

KAM Isaiah Israel
Social Justice Committee
Proposed Resolution on Refugee Resettlement
March 2017

Background

A central tenet of Judaism is that all humanity is created in the divine image. Our shared humanity underlies the *mitzvah* of welcoming the stranger: “When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” [Leviticus 19:33-34]. This principle of welcoming the stranger permeates Jewish tradition and appears 36 times in the Torah — more than any other commandment.

The Jewish Refugee Experience

The historical experience of the Jewish people involves repeated instances of being forced to flee the lands in which they lived. In addition to the diaspora of ancient times, Jews have been refugees from the Spanish Inquisition, from pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe, from the Holocaust, and from the former Soviet Union, northern Africa, Iran, and other countries.

Through much of the 20th century, Jewish immigration to the United States was seriously impeded by discriminatory quotas based on nationality. In 1939, on the eve of World War II, the U.S. government turned away a passenger ship with 900 Jews who were fleeing from Nazi persecution. In that same year, Congress failed to pass legislation that would have allowed the entry of 20,000 Jewish refugee children from Germany. In the aftermath of the war, U.S. policy on refugees changed significantly, shifting toward protection, assistance, and resettlement. Between 1945 and 1952, more than 135,000 Jewish refugees came to America.

Current Refugee Issues

According to HIAS — founded in 1881 as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society — today’s global refugee crisis is the worst since World War II, with over 65 million people displaced, including about 20 million classified as refugees. HIAS is now dedicated to providing resettlement services to refugees of all faiths and ethnicities from all over the world.

Under current U.S. law, refugees are people who have been forced to leave their homelands due to persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Refugee cases are referred to the U.S. Refugee Admission Program from the United Nations. Multiple federal agencies are involved in screening refugees and authorizing their admission to the United States. Refugee applicants are subject to the most intensive level of background and security checks of any category of traveler. The screening, admission, and resettlement process can take 18-24 months.

On January 27, 2017, President Trump issued an executive order that would severely restrict refugee resettlement in the U.S. This action was denounced by leaders of the Union for Reform Judaism, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, as well as by HIAS. Moreover, nearly 2,000 rabbis from across the country signed a letter urging that the federal refugee resettlement program be maintained and strengthened for refugees of all ethnic and religious backgrounds — not halted, paused, or restricted.

A federal court blocked implementation of the January executive order, and the Trump administration issued a revision on March 6. However, the major provisions regarding refugee admissions and resettlement remain the same:

- New refugee admissions, as well as decisions on applications for refugee status, would be suspended for 120 days (effective March 16).
- Before refugee admissions are resumed, more restrictive vetting procedures would be instituted.
- The total number of refugee admissions for federal fiscal year 2017, which ends on September 30, would be limited to 50,000 (down from 110,000, as approved by the Obama administration).

The future of refugee resettlement remains very uncertain. In January, the Social Justice Committee at KAM Isaiah Israel decided to work with HIAS Chicago (a program of Jewish Child and Family Services of Chicago) in co-sponsoring a refugee family, but those plans have been put on hold. According to HIAS Chicago, the cutback on refugee admissions means that they will not be able to match additional refugees with congregational co-sponsors until October — at the earliest.

Resolution

THEREFORE, the Board of Directors of KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation resolves that:

1. We affirm the Jewish value of the shared humanity of all peoples and the *mitzvah* of welcoming the stranger.
2. We recognize that many of us come from families who fled to United States as refugees from persecution in other countries and that U.S. immigration policy has too often discriminated against Jews and other ethnic groups.
3. We join with the Union for Reform Judaism and other Jewish organizations in opposing federal policies that would arbitrarily restrict refugee settlement, especially those policies that involve discrimination on the basis of religion or nationality.
4. We urge that federal refugee admissions and resettlement programs be maintained and strengthened.
5. We strongly support the Social Justice Committee's efforts to co-sponsor a refugee family in partnership with HIAS Chicago.