Thank you, Rabbi Cooper, Rabbi Israel, Cantor Rosner. Shabbat Shalom. It is wonderful to be here. I was very moved to be invited by my cousins Stacy and Jon Levitan to speak with you about the global refugee crisis. Back in November, when they first asked me, I would have told you that it was extremely well-timed – a critically important time to discuss this pressing issue. But who would have known exactly how well timed this would actually have been?

Last Friday, as we have all been following closely, an Executive Order was issued putting a hold on the US refugee admissions program and barring the entry of citizens from 7 Muslim majority countries. Coverage of refugees stuck at airports around the country, protesters, lawyers, and members of congress standing against the travel ban has been in the news non-stop. It has brought to the top of our minds questions about who is a refugee, how our refugee program works, and how we can keep our country and our communities safe. Perhaps more deeply, this news coverage has forced us to examine our obligations to those fleeing persecution from an ethical, legal, historical, even spiritual perspective.

By way of background…

**I work for HIAS – the global Jewish refugee agency**. We were founded 135 years ago, on New York’s lower east side, to assist Jewish refugees and immigrants. Throughout our history, we rescued Jewish refugees – whether they were fleeing pogroms in tsarist Russia, the horrors of the Holocaust, or persecution in Iran, the former Soviet union, Cuba, or Egypt. In our first 120 years, HIAS resettled 4.5 million Jews to the US. Today, in response to the urgency of a global refugee crisis, and based in our Jewish values and history, HIAS works with refugees from all around the world – regardless of their race, religion, or ethnicity.

**In other words, we used to help refugees because they were Jewish. Now we help refugees because we are Jewish.**

HIAS’ programs touch hundreds of thousands of refugees every year. We are in 12 refugee camps in Chad, working with the 300,000 survivors of the Darfur genocide. Our Ukraine office helps people internally displaced by conflict with Russia in the East. In Kenya, we support refugees from all over East Africa, including particularly vulnerable refugees such as the many gay and lesbian refugees from Uganda, where it is a crime to be gay. And we also are one of the nine national resettlement agencies in the United States – resettling thousands of the most vulnerable refugees here in our own country.

I normally work in our headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland. But when Stacy and Jon called to ask me to be here today, I was on the island of Lesvos, Greece. In Greece, we provide legal aid to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition to experiencing war in their home countries, all these refugees have made the grueling overland trip through Turkey and across the dangerous waters along the Turkish coast. I think most of us remember well the shocking image of Aylan Kurdi – a three-year old Syrian boy who drowned in those waters in September 2015. In fact, it was that photo that captured the world’s attention regarding the global refugee crisis.

**To give you a sense of where we are now --**

Worldwide, the number of refugees has reached the highest levels in all recorded history, exceeding the mass displacement after World War II. The UN Refugee Agency estimates the total number of displaced persons and refugees at 65 million. 51% are children.

The largest single refugee crisis is Syria. Over half of Syrians have had to flee their homes and almost 5 million are refugees. Most have fled to towns or camps in Turkey, which hosts 3 million Syrians now. And in Lebanon one-quarter of the population is now Syrian. Putting it starkly, that would be the same as the US hosting 80 million refugees. The strain on these neighboring countries is great and resources are limited.

Afghanistan and Somalia have also been producing refugees for years, and are the second and third largest refugee-producing countries. And there are so many other groups, including: the Rohingya Muslims fleeing Myanmar, those escaping oppressive regimes in Sudan and Eritrea, or people fleeing gang recruitment and sexual violence in Central America, many of whom have come to our Southern Border.

**Which brings us to the questions of who is a refugee.**

The world came to recognize the international legal concept of “refugee” in the aftermath of WWII. It was in direct response to the Holocaust, and the experience of Jews being forced to return to the very countries where they were being persecuted. In the 1951 Refugee Convention, nations including the United States, committed themselves to recognize as refugees ***anyone persecuted for their race, religion, nationality, political opintion or membership in a particular social group***. And more importantly, they committed themselves to ***never send refugees back to the country of their persecution***, but rather to find durable solutions for refugees. And what are these durable solutions?

* First, to be **repatriated**. That is to return to one’s country when the persecution has stopped. Given the nature of most of the conflict in the world today, this is simply not an option.
* Second, to **integrate** – to rebuild one’s life in the country of first refuge – the country that one fled to, usually a neighboring state.
* And third, to be **resettled** in another, welcoming country. This option is open to ***less than 1%*** of all refugees. Only the most vulnerable refugees – victims of torture and rape; orphans and vulnerable children; single women with many dependents; people with severe medical conditions; or people whose persecutors continue to hunt them outside their home country – only these refugees will even be considered for resettlement.

**The United States takes the most resettled refugees in the world.** Last year, we took in 85,000 refugees – about ¾ – of a total of 115,000 resettled globally.But we’ve taken in more – as many as 200,000 in 1980.

**It’s important to remember that refugees resettled to the US are different than asylum seekers.** Asylum seekers are those who arrive in the US – at the border or after coming in on a visa – and tell authorities that they cannot be sent home because they fear persecution. Last year, only about 25,000 were granted asylum in the US compared to the 85,000 refugees we resettled. In part this is an accident of geography – we are so isolated from the world’s largest refugee crises that we use the refugee admissions program to do our part to provide protection to persecuted people.

