed explains this verse as attesting to the beneficial character of the divine law, and thus to the people who observe it (3, 31).

It is thus unfortunate not only morally but also traditionally that the state of Israel has not taken a radically different approach to the refugee crises around and within it. With millions of Syrian refugees fleeing their homeland and tens of thousands of Africans who claim to be refugees inside its boundaries, Israel has shown little to no effort to help. Quite the opposite, the State of Israel has repeatedly refused to help Syrian refugees outside its borders, and declined even to review the status of individuals from Sudan and Eritrea, already living in Israel, to ascertain whether they are refugees or simply migrant workers.

Notwithstanding the justified concern of a nation state for its unique culture and demographic makeup, it seems that the Jewish people of all peoples should do a lot more for refugees, both from a traditional and a historical perspective. In fact, Israel has signed international treaties that advance the protection of refugees specifically as a result and in retrospect of the historical lessons the Jewish people have learnt. These treaties, it must be said, forbid the state from deporting refugees, which is sadly one of the reasons for Israel's unwillingness to determine if any of the Africans that entered Israel illegally are refugees.

Traditionally the matter is very clear. It is written explicitly in the Torah that “Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee: He shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him.” (Deut. 23, 15-16).

We are forbidden to send back a slave that has escaped his master and has found shelter in our community. Quite the contrary: we are commanded to let him dwell among us, “in that place which he shall choose,” “where it liketh him best”. It is easy to see how the Torah is emphasizing the freed slave’s liberty to choose to settle where he wishes, and our duty to offer her or him our assistance.

Commentators on these verses have made clear that they are connected to those that precede them, speaking about war, and so the law includes refugees of war. Ibn Ezra and Abarvanel, when commenting on the above verses, refer to a war waged by the people of Israel, in which they are commanded to offer shelter to slaves of the enemy. Maimonides widens the scope of the law and states that if a slave is to be protected, much more so a free-man seeking our help (Guide to the Perplexed, 3, 39). And following this line it was Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin (1881–1966), who in his commentary on the bible reproved the gentiles(!) who in the second World War did not accept Jewish refugees, or accepted them but put them in refugee camps, and not let each one settle “in that place which he shall choose [...] where it liketh him best”.

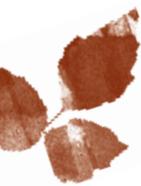
To these voices from the long line of our tradition we may juxtapose the Israeli rabbinic leadership, which is mostly failing in realizing the commandments of our tradition. We do not hear about our duty as Jews towards refugees from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, nor from Ultra-orthodox rabbis or almost all Zionist-Religious rabbis. A lone voice, until recently, amongst the better-known rabbis in Israel in favor of receiving refugees from Syria was Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, who was immediately opposed by other rabbis, such as Shmuel Eliyahu. As for the African refugees in Israel, Rabbi Israel Rosen wrote already in 2012 that the “African infiltrators” are “a national danger of the first degree”, and that “we have to get them out forcefully from amongst us, and drop them somewhere in the world. Preferably with the consent of a receiving country, but if we will not find one – the IDF will find a forsaken corner in Africa. Period!” (Shabbat Be'Shivto, 16.6.12)

With this as the backdrop it was as a breath of fresh air when in March 2017 the Religious-Zionist rabbinical organization Beit Hillel issued a Halachic essay (Beit Hillel 13) underlining the commandment to help Syrian refugees. In their complex text both male and female halachic figures debated different views, moral and halachic, and concluded that it is appropriate to help innocent lives in danger, even those of an enemy state. Not least in their line of arguments is the Jewish Holocaust, writing that “The terrible

event that burns our collective consciousness obligates us to make special efforts and take national and moral challenges upon ourselves."

And indeed, it is not only our tradition but the Jewish people's history that commands us to accept and protect refugees. As someone who all four of his grandparents suffered the flight from war and the trials of living as refugees, I find the way the State of Israel acts today devastatingly and dishearteningly disappointing. Stressing again the obligation of a sovereign state to protect its people's collective rights to a shared culture and identity, no doubt a way could and must be found to treat well those who are indeed refugees from Africa well and to help the refugees from the war that is tearing Syria apart. These, at the very least, are the commandments of our tradition and the duty we owe to our history.

**Dr. Tomer Persico is a Research Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and teaches at the Department for Comparative Religion in Tel-Aviv University. His book, *The Jewish Meditative Tradition*, was published in Hebrew by Tel Aviv University Press in 2016.**



## Why Do Jews Care about Refugees Everywhere – Except in Israel?

**Elliot Vaisrub Glassenberg**

While Jews everywhere seem to be rallying together in support of refugees, there is one place in the world where that is not the case: The State of Israel. While Jews throughout the Diaspora are advocating for policy change, raising money, and opening their doors to non-Jewish refugees – The Jewish State, for the most part, seems to be doing the opposite.

