

Choosing Life: Refugees, Racism, and Justice
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Just minutes ago, as we do every year on *Rosh Hashanah*, we read the vexing story of the binding, and near sacrifice, of Isaac, the *Akeida*. Most of us are familiar with the tale, but do not know that, traditionally, the *Akeida* is read on the second day of the holiday, which, as Reform Jews, most of us don't observe. But this year, as I was preparing for these Days of Awe, I was struck by the relevance of the "other" first day Torah reading, which centers on the troubling relationship between Abraham; his wife, Sarah; his maidservant, Hagar; and his son-by-her, Ishmael.

In *Genesis* 21, we learn that, as promised, God remembered Sarah in her barrenness, and so she conceives and bears a son. The new parents, Abraham and Sarah, are so overjoyed, they literally name their son, *Yitzchak*, "He will laugh;" Isaac is circumcised, later weaned, and a great celebration ensues.

Soon afterward, Sarah sees Abraham's son, Ishmael, by his maidservant, Hagar, playing and laughing as children do. Forgetting her own joy and blessings, she demands that Abraham cast them out, saying, "Expel this servant-woman and her son, for the son of this servant-woman will not share the inheritance with my son, not with Isaac (*Genesis* 21:10)." Abraham knows that his wife's request is wrong, that it is not humane to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, his own child, a child of God. But he chooses to heed his wife's request, whether for the sake of the covenant passing through Isaac, or for expediency and peace in his home.

The text continues: "So Abraham awoke early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water to give Hagar. He placed them on her shoulder along with the boy and sent her off. And she walked and she wandered in the wilderness of *Be'er Sheva*. And when the water-skin was empty, she cast the boy under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance -- as far as the shot of a bow -- for she said: 'Let me not see the child die.' And she sat a distance and raised her voice, and cried."

As I pictured the young boy Ishmael, displaced from his home, separated from his mother and father, cowering under the bush, confused, afraid, hungry, thirsty, and exhausted, I could not help but think of the horrifying image all of us saw last week of the body of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, washed ashore in Turkey, seemingly asleep, but in fact breathless and motionless, lifeless forever, "a symbol of a world gone mad," as Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, characterized him. Rabbi Sacks wrote in London's *the Guardian*, "You would have to be less than human not to be moved by the images of the refugee crisis threatening to overwhelm Europe: the scenes in Budapest; the 71 bodies found in the abandoned Lorrie in Austria; the 200 people drowned when their boat capsized off the coast of Libya."

As most of us now know, Aylan is just one of over four million refugees fleeing their war-torn homelands of Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, in search of life and peace. As the world has turned its back on the conflict and the carnage of the middle-east, North Africa, and Asia, hundreds of thousands have died at the hands of Syria's President Bashar Assad, Al Qaeda, ISIS, and myriad other groups. These despots and radicals, driven by the desire to retain power at all costs, or bolstered by a religious extremism that justifies that they conquer and wreak havoc on civilization, have murdered, maimed, and displaced innocents who are simply trying to defend their homes and families and survive.

Conservative Americans blame the current administration's foreign policy. We got out of Iraq too quickly, opening up a power vacuum that was filled by ISIS, the result of which has been the rampant murder of Muslims and Christians throughout the country and region. Then we, the United States and Europe, didn't do enough to stem the Civil War in Syria, now in its fifth year, which has cost over 210,000 lives and left millions displaced both inside the country and in neighboring countries' refugee camps. They may be right, but who is to say that these catastrophes are not the result of toppling Sadaam Hussein in the first place; or of the Arab Spring, which changed the balance of power in, Iraq and Syria, not to mention in nearly every country in the middle-east.

On the other side of the political aisle, philosophically American Liberals, supported the original Syrian uprising's goals of dignity and justice for the Syrian people; but practically, they are also anti-violence, anti-sectarian, and anti-internationalism, meaning against Western military intervention under any circumstances, even when diplomatic avenues have failed. Deep confusion over a course of action has resulted in general silence. And now out of sight, out of mind for over four years, Western indifference, led by America, has caused the colossal humanitarian crisis now facing the world.

But the complexity of the situation, or who is to blame for it in the first place, are not excuses, politically or morally, to say or do nothing. Although some of Syria's neighboring countries -- Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, for example -- have welcomed three million refugees among them, at great costs to their limited resources; the oil-rich Arab Gulf States -- Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates -- have, unconscionably, taken in zero of their Muslim brethren fleeing for their lives (by the way, zero is the same number of Palestinian refugees they have granted asylum since 1948).

