

D'Var Torah
Refugee Shabbat
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By Jess Winfield

Shabbat Shalom, everyone.

This Refugee Shabbat comes at an extraordinary moment in American and world history. Worldwide, there is now an all-time high of over 80 million of our fellow humans who are defined as refugees: people displaced by war, famine, climate change, and oppression. Many of those are Internally Displaced People, or IDP, unsettled in their own, sometimes occupied countries. But 25 million are migrants who have crossed international borders to flee.

Here in the US, which was built by immigrants and, of course, by slaves, there are 11 million refugees, undocumented immigrants, and asylum seekers who have spent the past four years under unprecedented attack by an Administration that demonized and terrorized **sojourners** in our nation solely because of their ethnicity and place of origin. I cannot think of a policy more thoroughly opposed to our Jewish values. I'm not sure what book Stephen Miller, who helped craft and promote so many of these cruel policies — including the kidnapping of children as a deterrent to immigration — I'm not sure what version of the Torah he studied at Beth Shir Shalom in Santa Monica, but it's not the one I know.

The one I know demands that we “welcome the stranger.” In fact, it's the single most oft-repeated mitzvah in our Bible. The Talmud tells us that the Torah “warns against the wronging of a *ger* in 36 places; others say, in 46 places.” That Hebrew word, *ger*, is translated many different ways depending on the context and on the translator. It's most often translated as “stranger” or “sojourner.” But also as new-comer. Foreigner. Temporary dweller. Alien. Resident alien.

Bible scholar Christiana Van Houten writes that of all the translations of *ger*, “immigrant” is the most accurate. She cites Bible scholar Frank Spina, who identifies three word-roots related to *ger* in biblical Hebrew: to sojourn, to stir up strife, and...to be afraid. Spina suggests “immigrant” best captures this full range of meaning—of someone who both arrives in a country afraid... and who may make those who already live there fearful.

That fear of the other, that we Jews know so well, is strong indeed.

When during the runup to the last I was making phone calls to turn out the vote in communities of color in Texas, I was shocked at how many people with last names like Rodriguez and Hernandez and Vega said they had no sympathy for “illegals.”

“Let them come in legally, like I did,” they’d say, completely ignoring the fact that due to policies enacted since 2016, there has been no way for asylum-seekers to do so. The Remain in Mexico policy, whereby asylum seekers have to file their papers and have their hearings **in Mexico**, with little or no access to translators or the legal assistance that is **essential** to properly file for asylum, has ensured that. Among many shocks in the 2020 election, that example of “I got-mine-ism” was the most shocking to me.

So what does our Torah portion this week, teach us on the subject? At first glance, I wondered why HIAS refugee Shabbat coincides with THIS week’s parshat, *Ki Tisa*. It’s a real blockbuster. Moses gets up close and personal with Adonai. He sees the living God pass before him. He receives the two stone tablets bearing the Covenant written “with the finger of God.” He goes back down Mount Sinai to find the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf — the Israelites’ greatest transgression in the entire Bible. He smashes the tablets, and goes back up the mountain for another encounter with God and another set of tablets. This is the big stuff. Cecil B DeMille time. But as is often the case with Torah, there’s also something big in what seems small.

The portion begins with God instructing Moses to take a census: A counting of the people with whom he's **sojourning** in the desert. And then Adonai says, "Everyone who is entered in the records, from the age of twenty years up, shall pay a half-shekel...as an offering to the Lord...The rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel." In the next verse, Adonai earmarks that money for the construction of the Tent of Meeting.

In Judaism, we count objects **representing** people rather than the people themselves, who are fashioned in the divine image, and too holy to become simply a number. That's the practical element of what's happening. But it is also significant that each person contributes a **half** shekel, rather than a whole shekel. In her D'var Torah on *Parshat Ki Tisa*, Rachel Travis writes: "This symbolizes that no person is a complete unit on his own; rather, we become whole by **contributing** to the community at large."

