

*Opening Gates – Erev Rosh Hashanah  
October 2, 2016 – 1 Tishrei 5777  
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester  
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The refugees came from a country that “had become hell itself and once had been infinitely beautiful.” The young couple and their young son arrived in a place where most did not want them. They spoke the language of the enemy. They practiced a strange religion. They brought with them neither wealth nor skills that could immediately benefit their new host country. This young family felt isolated, away from their families, wondering if they would ever see them again.

Making it to the new land took a miracle. Nations feared the other. Nations were suspicious. Perhaps the refugees actually served the enemy, infiltrating to conduct an attack. And so the doors closed around the world. But this family luckily got out, made it to the relative safety of a new land, this couple and their little boy.

I am speaking, of course, about – my grandparents and my uncle. Lisa and Fred Grubel and their little boy Henry, of blessed memory, miraculously escaped Germany in January of 1939 as the world shut their doors to the Jews. At Holocaust museums, Yom Hashoah commemorations, and Kristallnacht services each year we wonder aloud: “What could have happened had the world not closed their doors to the Jews?” We’ll never know. And so at those solemn gatherings we say “never again.”

Today, “again,” refugees overrun our world. This time from a different region, this time with a different strange religion, this time with a new set of suspicions and fears and economic woes used to keep them out. This time, instead of Jews knocking on the door for refuge, we are the gatekeepers. After 2,000 years on the outside, today nearly every Jew stands on the inside of the doors to safety and sanity. Now that we hold the key, how will we respond?

“Welcome the stranger for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” The Torah repeats this commandment thirty-six times. More than any other commandment. That says something. Not only that, the Torah provides a rare explanation. Why should we love the stranger? Because we “were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” We have not only been strangers in Egypt but all over the world for 2000 years. Why should we welcome the stranger? Simple empathy. We’ve been there. If anyone understands what it means to be unwelcome, to live without security it is us.

This notion seems out of place in this affluent corner of Westchester. Today, in this moment, we live as part of the safest, most secure Jewish community in the history of the world. Indeed, for the first time since the Romans conquered Jerusalem in the year 70 CE no Jewish refugees wander this world. Most of us live in the United States, Israel or some other first world nation with legal protections against discrimination. Even as populist, nationalist parties in various countries attempt to revive ugly strains of anti-Semitism, every nation in the West has laws that forbid anti-Semitic discrimination. The Jews of Europe experience real threats. Our beloved

State of Israel lives with constant risk but security experts agree that none of these external threats are existential,<sup>1</sup> all are manageable.

And so, it is from a place of true security that we face the challenge of the world's largest refugee crisis in history.<sup>2</sup> There are 65.3 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, "if they were a nation, they would make up the 21<sup>st</sup> largest in the world."<sup>3</sup> In 2015 alone an additional 12.4 million people became displaced, that's 24 people every minute. And where are they? Developing regions of the world host 86% of them. The Least Developed Countries provide asylum to 4.2 million. In other words, the wealthy nations, the stable nations, the countries with social services and agencies and resources have done the least to help people fleeing the horrors of violence and war and persecution. These people flee a reality which includes the beheadings that we watch with grizzly fascination on YouTube. We leave them to wallow in refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan and Nauru. Before writing this sermon, I couldn't even tell you where Nauru is. But this tiny South Pacific island hosts 50 out of every 1,000 refugees. So America sits here secure and rich and what do we do with that security and wealth? The same thing that every nation did with it when they turned our ancestors away for 2,000 years. We do almost nothing. Shameful.

According to our tradition, Abraham lived in the Bronze Age, about 3800 years ago. The Bronze Age was a dangerous time. Without the protection of your clan or feudal lord, you could count on being robbed, sold into slavery, and worse. Nevertheless, Abraham is the paragon of welcoming the stranger. Sitting in the heat of the day recovering from his own circumcision, Abraham sees three strangers outside his camp. He runs to these strangers, welcomes them into his tent, feeds them a glorious meal and washes their feet with his own hands. *Hachnasaot orchim*, welcoming guests, becomes an enduring value for the Jewish people thanks to Abraham's example. Abraham's guests were not well-dressed people he ran into at shul. They did not present a letter of introduction from a mutual friend. These guests certainly did not pass through dozens of background checks and intrusive interviews. They were strangers. They walked too close to his small camp, in the heat of the day, in a dangerous time, in a dangerous part of the world. And Abraham welcomed them in with open arms.

As a nation today, we fail to live up to Abraham's example – far from it. In 1939 the US combined quota for German-Austrian immigration was 27,370.<sup>4</sup> As a point of reference, at the time there were about 522,000<sup>5</sup> Jews living in Germany and 182,000<sup>6</sup> in Austria. Today there are 4.8 million Syrian refugees living outside of Syria and another 6.6 million who are internally displaced. This year, the US has agreed to take in 10,000 of them. As abysmal as the US was for the Jews of Europe, we're even worse now for the horrors of Syria.

