

## **D'var Torah: Shabbat, Dec. 4, 2016**

By Roberta Elliott

Studying for my bat mitzvah seven years ago set me on a course that has intensified over the years: Seeking out and knowing the heart of a stranger.

The bat mitzvah parsha was last week's parsha, "Chayei Sarah," a parsha that is so rich that it can be almost impossible to settle on a theme. But what spoke to me was Abraham's up-rootedness after leaving behind his father, his family and everything that he knew to follow God's commandment of "Lech lecha." I posited at the time, and still believe, that Abraham, the patriarch of patriarchs, was the first stranger. He was a stranger in his adoptive land of Canaan and a stranger in the land of his birth, Mesopotamia. None of us in this room would be here without Abraham's willingness to subject himself to the terrors of the unknown, the terrors of being a stranger.

At the end of the parsha, "Chayei Sarah" establishes our lineage in Canaan, but even such a lineage did not immunize our patriarchs from famine and the need to be economic refugees in Egypt from time to time and for a period of 400 years. Because of that sojourn, the Torah commands us repeatedly to welcome the stranger. In Exodus 23:9 we are admonished by God: "Do not oppress a stranger for you know the heart (nefesh, or soul, in Hebrew) of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." Nor was that the last time we Jews would be refugees – ours is a history of refugee-hood, punctuated by periods of stability. As such, I believe we have a special responsibility towards refugees. And, I am highly motivated and energized by my own history to exercise that responsibility.

My father was a refugee from Hitler. A reserved and in many ways unknowable man, he rarely spoke of the trauma of his expulsion and subsequent flight. Seeking answers, I have spent the nearly 25 years since his death physically retracing his steps as he escaped Europe.

Three years ago, I retired from HIAS, the Jewish refugee agency. I had returned there six years earlier after having worked there in the early 90s during the Soviet Jewish migrations. My father had worked at HIAS in Lisbon in 1941 in return for passage to America for him and his family. For me, it always felt like working at HIAS was closing a circle that had been opened during World War II.

My retirement has precisely coincided with the largest refugee crisis since World War II. There are currently 65 million refugees and internally displaced persons in the world. As a result, I have shifted my

explorations to today's displaced. I firmly believe in the words of Exodus that we are all created b'stelem Elohim, in the image of God. For me there is no difference between a Jewish refugee from Hitler, a gay refugee from African tribal culture, or a Syrian refugee.

As the daughter of a refugee, I know the heart of the stranger better than most. But my own heart yearns to explore and understand not only my family's path, but to learn as much as I can about people who have been forced to flee everything they've ever known for everything they don't know. To learn what separates them from me; to try to imagine being in their shoes. Or is it to imagine being with my father's as he fled for his life so many years ago?

So, in the past 14 months, I have gone to Europe twice to volunteer on the frontlines of today's refugee crisis. My father was Viennese and my roots to Vienna are deep, so in October, 2015, I went there for 10 days, where I volunteered helping refugees at two train stations. Since I made a presentation at BK shortly after I returned, I will not dwell on that trip now. I mention it only because at that point Vienna was still a transit center for refugees heading from Greece to northern Europe. The refugee crisis was still young, people were in motion heading toward their destinations - and there was still hope. While there, I distributed food and clothing, and came home buoyed by the abundant humanity I witnessed from Austrian and international volunteers.

It was a highly satisfying experience, but unfortunately not adequate preparation for what I found in Greece this past June. Just a little background about how one becomes a volunteer.

With Greece as the epicenter of the refugee crisis in Europe, I decide early on to make that country my target. I soon learn the smartest way to prepare for such a trip is by employing social media to the max, especially Facebook, host to hundreds of refugee assistance groups. I also learn that UNHCR, the IRC, MSF are not up to the job - they have been under-prepared and overwhelmed by the numbers in need; in their stead a number of ad hoc grassroots organizations have sprung up. In the end, I will become what is known as an "independent volunteer," which means I am not attached to any one NGO but can move freely between NGOs and camps. After months of careful research, I determine that I will split my two weeks between a camp, planned and organized by the Greek military, and the port of Piraeus, temporary home to 2,000 refugees who had refused to be relocated to official camps.

My first stop was Ritsona Refugee Camp, located 1.5 hours north of Athens. If any of you heard This American Life's two-part series on the refugee crisis in Greece, it was Ritsona where he based his report. Ritsona was established in March at an abandoned Greek Air Force Base. It is in a pine forest, which in

the 100 degree heat of an early summer heatwave served as only minor protection from the sun. Camp conditions are disastrous and chaotic. There are 150 tents – one tent per family – and 800 people living there, which gives you an idea of how many children are in the refugee population. The tents are government-issue of heavy canvas with no windows and no ventilation of any kind. Inside the tents, residents sleep on wool blankets on the bare earth. The heat wave has brought forth plagues of biblical proportion: poisonous snakes and scorpions, which regularly slip into tents, swarms of mosquitos, and Hepatitis A. There is no running water and no electricity and it has been like this for more than three months. In fact, until two weeks ago, the residents were in tents through the beginning of the rainy season. They have finally brought in ISO containers, but to the best of my knowledge, running water is still only available in the shower containers and there is still no electricity, which means there is no heat going into the winter months.