Tonight, this passage reminds us to think about immigrants' contributions to building the communities that they come to call home. So often the dialogue around immigrants hinges on the **fear** that they will **take away** valuable resources.

What gets lost is the many contributions that immigrants make to our community. On average, 82 percent of refugees participate in the labor force, compared to the 62 percent national average. Refugees are twice as likely as native-born people to hold jobs in the service industry. During COVID-19, these are the people tending our crops, feeding us, cleaning up after us, caring for our elderly. In LA's own garment industry, which is rife with exploitation, they make lifesaving PPE gear in unsafe sweatshops for an average of \$5.15 an hour. In 2015, refugees contributed more than \$100 million to state and local government through the tax system and contributed \$21 billion in taxes overall. And yet, tragically and ironically, most do not currently qualify for emergency relief during COVID-19.

So, what can we do? 11 million is an unfathomable number, let alone 80 million. But *Ki Tisa* reminds us to think of them not as numbers, but as individuals. Many of you have met one. Remember the Sukkot where we heard testimony from an asylum seeker and welcomed him into our Sukkah? He had been reunited with his 7 year old daughter 8 months after she was torn from his arms during the Zero Tolerance policy. That was two years ago. He's **still** in waiting for the asylum hearing that will determine whether he will become "documented." He's in limbo. And he's one of the lucky ones. He's on this side of the border...and he was reunited with his daughter. Not all are so fortunate.

I noted that we're at a historic moment, with 80 million displaced people worldwide. But we're also at a historic moment because now there is a window of hope and opportunity. Last week the Biden Administration introduced the US Citizenship Act of 2121, which as written, would finally, at long last, offer a reasonable pathway to citizenship for all 11 million undocumented residents of our great country. So what can you do? Call your Senators today and urge them to pass it.

The COVID relief bill currently before Congress provides emergency relief for resident family members of asylees but NOT for other undocumented immigrants who are on the frontlines of our COVID economy. Urge your representatives to assist ALL our country's residents. It's the moral thing to do, and it's the healthy thing to do.

In early April, as part of HIAS's Welcome Campaign, we hope to meet with the Congressman for Kol Ami's district, none other than Adam Schiff. He's been a solid vote for immigrants, but we want him to speak **loudly** and carry the beacon of welcome not as a **follower**, but as a **leader**, for immigrants rights. I hope you'll join us for that meeting.

JCARI-LA, the organization of which I'm co-chair, is partnering with Miles4Migrants to donate frequent flyer miles to physically re-unite immigrant families that have been separated. Please consider donating.

Finally, this coming week on Wednesday and Thursday, there are two separate but identical webinars where the California Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, RAC-CA, will be selecting the state legislative campaign that we'll be prioritizing this year. Our congregants will weigh in on three important bills: One each in the arenas of Criminal Justice, Climate Change, and Immigration and Labor rights — **ALL** of which have a strong element of racial justice, that will strengthen our connection to our important anti-racism work and bring it into the public square.

I'll place a link for each of these programs in the chat, and you'll also be able to find them on the "Social Justice" page on the Kol Ami website.

That Golden Calf sequence in our Torah portion begins with what struck me as pointed counter to the "half a shekel" passage that precedes it. When Moses and Adonai are playing peek-a-boo on Mt. Sinai, the people get restless and demand a new leader and a new God. Aaron tells them, "Bring me the rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters and bring them to me." He didn't say "Give me all *your* gold." He says, give me *your wives and sons and daughters gold!!!*" And they build a god literally made of money — much like a certain statue at CPAC last week — and the next day they go all Studio 54. Talk about I've-got-mine-ism! And what a contrast to the humility and sacredness of a half shekel per person, no more, no less, used to construct a Tent of Meeting, where man and God connect.

On this Refugee Shabbat, as we approach Pesach, I hope that we will keep the refugee, the asylum seeker, the undocumented immigrant — the *ger*— in our hearts, and **each** be givers of half a shekel — not worshippers of golden idols.

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