

The Trump administration policy on immigration is inhuman and unacceptable.

While we are very fortunate living peacefully in America, too many others around the world are not. According to the International Rescue Committee: "there are 68.5 million men, women and children escaping war, persecution and political turbulence"¹ as refugees and asylum seekers.

To explain the difference: Refugees have been forced to flee and cannot return home unless and until conditions in their native lands are safe for them again. The ceiling for the number of refugees that the U.S. will accept has historically averaged 95,000 a year. Tragically, last year President Trump set that number at only 30,000 refugees, up to now the lowest number in the history of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Just last week, though, his administration announced that for 2020 it intends to lower it even further to only 18,000² ... a mere pittance compared to the nearly 26 million refugees worldwide this year, the highest number ever recorded, half of whom are under the age of 18.³

Asylum seekers also seek international protection from dangers in their home country, but since their claim for refugee status has not been determined legally, they must apply for protection in the country of destination. Crossing an international border for asylum is not illegal, and an asylum seeker's case must be heard, according to U.S. and international law.⁴

In mid-September, though, the Supreme Court allowed the Trump administration to bar most migrants, particularly Central Americans, from seeking asylum in the United States. According to President Trump's plan, migrants will not be allowed to apply for asylum unless they have first tried—and failed—to receive it in one of the countries they passed through on their way to the U.S. The danger, according to The New York Times, is that a lot of evidence suggests that those countries are not safe and that the people passing through those countries are at risk of human rights violations.⁵ We still have time to advocate against this new policy.

Different from refugees and asylum seekers, immigrants are people who want to live in another country permanently. They often go through a lengthy vetting process to immigrate and many become lawful permanent residents and eventually citizens.⁶ "According to the National Academy of Sciences, 'immigration is integral to the nation's economic growth ... and there is little evidence that immigration significantly affects the overall employment levels of native-born workers.'"⁷

Under President Barack Obama, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known as ICE, prioritized removing undocumented immigrants who had committed serious crimes in the United States. Now, President Trump's hardline stance has directed his administration to target anyone in the country illegally, along with a policy that used a fast-track deportation process that bypassed due process before an immigration judge ... a policy that two weeks ago was fortunately barred by a federal judge.

Finding the proper balance between protecting the security of our country and respecting and preserving the human rights of those seeking to live in it is a challenge beyond my abilities to resolve. I hope and pray that the three branches of our government will finally rise

¹ <https://www.rescue.org/article/migrants-asylum-seekers-refugees-and-immigrants-whats-difference>

² <https://www.hias.org/news/blog/number-refugees-cut-third-straight-year>

³ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

⁴ <https://www.rescue.org/article/migrants-asylum-seekers-refugees-and-immigrants-whats-difference>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/europe/trump-america-asylum-migration.html>

⁶ <https://www.rescue.org/article/migrants-asylum-seekers-refugees-and-immigrants-whats-difference>

⁷ <http://nas-sites.org/PC/2016/09/21/new-report-the-economic-and-fiscal-consequences-of-immigration/>

to that challenge and find that balance. What I do know, though, is that while our government is still struggling to find the right legislation and actions to accomplish this, my religion teaches me that I must ... we must ... treat all who are at risk under the current policies—refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants—with respect and humanity.

As we learn in the first book of Torah, we were a migrant people from the start. God tells Abraham and Sarah: “*Lekh lekha*...Go forth from your land, your birthplace, your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.” As we read each Passover in the *hagaddah*: “My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there.” At first we were just strangers ... then enslaved there ... until God redeemed us and led us to the Promised Land.

That time in Egypt is central to our story as a people. Its teaching is our moral compass in our relationship with others. **Thirty-six times** the Torah commands us to love the stranger, more than any other commandment in Torah. Here are just a few examples:

“You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:20).`

“You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23.:9)

“When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them.” (Lev. 19:33)

“The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I the Eternal am Your God.” (Lev. 19:34)

Every individual is recognized and valued as having been created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Instead of instructing us to take revenge and oppress others as we were oppressed, Torah teaches us to love them, so that no one should suffer as we did in Egypt.