Israel is currently home to approximately 40,000 non-Jewish asylum seekers, mostly from Darfur/Sudan and Eritrea. They have fled genocide, war, dictatorship, and persecution, walked out of Egypt, and sought refuge in the Jewish State. While many Israelis have risen to the occasion, opening their homes, volunteering, donating, and advocating for the rights and wellbeing of non-Jewish asylum seekers, the current Government of Israel and the vast majority of Israelis have not. The Government of Israel has effectively refused to grant refugee status to non-Jewish asylum seekers (granting status to fewer than 1 out of 1000 applicants), has subjected them to arbitrary arrest and extended detention without trial, has coerced thousands to return to their countries of origin despite the dangers they face there, and is now attempting a new policy of deportation to third-party countries (Uganda and Rwanda), which is currently being challenged in Israel's Supreme Court. Hundreds, if not thousands, of those who have left have gone missing, have lost their lives (including a number of friends of the writer of these words), or have been forced to begin new journeys of refuge. The Government of Israel, as a rule, insists on calling these asylum seekers "illegal infiltrators" and a "threat to the Jewish character of the state", who must be removed for the sake of the "Jewishness" of the State of Israel. What I personally find most perturbing is the usage of "Jewish" language – the same language used by Jews elsewhere to support refugees – to justify the oppression of refugees and incitement against them. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Israelis have been complacent – if not acquiescent and supportive – of the Government's approach, and the vast majority of Jews around the world have been deafeningly silent. While Jews are advocating for refugee rights around the world, in the one place where we most truly have the power – and the sovereignty – to make a difference, we are failing.

Why is this so? While I may not be able to provide a complete answer to this question here, I wish at least to raise the question, share a few thoughts, and offer suggestions for moving forward.

Growing up in suburban Jewish Chicago, I was taught that the very essence of Judaism is to "love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:19 et al). That to be Jewish means to remember our own past, to support those who are oppressed, and to fight persecution of all forms – be it against our own people or any human beings, having been created in the image of God. When I moved to Israel in 2011, at the height of the arrival of asylum seekers from Africa, I was heartened to see a core group of Israelis working tirelessly on their behalf. At the same time, I became increasingly appalled by the ever-worsening government policies toward the asylum seekers, as well as by the discourse among every day Israelis.

Working with both Diaspora and Israeli Jews, I have come to observe that, Diaspora Jews, for the most part, seem to have a natural tendency to empathize with the African asylum seekers, and to feel that Israel, especially as a "Jewish" state, should do its part to support these refugees, of course in balance with the need to preserve Israel's sovereignty and security. However, Israeli Jews, for the most part, seem to react to the African asylum seekers with fear and discomfort, seeing them as a threat or danger – either to their own physical safety or to the "Jewish" character of the State of Israel. If there is sympathy, it is often expressed as "I feel bad for them, but they should go somewhere else; this is a Jewish state." I often prod such Israelis, asking them what it means to be a Jewish state – a state for Jews only, a state governed by halacha (Jewish religious law), or a state of Jewish culture and values, and if so, which Jewish values? They often respond that they have never thought of that question before. For many of them, it seems, a Jewish state simply means a state for Jews.

Indeed, the 2011 Pew Study of American Jews and the (fascinating yet under-discussed) 2016 Pew Study of Israelis have revealed significant differences in Jewish identity and values. One particularly salient difference is that for most American Jews, the main elements of Jewish identity include "leading an ethical and moral life" (69%) and "working for justice and equality" (59%), while this is not so for most Israeli Jews (47% and 27% respectively). For most Israeli Jews, Jewish identity is more a national-ethnic identity than an ethical-values-based identity. And while most may state that they believe it is important for Israel to be a "democracy", they do not necessarily believe that non-Jews should share in equal rights (21%) or even be part of that democracy (46%).

