

“Let My People Come!”
Parashat Vayikra
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What does a UMass Amherst history professor have to do with the woman who became Miss Israel in 2013 -- or, for that matter, with the Rohingya people of Burma? Well, more than you think. Let me explain.

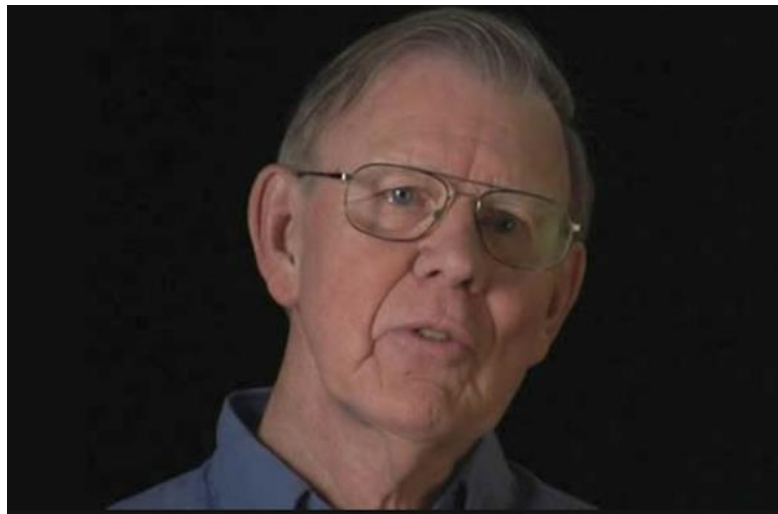
As many of us know, several notable individuals who had a deep impact on our world passed away this past week. One was **Stephen Hawking**, the great physicist/astronomer who, notwithstanding a severely debilitating disease, managed to influence vast numbers of people worldwide. Another was **T. Berry Brazelton**, the pediatrician who influenced several generations of parents -- my own generation included -- to raise their children differently than they otherwise would have.

Let me tell you about a third, who's much less well known. He didn't alter the way we think about the physical universe, or the way we rear newborns, but, like them, he influenced many men and women worldwide. He did this by doing something that is usually very unpopular, namely, **challenging a popular**



understanding of the past. By doing so, he deeply influenced the present and the future.

I'm speaking of the late Professor **David Wyman**, emeritus professor of History at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, who died on Wednesday at the age of 89.



I'm sure that many of the young people here -- probably many of the older folks here as well -- have no idea who Dr. Wyman was, and how and why he was so influential. So let me tell you about him.

Dr. Wyman was a historian, a scholar of Franklin D. Roosevelt and American foreign policy in the 1930's and the 1940's.

To explain how impactful Professor Wyman was, I have to tell you that Franklin D. Roosevelt (or, "FDR," as he was called) was a big hero for, in particular, many Jews during the 1930's and 1940's. They saw him as having

rescued our country, practically single handedly, from cold, heartless capitalism during the worst economic crisis our nation had ever faced, the Great Depression. Then, after seven or eight years of humanely and successfully contending with economic catastrophe, they saw him rallying America to defeat Nazism during World War II. Because of his role in helping America -- and American Jews -- during these two crises, FDR's death, in 1945, was a source of great sadness, pain and loss for many American Jews.

Fast forward fifteen or twenty years or so. David Wyman, born and raised in the Boston area, gets his undergraduate degree from B.U., and his PhD from Harvard. Like many Americans, he certainly had an appreciation of F.D.R.'s accomplishments. But he was a historian, and his research focused on America's policies toward refugees during the 1930's and 1940's. And as he pursued his research, he uncovered evidence that FDR and the American government were not as willing to help European Jews desperate to escape Nazism, they were not as *supportive*, as everyone had long believed them to have been.

Indeed, in two highly researched and well-received books, Wyman demonstrated that there were, indeed, *many* ways that the United States could have aided European Jewish refugees, without interfering in the war effort and without undermining America's immigration laws.

Wyman's first book on the subject was called, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941*. His second book had a more profound impact, perhaps because of its title. It was called, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945*. *The Abandonment of the Jews* became a best-seller. It dramatically influenced American opinion of the past, and it had an impact on the present and the future as well.

Dr. Wyman was invited to address groups of members of Congress. He was featured on numerous radio and TV shows, including the Today show, Nightline, and the Larry King show -- which, in their time, were instrumental in shaping public opinion. In his lectures, he would often unfurl the 4-foot long form that a would-be immigrant was required to fill out in order to be considered for a visa to enter the US in the 30's and 40's.

If all that Dr. Wyman accomplished had been to educate Americans about our government's response to the Holocaust, we might have said, "*Dayenu!*"-- "That would be enough for us." But he went further than that. *The Abandonment of the Jews* helped ensure that *another* persecuted Jewish community would not be abandoned.

In the mid-1980's a group of Ethiopian Jewish refugees had become stranded in the Sudan. Because of the complexity of the geo-political situation,

only one nation had the means to do something about it, and that was the United States.