**Which brings us to last Friday’s Executive Order.**

The Order puts a hold on the refugee program for four months and bars Syrian refugees from coming to the US indefinitely. The rationale for this is that refugees pose a security threat and that we are not doing enough to vet those coming in.

**But the reality is that refugees go through the highest level of screening of any traveler coming here.** In Vienna, Austria we are on contract with the USG to resettle religious minorities from Iran, including Jews. So we know the ins and outs of the screening process.

Before people are even considered for resettlement, they have already spent years going through interviews with the UN Refugee Agency to determine if they are refugees. Then the UN identifies the refugees that are in the most danger and need resettlement. The UN – not the refugee – chooses which resettlement country they go to, looking at where they will be safest and where family members are located. Those referred to the US undergo vetting involving:

* 8 government agencies — including the National Counterterrorism Center, FBI, Department of Homeland Security, and State Department
* 6 security databases
* 5 separate background checks
* 4 biometric security checks — that means fingerprints, checked against databases
* 3 separate, in-person interviews, and
* 2 interagency security checks running data against criminal, intelligence, and terrorism databases

Refugees from Syria go through an additional layer of screening involving a supplemental review by Headquarters staff of the Department of Homeland Security.

Each interview is checked against the last to ensure that the refugee’s story holds up. At any point during this process, if credibility or security questions come up, the case can be flagged, pulled and put on hold indefinitely or rejected. Those refugees will never make it to the US. And if any piece of information changes, like a refugee gets married or has a child, many parts of the process are delayed, increasing the chance that the validity dates on checks will expire. After all those screenings, which take between 18 months and two years, refuges are approved. Before leaving for the US, they go through a “cultural orientation” program to learn about American values and daily life. Once in the US, nine non-governmental agencies, one being HIAS, is involved in helping them find a place to live, get their kids in school, and start looking for work. This help is for three months, or in exceptional cases, 6-9 months.

**Once we understand the thoroughness of the existing vetting process, the administration’s call for “extreme” vetting doesn’t add up. And when we consider that no fatal terrorist attacks have ever been carried out by a refugee on American soil this Executive Order appears to be driven by fear, not by common sense.**

But as Jews, it’s not enough to criticize the Order. Both the Torah and our own history of persecution call on us to “welcome the stranger” and take active steps to counter this administration’s decision to slam the door on refugees.

The Torah teaches not once, not twice but 36 times to welcome the stranger, to protect the stranger, even to love the stranger. Why? In a rare instance, a reason is given for a commandment: *Ki Gerim Hayitem Bi’eretz Mitzrayim* – Because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

In fact this week, in *Parashat Bo*, we are told to observe the Passover ritual for all time – to pass down to our children the experience of being slaves and being freed. In essence, to recall our persecution, our flight, and finding save haven in a new land.

Fleeing persecution and seeking safety in other lands is a defining part of the Jewish story – ever since the time of Abraham, the Exodus from Egypt, the fall of the ancient Temples. We are a refugee people.

We know what it looks like for the world to turn its back. We know that many Jews were regarded with suspicion in this country when we first arrived. In the 1930’s, fears that German Jews would be spies or otherwise loyal to Germany kept the SS St Louis from docking in this country, sending 900 Jewish people back to Nazi Europe. We know that during the Soviet Jewry movement, there were fears that Jews were bringing communism into the country.

The parallels to today are striking.

The Jewish community should not turn our backs. We can be a powerful voice in support of refugees – and this past year – many communities have stepped into that role. They’ve signed petitions. They’ve attended rallies. They’ve supported refugee families. Last December, when congress tried to pass legislation that would restrict and defund the refugee program, 1,300 Rabbis signed a letter in support of welcoming refugees. Now the number of signatories is up to almost 2,000 and on Monday, Senator Dick Durban referenced it on the Senate Floor. And there are now 236 synagogues – comprising HIAS’ Welcome Campaign – who are taking action for refugees.

And although fear can make the best of us want to turn inward… it must be the Jewish community that fights that urge, that learns from our own history, and that does both the internal and the external work to actively welcome those who need our compassion and our generosity. **Welcoming the stranger can be an act of courage.** It is exceptionally hard. And profoundly necessary in order to save lives of innocent people the world over.

I want to end with a quote from Elie Wiesel, whose brave voice brought compassion and humanity to the world.

“True, we are often too weak to stop injustices; but the least we can do is protest against them. True, we are too poor to eliminate hunger; but in feeding one child, we protest against hunger. True, we are too timid and powerless to take on all the guards of all the political prisons in the world; but in offering our solidarity to one prisoner, we denounce all the tormentors. True, we are powerless against death; but as long as we help one man, one woman, one child live one hour longer in safety and dignity, we affirm a human's right to live.”

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.

More Resources:  
[https://www.hias.org/resources](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.hias.org_resources&d=DQMFaQ&c=euGZstcaTDllvimEN8b7jXrwqOf-v5A_CdpgnVfiiMM&r=Xr0WnHy_Kk8MsAnKfkoMxrvpY3Jv1NcuCKBhp9cdUc8&m=6PCVcZeswljqUQ0XIVGujJ0-eh_AsoH33HavLuPwX2s&s=jBDKnnWzp7tK7eVhaHlPBjN8Ssotcl9cAlXinWaFzLc&e=)  
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