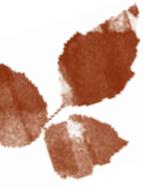
How did we get to this place? It has oft been said that the greatest threat to Zionism is the realization of its dream. We dreamed of having a state like any other nation, but

now that we have a state, it seems that within that state we are losing touch with what makes us uniquely Jewish - our values, our empathy for the oppressed, our striving for justice and equality, our Jewish neshama (soul) – and finding ourselves left with the same ethno-nationalism and xenophobia that characterize so many modern nation-states. Being raised with a Jewish-minority mentality in America, I had friends of many different religions and colors, and I was taught that loving those who are different is an important Jewish value. My Jewish-Israeli peers, however, generally grew up not knowing others who were different, and learned to fear the other. Some may call this a “Jewish-majority” or “tribal” mentality. It is easy for us Diaspora-born Jews to judge our Israeli peers. Though rather than judge, we must seek to understand our Israeli friends, to understand the pain and trauma and systems that led them to feel and fear the way they do, and – while not excusing the un-Jewish and inhumane policies that their feelings have led to – work together to heal and to transform fear into compassion.

For the last several years I have been proud to work for the Israeli-based BINA: The Jewish Movement for Social Change, which seeks to reshape the Jewish discourse in Israel with renewed study, appreciation and implementation of Jewish social values, working with some of Israel’s most vulnerable populations, from aging Jewish Holocaust survivors to new African asylum seekers – not in spite of, but because of our Jewish values. And here I must also give credit to the good people at the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, Assaf, ARDC, and HIAS Israel, and others who also work tirelessly to support refugee rights in Israel, as Jews, Israelis, and human beings. While much good work has been done, much more work remains.

I see the current global refugee crisis as a challenge and an opportunity – for Jews and for people everywhere. It is a challenge and opportunity to rethink our identity as individuals, nations and human beings and our shared responsibility to humankind. For too long Jews have been refugees, but today, we have the resources – not the least of which being a sovereign state – to help other refugees. We Jews must use our resources and our global peoplehood to model a global approach to the refugee crisis, working together across borders to share the challenges and burdens of the current crisis and to address the root causes that force people to become refugees. The Jewish people and the Jewish State must lead the way. This crisis is our challenge, our test, our opportunity. We mustn’t fail. We must rise to the occasion.

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# Our Commitment to Refugees as a Reflection of our Peoplehood

**Maayan Ravid and Shlomi Ravid**

Jews today, for the first time in the last two millennia, live in a rather unique situation for them – they are not refugees. The creation of the Jewish State and the development of the modern nation-state system has granted Jews a historically atypical period of freedom, civic security and stability. It is also a period in which Jews are free to determine for themselves their collective ethos and destiny. As Rav Soloveitchik framed it, Jews can progress from a 'covenant of fate', mostly imposed on them by outside forces, to a 'covenant of destiny' which "...in the life of a people, signifies a deliberate and conscious existence that the people has chosen out of its own free will..."

The awareness of the plight of refugees is engraved into the Jewish historical consciousness. It began with the emergence of Jewish Peoplehood in the Exodus from Egypt and the journey through Sinai. It further developed via the exile from Israel and two millennia of a turbulent Diasporic history. The memory of persecution and search for refuge, is central to Jewish foundational texts and the lived experience as a stateless minority around the world for so long. Despite this awareness, the current refugee challenge is catching Jews unprepared, both conceptually and practically. Sadly, Israel as a state has failed to address the challenge in accordance with the command of "loving the stranger" and the response of the Jewish people, has been limited. While world Jews are known to successfully mobilize in times of great need as in the struggle to release Soviet Jewry, the current refugee crisis and its manifestation in Israel, yielded mostly apathy and silence. We argue that Israel and Jews around the world should be committed to those seeking asylum, as are many other humans and nations. We further maintain that the Jewish people are specifically endowed with a collective ethos and memory that should make them particularly skilled and motivated champions of this cause.

We focus in this essay on the way Israel treats asylum seekers living in its midst, and the response of Jews outside Israel. The State of Israel legitimates exclusionary policies toward Sudanese, Eritrean and other asylum seekers. Exclusionary policies are based on two major claims: First, the State views their entry as a demographic threat to Israel's sovereignty and Jewish identity, and has no interest in becoming a shelter for a

'flood' of potential African migrants. Second, Israel considers such persons a social and economic threat - competing with local Israelis over material resources. This stance has been expressed by Israeli politicians, and voiced by the State in the Supreme Court to legitimate the detention of asylum seekers in Holot detention facility since 2013.

Approximately 3,300 people from Sudan and Eritrea are held in Holot at full capacity and 10,000 persons have been detained, without trial, to date. The facility is situated in the middle of Israel's Negev Desert. While many other Western countries detain irregular migrants, Israel stands out due to the long duration of detention, its detention of people who have lived in Israel for years, and the size of the detention facility - far larger than any other in the Western world. For many of us, the image of this camp - a barbed wire detention facility - created to house asylum seekers in the Jewish state, is tragically ironic. One would expect that a country built by a people whose ancestors faced persecution across the world, who fled restrictive regimes, camps and near decimation, to act differently. While Israel adopts these policies, most of the world's Jews remain silent about them.

