

**Jacob the Refugee  
Parashat Vayetze  
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Rabbi Carl M. Perkins  
Temple Aliyah, Needham**

The other day, I watched on Youtube a portion of one of my favorite films.

One of the greatest American films produced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it begins with a shot of a globe that is revolving. And then the globe turns into a map of Europe, with arrows depicting escape routes. Superimposed over the map are shots of people fleeing from all over Europe toward the south, across the Mediterranean, toward a city with an exotic name. And while we're watching these people fleeing, we hear the following words:

“With the coming of the Second World War, many eyes in imprisoned Europe turned hopefully, or desperately, toward the freedom of the Americas. Lisbon became the great embarkation point. But not everybody could get to Lisbon directly, and so, a tortuous roundabout refugee trail sprang up. Paris to Marseilles, across the Meditaerranean to Oran, then by train, or auto, or foot, across the rim of Africa to Casablanca in French Morocco. Here, the fortunate ones, through money or influence, or luck, might obtain exit visas and scurry to Lisbon, and from Lisbon to the New World. But the others wait in Casablanca – and wait – and wait – and wait.”

The film, of course, is “Casablanca,” and if you haven't seen it, well, you're in for a treat. It captures the desperate plight of so many people trying to escape from persecution and oppression, by focusing on one particularly appealing group of characters.

This raises a question: What comes into our minds, and what feelings come into our hearts, when we hear the following word:

**Refugee**

What is a refugee? According to the dictionary definition, a refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or



natural disaster. Synonyms include émigré, fugitive, exile, displaced person, asylum seeker.

My guess is that hearing that word, “refugee,” this week, makes just about all of us think a bunch of jumbled thoughts and feel a mixture of feelings. Why? Because we’re in the midst of a time of great confusion and disagreement in this country regarding refugees: whether to accept them from, among other places, Syria, and if so, how many and under what conditions.

The world is a crazy place. If you had suggested to me, ten years ago, that we would be facing this question, it would have seemed ludicrous. If someone would have suggested ten years ago that Jewish organizations like HIAS, formerly known as the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, the organization that resettled millions of Jews in this country in the early part of the twentieth century, would be out in front urging our country to absorb tens if not hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, I wouldn’t have believed it.

But then again, that was before the Syrian Civil War began. Throughout these past few years, the number of refugees crowding the detention camps in Jordan and Lebanon and Turkey has grown dramatically. There are millions of Syrian refugees. And then with the huge wave of migration across the Mediterranean this past summer—in the opposite direction from those arrows in that movie—it was only a matter of time before this question would arise. And HIAS stands for helping refugees no matter what their national origin, their religious faith, their political views.

The question is, “Do we?” And the answer isn’t clear.

And the answer is, “it’s not clear,” right?

This issue has raises all sorts of questions in our minds: questions about safety, about “How many is too many?” Issues like, “NIMBY” (not in my backyard) have come up, and whether we should have or could have, or should now or could now intervene in the conflict in Syria so as to make that country safe for Syrians to live in.

I must say, I don’t envy the President of the United States, nor our representatives in Congress who ultimately have to decide together what we as a nation should do. And yet, this is the world we live in: challenges present themselves, and we have to act.

There are Jewish values implicated in this discussion, of course. Let me raise some of them to our consciousness.

First, of course, we have to protect ourselves. That's a basic obligation in Jewish law and tradition—an obligation on an individual and on a collective.

There's an important story in the Talmud, not as well known as it should be. (Bava Metzia 62a; see: <http://etzion.org.il/vbm/english/halakha/lifeboatethics.htm> .) You're in the wilderness, with a canteen of water. The assumption is that it's enough, barely enough, to keep you alive until you reach the nearest town. You encounter another person who also is thirsty. That person doesn't have a canteen. If you share your canteen, you'll both die. If you give it to him, he'll live and you'll die. If you keep it, you will live and he will die.

What should you do? What should you do in this situation? It's a great question, entirely theoretical, of course, and yet the implications are very practical.

Since it's a question in the Talmud, not one but two answers are presented.

The first is presented by a rabbinic sage named Ben Petura. He says that you should share that canteen. Why? Because no one should have the experience of watching another person die – think of that scene of Hagar with her son Ishmael dying of thirst that we just read two weeks ago in shul -- especially, knowing that the loss of that life was the price of your own.

But then comes a second opinion, that of Rabbi Akiba, the famous rabbi whose opinion is considered authoritative in this context. He quotes the Biblical verse, *v'hai achichah imach*, “in order that your brother should live alongside you,” to support his view that you should drink the water, because your life takes precedence over his – indeed, over anyone else's.

So, based on Rabbi Akiba's view, we have an obligation not to risk our own lives, or the life of our society. Obviously, if there are visitors to this country, even purported refugees, who seek to enter the country in order to sow mayhem, wreak destruction, kill Americans, then we owe it to ourselves and our society to keep them out.