Until now, the Europeans, with the exception of Germany and Sweden, have not been much better. And, shamefully Israel has admitted no refugees. The stated reason? They fear terrorists embedded among them. But in its defense, even as Syrian refugees have continued to declare Israel their sworn enemy, Israel has still treated 1,000 wounded Syrians fighters in its hospitals. And what of us? While the United States has contributed \$3 billion in humanitarian aid, far more than any other country in the world, we have taken in fewer than 1,500 refugees since the crisis began, 1,500 men, women, and children out of four million displaced persons.

And then there is Hungary. Hungary, having built a barbed wire fence on its 108-mile border with Serbia, has decided to make it criminal to enter the country

illegally, punishable by up to three years in prison. Those currently detained in transit zones will be held until asylum requests are approved or they are deported if not. Of course, it is any country's prerogative to police immigration as it sees fit, but it is Hungary's reasoning that is so disturbing. Hungarian Prime minister, Viktor Orban, explained, in a German newspaper, that it was important to secure his nation's borders from mainly Muslim migrants "to keep Europe Christian." He continued, "Those arriving have been raised in another religion, and represent a radically different culture. Most of them are not Christians, but Muslims . . . This is an important question, because Europe and European identity is rooted in Christianity and Christians will not be a minority on their own continent."

No doubt his hateful rhetoric against one religious minority in Europe and the images of thousands of refugees trying to get on boats, trains, buses, and trucks to escape their circumstances disturbs, if not sickens us, particularly because they remind us of our own recent history of bigotry, violence, displacement, and death at the hands of another radical ideology -- Facism -- and, it's far more malignant mutation, Nazism. The descriptions of what is going on in Hungary today are hauntingly familiar: ". . . the young and old, some in wheelchairs or on crutches, others barefoot, some with children in buggies, others with toddlers on their shoulders, set off to walk the 105 miles from Budapest's main railway station to Austria. Snaking through the city in a line nearly half a mile long, the column was one of at least three groups of desperate, mainly Syrian refugees and migrants, who decided on Friday to take their fate in their hands and attempt the journey by foot. Marching through grand boulevards and down a motorway in the blazing midday sun, dodging traffic but with no respite from the heat, no food, and very little water, there was one toilet for each thousand people." In spite of the harsh conditions, one woman simply asked, "What else can we do?"

This has been a horrible year for religious persecution, bigotry, and racism worldwide. In our own country, there were too many examples of violence against African Americans, often at the hands of law enforcement as in Ferguson, MO and Baltimore, MD. These events culminated on June 17th in the murder of nine members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. After studying Bible with them for an hour, 21-year-old Dylann Roof took a gun out of his hooded sweatshirt. When asked by one of the parishioners, "why?" Roof said, "I have to do it. You rape our women and you're taking over our country. And you have to go." Shouting racial epithets, during his murderous rampage, Roof later confessed to committing the shooting in hopes of igniting a race war. While the event precipitated the taking down of the Confederate Flag from the South Carolina Statehouse, I don't know that it did much to address the root causes of racism in our country or in ourselves. This year's refrain, or hashtag, *blacklivesmatter*, is as sad and necessary as ever.

As Jews, we, too, are sometimes complicit in being indifferent to the plight of the other. We can have no doubt after watching Ultra-Orthodox Yishai Shlissel stab six people and murder 16-year-old Shira Banki in this summer's Jerusalem Gay Pride Parade. A day later, equally heinous was bearing witness to the arson fire in the Palestinian village of Duma, set by Jewish settlers bent on "revenge." This horrifying act of violence, hatred and racism, took the lives of 18-month-old

Ali Saad Dawabsheh, and his parents Sa'ad and Riham, and shook the Jewish world to its core. These murderous fanatics' actions hold up a mirror in which is reflected a painful part of our Jewish history and present we'd rather not acknowledge; the Jewish bigots in Israel remind us that our beloved homeland also has many sins for which to atone, not the least of which is allowing religious fanatics to dictate her character and to hijack her soul.

Similarly the refugee crisis in the middle-east, Asia, and Europe harkens back to deeply held prejudices, which, more often than not, have been meted out against us as Jews. We need not repeat one of the darkest moments in our history, in Evian, France in 1938, when representatives of 32 countries and 39 private relief agencies, 21 of them Jewish, shut their doors to our people; when nation after nation, and group after group said, in effect, that the destruction of European Jewry wasn't their problem. Now infamously, the Australian delegate T. W. White noted at the time: "as we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one."