The residents are primarily Syrian, but also Kurds, Yazidi, and Iraqis. They are mostly middle class – people like us. I have come to realize that the less educated left much earlier in the crisis because they had far less to lose. The residents of Ritsona are engineers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, people just like us, living in conditions we cannot begin to imagine.

At any given moment, there are 40 or 50 pregnant women, but no mid-wife and no pre-natal care. All babies are delivered by pre-arranged Caesarians in local hospitals and then returned to the camp's abysmal conditions within a day or two. Vaginal births are not allowed because it would inconvenience the Greek doctors and nurses; more than one newborn has died due to unsanitary living conditions.

Knowing that contraception was a challenge, I brought more than 1,000 condoms to be distributed. There isn't enough time to go into the dysfunctionality and turf wars of the NGOs, but suffice it to say that I didn't see one of my condoms distributed. When I asked why, an NGO rep told me – with a straight face - that they wanted to organize sex-education classes for the women and would distribute them at that time. Sex education classes for women who were on their 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> child....

After a week of distributing food, sorting clothes and other essentials, I moved onto my second post: Piraeus, the port of Athens. I imagine many of you have been to the port on your way to the Greek Islands. But, I doubt any of you have seen the side of the port that housed a large, illegal refugee squat with some 2,000 mostly Afghani residents living in a parking lot. It looked like a Bedouin encampment, but on black top. As an illegal site, they were given far fewer services than the sanctioned camps, but they did get food delivered twice a day.

I arrived shortly after 200 people had been evacuated to hospitals following a bout with food poisoning. No one died, but two pregnant women miscarried.

Even so, there was joy at this squat, provided by a group called Amurtel Athens. Amurtel is an international organization of yoga nuns – yes, yoga nuns! – devoted to caring for women and babies in challenging situations. At Piraeus there were two small Amurtel trailers – one for distributing supplemental nutrition to pregnant women, nursing mothers and newborns; the other for midwifery appointments and baby bathing. Imagine this: you are in control of almost no aspect of your life, but you are given a daily reprieve of warmed bath water and soap for your baby. I helped as mothers luxuriated in washing and pampering their babies. It gave them the greatest possible gift: stolen moments of baby-bonding, order and cleanliness in an otherwise chaotic existence. I will carry the images of laughing babies and their earnest, ministering mothers with me forever.

Since my time at Piraeus, it has been evacuated, hopefully with the refugees landing in sanctioned camps. There are currently 60K refugees in Greece at 50-60 official refugee camps dotting every corner of the Greek countryside. At the time of This American Life's report there was only one asylum officer in all of Greece. The refugees will be there for years – we are only at the beginning of this crisis.

But, there is good news. Refugees are being admitted to the U.S. to make new lives here much as my father did 75 years ago. Last year NJ took 53 families or 250 people; the figures aren't in yet for this year. As you all know from the wonderful work being done by Kate and Melina, Syrians are being resettled in Elizabeth, Jersey City and Patterson. The opportunities to help are limitless, as are the needs. This congregation has so proudly born the banner of "Welcome the Stranger."

I could go on for a long time, but I won't and will circle back to some truths that I learned and now know. I have learned that volunteering with refugees is transformative - it changes and helps them as much as it changes and helps us in deep and complex ways. While there, I found my emotions toward the refugees were mercurial and ranged from deep empathy, to annoyance, to feelings of superiority, and ultimately to feelings of humility.

I have also learned that one should never hesitate to claim one's Jewishness. I made short order of telling just about every refugee I worked with in Greece and Vienna that I was Jewish. It changes the conversation and the relationship, and always for the better. I was never met with anything but deep gratitude from the mostly Muslim refugees and from other volunteers.

And, most importantly for me, I learned that if you can't figure out what your purpose is in life, then figure out your passion. Your passion will ALWAYS lead you to your purpose.

My passion and purpose is to help refugees. I'm not exactly sure how that happened. I don't know if it was witnessing 2,000 arrivals of Soviet Jews at JFK on one boundlessly joyous day in 1990; or whether it was listening, stunned and devastated, as a young women refugee, a survivor of tribal violence in Congo, put into words the most obscenely imaginable human cruelty that no one should ever utter, much less undergo.

Over the years I have also been absorbing the neshama, the words and deeds of our Rabbi, an exemplar of one dedicated to social justice action. Or maybe it was just in my blood, a gene waiting to be discovered.

I know that finding my passion and purpose feels like a significant personal achievement – I just don't pretend to know exactly how I got there. So let's have a conversation about passion and purpose....

Do you agree that your passion will lead you to your purpose? And, if that is such an obvious, acceptable statement, why is it that we so often hesitate to move forward with things that we know we should and want to do? What are some of the reasons that dreams and goals don't always align with actions? Where does the psychological resistance that frequently stands in our way come from? What can we do to overcome it?