But what if refugees were to go through an extensive vetting process, much more, say, than those entering the country on tourist visas? What if sound and proper

protections could be provided? What then? What if there were no greater risk to taking in a refugee than allowing anyone else to fly here on a tourist visa, in fact what if there were less risk of the former than the latter?

Then, of course, I hope it's clear that we would have a duty, under Jewish law and tradition, to open up our hearts and our homes and to admit refugees.

But then the question remains, "How many?" "How many is too many?" Well, I don't think we're anywhere near reaching the limit on that question. A refugee worker I heard on the radio the other day recently suggested that if we were doing our part, we'd take in 100,000 Syrian refugees. But, as he put it, he wasn't "born yesterday," so he knows that that is not going to happen, but if the country accepted 10,000, as it had initially indicated it would, that would be a step in the right direction.

With whom do we identify when we see images of the contemporary refugee crisis? When we watch that film, "Casablanca," our sympathies are clear. We sympathize with Ingrid Bergman's character, of course, and that of her husband. But it's less clear when we watch the news. This crisis has really put that question to us front and center, challenging our heads and our hearts.

Anne Roiphe, in a piece just published in the *Forward*, argues that, as Jews, we can't ignore the plight of refugees, no matter what their religion, ethnic origin, or political persuasion. The basis of her argument is that Jewish refugees were turned away before and during WWII.

Well I happen to agree that, as Jews, we cannot ignore the plight of these refugees, but I disagree with the basis for Anne Roiphe's argument.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Jews didn't pose the kind of threat to our society that Islamists do today. Jews then were not part of a world-wide conspiracy to overcome the Western world.

And yet, and I used those words deliberately of course, because the problem with that argument is that, in the 1930s and 40s, people *did believe* that the Jews were part of a vast conspiracy to destroy the world. Of course, it was false, and there was no evidence for it, but that didn't stop people from believing it.

During the summer of 1938, a conference was held in the city of Evian in France. Delegates from 32 countries met to discuss what could be done to address the

problem of the refugees, the Jewish refugees, from Nazi Germany. And “ delegate after delegate rose to express sympathy for the refugees. But most countries, including the United States and Britain, offered excuses for not letting in more refugees.” In fact, when the Canadian representative was asked at the Evian conference how many Jews Canada would take, he said, “Even one would be too many.” When you hear that answer, it makes you realize that there was a lot of paranoia, a lot of anti-semitism then.

And yet I don't think it's that we were victims that gives us the duty to contend with refugees today. It's our values. It's not what happened to us, but who we are and what we stand for.

It's *Judaism* that teaches us that we have to reach out to the stranger, to the stateless wanderer. It's *Judaism* that teaches us that we must only not oppress the stranger, we have to love the stranger. It's *Judaism* that teaches us that “there, but for the grace of God, go we.”

One of the famous lines in the haggadah alludes to this: *Arami oved avi*, “My father was a wandering Aramean.” And “my father” in that passage can be understood to refer to Jacob, whom we encountered in today's parashah. “*Vayivrach Yaakov*,” “And Jacob fled,” as we read in the haftarah. During the entire parashah, Jacob is in exile. At the very beginning, he's fleeing his homeland; at the end, he is fleeing in the opposite direction. Yes, he has wives and children and wealth, but he's still fleeing.

That captures, I think, a sense of the acute vulnerability of the refugee.

A vulnerability that should be in our hearts and in our minds when we think about the word “refugee.”

The other day, Rabbi Bradley Artson, who was our Shabbaton speaker just about a year ago, posted a verse from the Tanakh, from the Hebrew Bible, on his Facebook page. The verse was Psalms 39:13. It's a beautiful verse and it includes the following words:

הָאֲזִינָה אֶל־דְּמָעָתִי אֶל־תְּהִרָשׁ כִּי גֵר אֲנֹכִי עִמָּךְ תּוֹשָׁב כָּכֶל־אֲבוֹתָי: ...

“Do not disregard my tears, for I am a foreigner, indeed, as all my fathers were.”

He then added the words, “We all wandered from somewhere, so every refugee is our sister and brother; every one a child of God and the universe. All deserve shelter, home, safety. Their need is our duty.”

Interestingly, there were comments underneath that Facebook posting. One of them read, “I am unfriending you, because of this Facebook posting.”

The bottom line, I think, is that we can and should reach out and help the strangers who are seeking refuge: whoever they are and wherever they come from. Of course, if they pose a threat, we shouldn’t be admitting them. But if they can be absorbed safely, we should seek to do that. Anti-immigration sentiment is as old as our country, and it is a piece of the American tradition; but it’s not a piece of the Jewish tradition:

*“Do not disregard my tears, for I am a foreigner, indeed, as all my fathers were.”*

Shabbat shalom.