As Americans and Jews, we are no are no different than other people; we believe ourselves to be good and nice people who are color-blind, religiously tolerant, and unbigoted; and, for the most part, we are. Yet in the fullness and comfort of our blessed lives, it is easy not to think about the plight of Muslim refugees fleeing Syria; or Black people being murdered in our inner-cities; or Christian men, women and children, being beheaded by ISIS Jihadis in Iraq; or Palestinian babies being burned alive. Yet, when we stand by idly while our neighbor bleeds, we too are guilty of injustice.

Our tradition has much to say about our responsibility for others. Thirty-six times, the Torah tells us to "remember the stranger, for we were strangers." We are especially to care for the poor, for the widow, and for the orphan. I have shared with you many times the guiding principals of Judaism:

* *lo tukhal le'hit'alem*. You cannot remain indifferent (*Deuteronomy 22:3*), even if, with 100% certainty, you were not personally the cause of the injustice. Our rabbis teach us we have no choice but to take responsibility for the stranger because leaving the defenseless, the vulnerable, or the slain, to the whims of chance, or to the good graces of others, is unthinkable. It is inconceivable, our sages say, because the Bible's moral compass brings responsibility to bear on human events. Responsibility is not the same as guilt, but, nonetheless, it necessitates that we stand up and answer. Our spiritual ancestors shuddered to imagine a world where people could commit horrible crimes, and nobody would be accountable. Indeed, on *Yom Kippur* we will atone collectively for our failures of justice: For keeping the poor in the chains of poverty and turning a deaf ear to the cry of the oppressed," *lo tuchal l'hitale*m.

*Another of our guiding principals is "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice shall you pursue," which we just read a few weeks ago in Torah (*Deuteronomy 16:20*). To me, the imperative to bring holiness into the world by doing that which is good, right and just, is not only central to Judaism, but to Reform Judaism in particular; for our movement was founded upon the principal of ethical monotheism; and we have been bequeathed the prophetic vision, and prophetic responsibility, of bringing justice to a broken world. "It is impossible to be moved

by the prophets and not have a social conscience. Their message, delivered in the name of God, is: accept responsibility. The world will not get better of its own accord. Nor will we make it a more human place by leaving it to others, by making them our agents to bring redemption on our behalf.

The Hebrew Bible begins not with man's cry to God, but with God's cry to us, each of us, '*Ayekha*, where are you?' That is the question God poses to us. Yes, if we do not answer the call, someone else may. But we will then have failed to understand why we are here and what we are summoned to do. The Bible is nothing less than God's call to human responsibility" [Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal A Fractured World* p. 28]. As Jews, as Reform Jews, we don't have a choice; we are here in this life, on this earth, to pursue justice.

*And finally, we have the guiding principal of these High Holidays, *u'vacharta va'chaim*, choose life, that you and your children might live long lives. Choosing life does not only mean taking care of your health, although that is a noble and holy pursuit. Choosing life means choosing the kind of life you will live: a life of goodness, kindness and righteousness. It means living a life of fulfilled responsibilities and commitments to those we love and to our community, yes; but it also means committing to a life of duty to God and country and humanity. *U'vacharta va'chaim*, choose life, means doing the right thing, for yourself, your family, your congregation, your community and the world.

The Torah doesn't say, "It's not my problem, let somebody else worry about it;" it says, "*Lo tuchal l'hitalem*. You cannot remain indifferent!" It doesn't say, "Do whatever you want;" it says, "Do as God commands you, *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, pursue justice!" And it doesn't say, "I'll pick and choose when I do the right thing;" it say, in all ways, live righteously, "*u'varchata v'chayim*, choose life!"

I have heard and read all of the excuses for not getting involved. From Deborah Lipstadt, Emory University Professor, Holocaust Scholar, and, herself, a child of survivors in this past week's *Forward*. She asks:

1. What do we really know about these people? Are they fleeing for their lives or just looking for "a strategic opening" to secure "a better economic and social future" for their families?

Does it matter? The great wave of Jews from Eastern Europe that came over in steerage in the 1880s, 1890s and first decade of the 20th century did not come with passports. They did not speak English. They were economic migrants — pogroms were not the main push factor, as prominent Jewish historians like Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi have shown in their research. They immigrated under America's open door policy.

