

## Jacob: The First Syrian Refugee

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We read today about the heart wrenching story of a family of Syrian refugees. Escaping from their oppressive environment, from the deceit and deception that they have been subjected to, they decide to leave the dangerous country where they live. They set out across treacherous terrain seeking a better life, risking their lives to journey to a place where they will be able to live free and unafraid. The refugees from Syria I am referring to are not the ones we read about in the news who are currently leaving Syria, but rather, our patriarch Jacob who fled thousands of years ago with his family from his father-in-law Lavan, for whom he worked for twenty years in Haran to return to *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel.

In many respects the story serves as a paradigm and motif for our history. Throughout the millennia we have spread across the globe in many countries which is why we are known as the “wandering Jews.” We have been evicted from our homes, expelled, exiled, and forced to flee to avoid persecution and violent attacks. As a result of our experience in history, it is ingrained in us to be sensitive to the plight of refugees. Furthermore, appearing more frequently than any other phrase in the Bible, we are reminded repeatedly to heed the message that we were once strangers in the land of Egypt, *uzechartem kee gerim hayeetem beEretz Mitzrayim*. Xenophobia has no place in our tradition.

Most of our ancestors came to this country as immigrants fleeing pogroms and anti-Semitism, seeking freedom and a better life for themselves and their children. We, their children and grandchildren who enjoy the freedoms of this country are the beneficiaries of their decision to come here. And I might add, America, and the world is the beneficiary, for our world is a better place because of the contributions Jews have made in a country which has not limited or restricted our opportunity to contribute and to create. Our encounter with history throughout the ages coupled with the imperative of our heritage and the moral calling to act with compassion towards the stranger clearly points in one direction in terms of how we should feel about and respond to the current refugee crisis.

We know all too well what happened when the gates and ports of the Free World were closed to our people during World War II. Whether it was the *St. Louis* ship carrying Jewish refugees that was turned away and not allowed to bring Jews fleeing the Nazis into this country, or other requests to save Jews which were denied, we recall these shameful chapters with indignation. President Obama is absolutely correct when he says that, “Slamming the door in the face of refugees would betray our deepest values.”

These factors point to what appears to be a clear and unequivocal conclusion about what to do about the current refugee crisis, and has led many Jewish organizations to support a position in favor of widespread opening our gates, I cannot however, help but express a note of caution as we proceed and consider our responsibility and obligations to the current wave.

We must do what we can to save those fleeing from oppression, and we must act with compassion. But it would be prudent to also proceed with caution.

While not all those coming from Syria today are a threat, it would be naïve to assume that there are not among these refugees those intent upon destroying the countries and societies that offer them safe harbor. We cannot overlook the fact that those seeking asylum were raised in countries where anti-Semitism is universal, over 95%, where the steady diet of racist anti-Jewish images, negative stereotypes and hateful propaganda about Jews permeates every aspect of their society – their educational, academic and religious institutions, as well as their media and governmental institutions. We have already seen the impact such a large influx of immigrants from Arab nations without a history of liberal democratic traditions has had on Europe, and on European policy towards Israel.

What we need is a policy that takes into account the conflicting narratives and divergent interests. It would be nice if our political leaders would adopt a sane policy, not based upon political grandstanding. We should adopt an approach that is founded upon principles of tolerance and compassion, but is at the same time, guided by reason, moderation and which takes reality into consideration.

We are entitled to ask why it is that the refugees who are from Arab countries are not being absorbed and accepted into neighboring Arab countries, where the same language, culture and religion is practiced, where the process of absorption would obviously be far easier, the distance shorter and the journey less treacherous. It is not as if the 21 Arab nations do not have the resources or the space to accommodate their brethren. The international community needs to press them to accept more to help to solve the international crisis.

While many draw parallels to the Syrian refugee crisis of today to the plight of the Jews in World War II, I would like to remind all of us of another important lesson to be learned from our experience in World War II. We must never forget that one of the enduring lessons of the Holocaust was that 2,000 years of persecution, wandering, and expulsions, made clear the need for a country to exist which would accept Jewish refugees. An independent, sovereign nation, a nation-state of the Jewish people which would offer haven to Jews escaping those who would seek to kill them is justified and necessary.

Throughout Israel's short 67 years of existence, it has opened its arms to Jewish refugees escaping persecution and anti-Semitism, who had nowhere else to go. From the time of its birth, whether it was Operation Magic Carpet, which brought Jews from Yemen, to the miraculous Operation Exodus, which brought Jews from Ethiopia or Jews from the Soviet Union, and elsewhere, having learned the lesson of history Israel, has understood its mandate and part of its *raison d'être* as providing safe harbor for Jews. I recall visiting absorption centers in Israel in the 1980's and 1990's where I saw elderly, infirm people who would have been rejected by any other country because they would be an economic drain on their society, yet who were welcomed by Israel.

As Europe copes with the threats it faces, and mistakenly thinks that imposing a boycott on products coming from the West Bank will gain it immunity from fundamentalist terrorist attacks, we must remind them that the threats they face are the same ones Israel encounters every day from those who want to displace the one country in the world which since its inception openly embraces Jews fleeing

persecution. So while we consider how to cope with the human tragedy unfolding before us, and we look to learn from past experience, let us act with compassion and sanity. Our tradition compels us to firmly reject extremists on either side of the debate, who appeal to our basest instincts. Let us devise and develop a policy that takes into account our moral obligation to accept those fleeing persecution as well as the security challenges such an influx presents. And finally, let us also recall one of the lessons of history and of the refusal to admit Jewish refugees to this country -- the obligation we have to ensure that Israel is safe, strong and secure so it can continue to be as it was for our ancestor Jacob, a haven for Jews escaping oppression and persecution.

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