Or as so many are suffering under the immigration policies of the current administration. The good news is that there is hope ... hope that resides in us and in our ability to act to mitigate and counteract those policies. There are many wonderful organizations helping to guide and coordinate our actions. I'll speak of two within our Jewish community.

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, known by its acronym **HIAS**, was founded by American Jews in 1881 to assist Jews fleeing pogroms, the anti-Semitic riots in Russia and Eastern Europe. During the 1970s and 1980s it was instrumental in helping Jews leave the oppression of the former Soviet Union. Today, it has expanded its mission to provide welcome, safety, and freedom to refugees of all faiths and ethnicities. I have listed its Web page address—**hias.org**—in our *Daf T'filah*. There you can learn about volunteer opportunities, find resources, attend an event, or take action to support refugees and asylum seekers.

The Religious Action Center of the Union for Reform Judaism does powerful work opposing the current harmful policies while advocating for comprehensive immigration reform that is based on streamlined processing, a commitment to obey the rule of law, payment of taxes owed, family reunification, and a path to citizenship. On their Web site—**rac.org/immigration**—also listed in your *Daf*, you will find links to:

- their North American Immigrant Justice Campaign
- how to take action on immigrant detention and immigration reform
- how to urge Congress to defund deportation
- and additional resources.

We have also heard the call here at Woodlands. Working in concert with our other teams in the temple, two Task Forces of the Social Action Committee are striving to make sure that our motto on the banner outside our building that “**All Are Welcome Here**” applies to the wider world as well.

Immigrant Friends at Woodlands is involved in advocacy on behalf of both documented and undocumented immigrants, challenges that immigrants face, and service to immigrants. As recounted in Rabbi Billy’s cover article in the September issue of our *Makom* bulletin, we maintain a list on our temple Web site of immigrant advocacy resources as well as organizations through which we as congregants can provide legal and humanitarian assistance to immigrants. We work together with community organizations such as Lifting Up Westchester and Neighbors’ Link to meet the needs of the largely Spanish-speaking immigrant population of the county, particularly enjoying the work with Reading Buddies, where we read with kids in the Yonkers Public Library. Most urgently, as explained in our *Daf*, we are joining with other Rivertowns congregations in creating a sanctuary apartment at South Presbyterian Church in Dobbs Ferry to provide refuge for immigrants under threat of deportation while they pursue their case in court. For more information and to participate, contact Steve Glusker, whose email address—immigrantfriends@wct.org—is listed in the *Daf*.

The Refugee Task Force, an officially deputized arm of HIAS, has partnered with Bet Am Shalom in White Plains to provide the refugee Azizi family from a ravaged Afghanistan with financial support, housing, cultural orientation, and whatever is needed to welcome this six-member family and help them become successful American residents. This has included finding and furnishing an apartment, helping register the four children for school and the parents for ESL classes, finding medical care providers and drivers for medical & other appointments, helping Sabehr (the father) find employment, and ongoing work to help the family fully integrate into life here. Shameela, his wife, was quoted in *The Jewish Week* newspaper saying: “We have experienced only kindness.” For more information or to join the Refugee Task Force team, contact Marge Glusker and Melanie Roher at refugees@wct.org, also listed in your *Daf T’filah*.

In the special *Shabbat Shuva* Haftarah portion that Cantor Jonathan just chanted so meaningfully for us, the prophet Hosea urges the people of Israel to return to God by returning to a path of righteousness ... surely an appropriate reading for this Shabbat just before Yom Kippur. Hosea goes on to say: “Assyria shall not save us.” When we cannot count on our government, as is the case with current immigration policy, then *alenu* ... it is upon us to hear God’s strong call to love the stranger as ourselves, to work to change governmental policy, and to support all those in need until that policy changes.

In *Vayeilekh*, our Torah portion this Shabbat, Moses tells the Israelites that he will not go with them into the Promised Land, urging them to be strong and resolute as they continue their journey, for God will not fail or forsake them.

May we hear that charge as our own as we continue our work toward a world where the stranger is accepted, loved, and ceases to be the stranger.

Keyn y’hi ratzon ... May this be God’s will.