The 11<sup>th</sup> century commentator Rashi, one of the greatest Jewish scholars of all time, notes that our treatment of the stranger should come from the fact that we "know the feelings of the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Ex-Mossad-chief-Israels-biggest-threat-is-potential-civil-war-not-Iran-466415>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005267>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005469>

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Jews\\_in\\_Austria#The\\_Holocaust\\_in\\_Austria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Austria#The_Holocaust_in_Austria)

stranger... [We] know how painful it is for him.”<sup>7</sup> We could easily be in their place. From where we sit that seems preposterous. Well my grandfather worked as a respected lawyer in Leipzig and my great-grandfather fought for the Germans in World War I and look what happened just one generation later. When we see the stranger, today’s refugees, we see the people we have been and the people that we might again become. For millennia we cried out because no one would let us in. How can we – of all people – not respond to today’s refugees with openness, with kindness, with help and support?

On September 2, 2015 the heart breaking photo of Aylan Kurdi lying lifeless on the Turkish coast first raised the world’s consciousness of today’s refugee crisis. Nations called on admitting refugees, whole populations sought to open their doors. And then, on November 13 Islamic terrorists attacked Paris killing 130 and wounding 368. The backlash that began immediately demonstrated the terrorist success in striking terror in the West, in turning us against our highest values. Suddenly the world did not want to welcome the refugees. The terrorist bombs blew away the humanity of Aylan Kurdi.

I want to acknowledge the real fears that we have. I know of several members of our congregation who were in Paris on that fateful night. We see the violence around the world and we do not want it here. So, it seems logical to keep refugees out to avoid violence at home. The thing is, especially when applied to refugees, that logic is false. Since September 11, 2001 there have been 139<sup>8</sup> fatalities on US soil linked to Islamic terrorism. By comparison, nearly 19,000 people a year die from prescription opioid overdoses.<sup>9</sup> About 30,000 die in car accidents.<sup>10</sup> Lightning kills about 51 people a year.<sup>11</sup> To say nothing of gun violence, this year alone 23 people have been shot – by toddlers.<sup>12</sup> According to an October 2015 report from the Migration Policy Institute, “The reality is this: The United States has resettled 784,000 refugees since September 11, 2001. In those 14 years, exactly three resettled refugees have been arrested for planning terrorist activities—and it is worth noting two were not planning an attack in the United States and the plans of the third were barely credible.”<sup>13</sup> Terrorist attacks are deadly, but far less deadly than so much that we easily accept as risks of daily living in America. If we really want to reduce the number of deaths in this country, there are better places to spend resources and effort than erecting walls against Muslim refugees.

The threat of Islamic terror is real. But, despite recent events in New York and New Jersey, the odds of that terror originating with a *refugee* is very slim. The process of qualifying for resettlement is lengthy, to say the least. It involves, at a minimum, nine Federal and International agencies, five interviews, at least nine background checks, continuous screening against terrorist and security databases and takes at least two years.<sup>14</sup> No other traveler to the US receives this level of scrutiny. Plenty of people and things in this world should scare us. But refugees who have gone through this process are NOT one of them.

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<sup>7</sup> Rashi on Ex 22:20 and 23:9

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thereligionofpeace.com/attacks/american-attacks.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.drugwarfacts.org/cms/Causes\\_of\\_Death#sthash.0rHvBj7E.dpbs](http://www.drugwarfacts.org/cms/Causes_of_Death#sthash.0rHvBj7E.dpbs)

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_motor\\_vehicle\\_deaths\\_in\\_U.S.\\_by\\_year](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_motor_vehicle_deaths_in_U.S._by_year)

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lightning\\_strike](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lightning_strike)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/05/01/toddlers-have-shot-at-least-23-people-this-year/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/us-record-shows-refugees-are-not-threat>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>

In the coming weeks, I will ask our board of trustees to approve two initiatives. First, I will seek approval to join HIAS's Welcome Campaign in support of "welcoming refugees to the United States". In addition to signing a statement of support we will take some affirmative step toward welcoming refugees. These steps may include: "education, advocacy, holding events and programs, raising money, building partnerships, or helping refugees in our local communities."

When the picture of Aylan Kurdi appeared a year ago, the Jewish community in Westchester, including our congregation, reached out to HIAS and said, "What can we do?" In response to that outpouring of support, HIAS put in an application to the State Department to resettle 50 Syrian refugee families here in Westchester. If the State Department approves the application, I will ask our board to approve our participation in welcoming these families to the United States. It will require an effort unlike anything since we helped to welcome an extended Russian Jewish family 25 years ago. Our congregants, Joan and Stephen Kass, have volunteered to lead this effort. They will need help from all of us. If you would like to help, just let me know.

Rabbi Jennie Rosenn from HIAS explains that Jews used to help refugees because the refugees were Jewish. Now Jews help refugees because we are Jewish, because we hear the call from the Torah over and over again, 36 times, to welcome the stranger because we were strangers.

Those strangers that Abraham welcomed into his tent graciously sat with Abraham accepting his hospitality. They ate his food. They drank his water. They reclined in the shade that his tent provided. And then they told Abraham that God would bless him and Sarah with a son, an heir to the covenant with God. By taking the risk to reach out to strangers, to welcome them, Abraham and Sarah realized the blessing that they had sought their entire lives. They realized their future – and ours. As we work to open our door, to welcome the stranger into our tent, may we, too, find untold blessings and assure the future of our community and our nation.

כן יהי רצון