We argue that Israel can and should improve its treatment of asylum seeking populations for three main reasons:

1. While Israel is the only Jewish state, feelings of external threat are shared by other states around the world. Feelings of cultural and competition threat, are the most widespread responses to foreign migration, in any given community. Israel is not unique in its predicament of irregular migration, or feelings of out-group threat. As states throughout the global north work to acclimate to new trends in global migration, Israel's policies should fall in line with the common practice, rather than being an extreme example of exclusivity. This does not mean that Israel should open its borders and accept all refugees. It does mean it should accept some. We argue it would be best to start at home - caring for the people already present within its borders.

2. Much has already been written about Jewish and Israeli involvement in the drafting of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, in the aftermath of World War II and the Jewish Holocaust. Others have also written about the concept of 'Responsibility Sharing' in the international community, which is grounded in both international law and shared moral sensibilities.<sup>1</sup> Israel has always aspired to be a 'nation among nations,' and as such it should implement the conventions it signed in domestic law, and carry its share in the global responsibility for asylum seekers and refugees.

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1 Tally Kritzman-Amir and Yonatan Berman, 'Responsibility Sharing and the Rights of Refugees: The Case of Israel' *The Geo. Wash. Int'l L. Rev.* 41 Jan 2011.

3. Israel has an added value as it approaches the predicament of asylum seekers. As the state of the Jewish people, created in the spirit of Judaism, it has to abide by the command to love the stranger. You cannot proclaim your love and responsibility for the "stranger" every Passover, in the prayers and texts, and then turn your back on refugees. Jews, if they are faithful to their ethos and have integrity, need to be at the world's vanguard of helping refugees. This should become the hallmark of our Jewish identity.

Jews today are re-interpreting and re-writing their collective ethos and destiny. Do we want our children to inherit a Jewish People known for human compassion, social sensitivity and sense of justice? Or do we want notions of particularism and nationalism to define us? Will our children even want to be part of a collective whose entire sense of self rests on particularistic considerations, at the price of the same humanistic values Judaism brought to the world? This specific issue reflects a larger challenge: What will the future character of the Jewish people look like? Will we tolerate insensitivity, human apathy and sometimes cruelty performed in the name of the Jewish State? Or should we insist that the state of Israel abides by its legal, moral and Jewish commitments, as an expression of our collective covenant of destiny. The one in which, as Soloveitchik points out, the people "finds the full realization of its historical being".

**Maayan Ravid is conducting doctoral research at the University of Oxford, UK, on the detention of asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea in Israel. She completed a Masters degree at the University of Oxford and a BA at Tel Aviv University in Political Science and Histories of Africa. Her academic work corresponds with over 10 years of grassroots activism with disenfranchised communities in Israel – including asylum seekers, Ethiopian migrants and Israeli residents of South Tel Aviv.**

**Dr. Shlomi Ravid is the founding director of the [Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education](#) and the founding editor of the Peoplehood Papers.**

**The Peoplehood Papers** provide a platform for Jews to discuss their common agenda and key issues related to their collective identity. The journal appears three times a year, with each issue addressing a specific theme. The editors invite you to share your thoughts on the ideas and discussions in the Papers, as well as all matters pertinent to Jewish Peoplehood: [publications@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:publications@jpeoplehood.org)

Past issues can be accessed at [www.jpeoplehood.org/library](http://www.jpeoplehood.org/library)

**The UJA-Federation of New York** cares for those in need, rescues those in harm's way and renews and strengthens the Jewish people in New York in Israel and around the world. **The Commission on the Jewish People** is dedicated to building connections among the diverse elements of the Jewish People and develops and supports efforts to forge linkages among Jews wherever they may live and support Israel as a vibrant, democratic and pluralistic Jewish state.

**The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education (CJPE)** is a "one stop" resource center for institutions and individuals seeking to build collective Jewish life, with a focus on Jewish Peoplehood and Israel education. It provides professional and leadership training, content and programmatic development or general Peoplehood conceptual and educational consulting. [www.jpeoplehood.org](http://www.jpeoplehood.org)

**HIAS** is the global Jewish nonprofit that protects refugees—including women and children, and ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities—whose lives are in danger for being who they are. Guided by our values and history, HIAS helps refugees rebuild their lives in safety and advocates to ensure that all displaced people are treated with dignity.

Founded in 1881 to assist Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe, HIAS has touched the life of nearly every American Jewish family. In its more than 130 years, HIAS has assisted more than 4.5 million people worldwide.