Dr. Wyman played a key role in persuading American leaders to get involved. Eventually, this led to a highly secret airlift of Ethiopian Jews, eventually bringing them to Israel. It was called, Operation Moses. As many American leaders of the time readily acknowledged -- chief among them, then-Vice President George H.W. Bush, who wrote a hand-written note of thanks to Dr. Wyman -- his book, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, was crucial in opening up the eyes of the American public and American political leaders to the need to act.

In 1988, Dr. Wyman travelled to Israel and met some of the children who had been rescued as a result of his efforts. That rescue effort sparked further airlifts, resulting in the absorption of, in all, over 100,000 Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Their absorption hasn't been easy. But over time, they've risen in various sectors of Israel's society, including the army, politics, and entertainment. That's where Miss Israel 2013 comes in.



Yityish Aynaw, or “Titi”, as she is called, is an Ethiopian-born Israeli. In 2013, she became the first Ethiopian-born Israeli to win the Miss Israel contest. In doing so, she became a symbol of the way that refugee absorption can enhance a nation. Coincidentally, about a month or so after Titi became Miss Israel, I travelled to Israel on sabbatical. One of the highlights of my sabbatical was President Obama’s trip to Israel which took place a few weeks after my arrival. It captivated the entire country. And one of the highlights of that visit was a dinner that President Obama had at the residence of then-Israeli President Shimon Peres. There was only one other guest at that dinner, and that was Titi, the first Ethiopian Miss Israel, meeting the first African-American U.S. President. The symbolism was out there for all to see.

It isn't clear that Titi would ever have made it to Israel had not the path been blazed by Operation Moses and Operation Solomon before the wave that brought her and her family to Israel. She, along with many, many other Ethiopian Israelis, owes a debt of gratitude to David Wyman's quiet and convincing advocacy.

And that brings us to the Rohingya of Burma.



I am sure I am not the only one who doesn't know a lot about the Rohingya. But this I do know: The Rohingya are a persecuted minority in Burma, or Myanmar. Many have fled to neighboring countries. Hundreds of thousands are living in refugee camps in places like Bangladesh and Thailand. You could say that the refugees are the lucky ones. Those still living in Myanmar are effectively

denied the possibility of acquiring a nationality. Despite being able to trace their presence in Myanmar to the 8th century, they are not recognized as an indigenous race. Their freedom of movement is restricted and they are not eligible for state education or civil service jobs. They have faced military crackdowns that are part of what has been described as ethnic cleansing. The United Nations special investigator on Myanmar believes that the country is intent on expelling its entire Rohingya population. Let's leave aside whether the U.N. or Human Rights Watch or the other observers on the ground are entirely reliable; the bottom line is that this ethnic group is suffering. That much is clear.

What does this have to do with us? What do we have to do with the Rohingya? What's our role?

Many times, when we review the story of the Exodus, as we did this morning, and as we will at the Passover seder, we sum it up with the words, "Let My People Go." But for those of us who live in nations that could provide diplomatic, material, financial or moral support to those suffering persecution elsewhere, perhaps we should be summing it up with the words, "Let My People Come!" Allow them to flee the oppression of their native land and find freedom elsewhere.

It isn't easy to help refugees. They're different -- or at least, they *seem* different. It's easy to distrust them. It's easy to fear them. It's easy to say:

“We’ve got our own problems. Let them take care of themselves. We can’t afford it. It’ll hurt the rest of us. Some of us might say: “We got through it. So can they.” That attitude is apparently common.

A recent study published in the Harvard Business Review (See: <https://tinyurl.com/q2yqby2>) surprisingly found that an experience of having been a refugee may make one *less*, rather than *more* sympathetic to other refugees. In a series of experiments, researchers found that people who had endured challenges in the past were less likely to show compassion for someone facing the same struggle, compared with people with no experience in that particular situation.

This is highly unfortunate, for the Torah, over and over again, assumes that the opposite is the case! The Torah teaches us: “You should love the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” In a sense, then, our challenge is to overcome our natural tendency to be unsympathetic -- which tendency is, if anything, exacerbated by the Torah’s reminding us that we were once refugees ourselves!

I have a suggestion for how we can do this. Whenever we’re feeling unsympathetic about people like the Rohingya, or other refugees who might be very different from ourselves, let’s think about the life and work of the late Dr. David Wyman.

After all, David Wyman didn't identify *personally* with Jewish victims. *He wasn't Jewish himself*. Both of his grandfathers -- both his father's father and his mother's father -- were Protestant ministers. For him, it wasn't *personal*, it was *moral*. He imbibed from his grandparents and his parents a commitment to decency and caring, that consciously and deliberately transcended his own particular ethnic and religious origins. He identified with victims, not as fellow members of a tribe, but as fellow human beings.

David Wyman, in his quiet and methodical and decent way, taught us that you don't have to be Jewish to care about Jewish suffering. He taught us something else: you don't have to be Rohingya to care about Rohingya suffering.

I hope that, as we sit down to celebrate Passover together, in just two week, we'll reflect on Dr. Wyman's life's work. I hope that, as we should, we will ask ourselves lots of questions at the seder. I hope that we'll ask an additional one, that we might not otherwise have asked: *What will the historians of the future, historians like Dr. Wyman, say about us?* Will we be found guilty of abandoning the vulnerable? Or will we learn lessons from the past, and, like him, open up many, many hearts and open up many, many doors?

Shabbat Shalom.