2. Will these primarily Muslim refugees integrate into Western Societies? Will they commit to the messiness of Democracy and accept challenges to their most basic beliefs peacefully?

Think about it: our parents and grandparents and great grandparents, all immigrants, did not know from democracy either. A few of them became mobsters, but the vast majority became productive and proud citizens within one generation.

3. Why haven't their own Muslim brethren, -- those of the Gulf States, -- done their part; why not wait and pressure them to act first?

The answer to this one is that they should, of course, be opening their gates, and their reasons for failing to do so are not flattering. But, as we teach our children: "two wrongs don't make a right" and "the only person's behavior you can control is your own."

As Jews, we can't abdicate responsibility because someone else is forfeiting theirs. And as Americans, we are part of the country that has tried, not always successfully, but always tried, to honor a set of universal values around which we have organized our lives and our aspirations. The refugees' plight should alarm us and disquiet our conscience. Human beings are suffering; life and liberty are being denied them. This should matter to us. And it definitely matters to who we are." And I would add, it matters to us as Jews as well because the pursuit of justice, not remaining indifferent and choosing a worthy life are not just good ideas, they are imperatives for us as Jews and human beings.

Indeed, as a result of Jews fleeing Russian and Eastern European Pogroms, in 1881, in a storefront on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a group of American Jews organized HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, whose purpose was to provide much-needed comfort and aid to thousands of Jews fleeing waves of anti-Semitic riots. And many of us here today, or our families, have been touched by their humanitarian efforts. As a result of the Holocaust, writes Mark Hetfield, HIAS' President and CEO, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol were established. They define a refugee for us:

"A refugee is a person who fled his or her country due to a well-founded fear of persecution on account of who they are or what they believe. A refugee shall not be returned to his or her persecutor. Anyone claiming to be a refugee shall be regarded as a refugee until found to be otherwise. And refugees are entitled to the same human rights as you and me. That is the Refugee Convention. All the rest is commentary . . . Our obligations toward refugees are the same no matter who they are, no matter who we are, no matter what other countries are doing, or are not doing."

As a result of the current refugee catastrophe, a group called "Rabbis Responding to the Syrian Crisis" has launched a campaign called, "Hear the Call. Be the Call." They are asking of each of us three things:

1. That we call the White House and ask the President to admit 100,000 Syrian Refugees this year. In our population of nearly 320 million plus people, that will be less than 1/3 of one percent of our population, less than 1/3 of 1% of our population.

Yes, there might be among them, those who could threaten our security; but an 18 - 24 month screening process should keep us safe. Besides, we cannot punish the many in need by succumbing to fears of what might never be. We must do the right thing. Urge the President to admit 100,000 Syrian refugees this year.

2. Call you senators and congress people asking them to support increases in refugee funding and legislation that will improve the lives of refugees.

3. Go to the HIAS website, HIAS.org, look under the "Get Involved" tab at the top of the page, and sign the online petition to President Obama, which reads: "Commit to resettling in the United States 100,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian

refugees, allowing more individuals and families to start new lives in safety and freedom."

Following our service this morning, our OSTY representatives will be handing out flyers with all of this information, in addition to the brown paper bag and Mazon card to be filled with canned goods for OST's Annual Food Drive.

We can be a light in this darkness. We can make a difference. "Hear the Call. Be the Call." As the late Hanns Loewenbach, a Holocaust Survivor, and a member of our United Jewish Federation of Tidewater's Holocaust Commission, used to say at the end of every talk he gave: "Evil does not need your help, only your indifference" -- kind of the Jewish version of Edmund Burke's "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

We began with the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael and left them dying in the wilderness. But the story continues: "God heard the boy's voice. And a messenger of God called out to Hagar from the heavens, and said to her: What troubles you Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the boy's voice where he is. "Stand up. Lift up the boy, and hold strongly onto him with your hand -- for I will make of him a great nation." And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the water-skin and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy as he grew."

We, too, can be God's messengers. We can hear the cries of the boys and girls and men and women who are suffering. We can stand up and lift them up and hold on to them strongly with our hands. We can ensure that they receive the divine promise that they will endure; that they will be inscribed for life and renewed for a good year and good life; the same good life all people seek; the same good life for which we pray this *Rosh Hashana*. May it be so for ourselves and our loved ones, for our people, and for all the peoples of the world. Amen.