

Rabbi Alexis Berk
Rosh Hashanah 5777

Refugee Crisis

Many of you know that I really like it when you send me articles and readings that interest you. This is for several reasons – one, I’m honored that you think of me. Two, I always welcome the chance to interact about topical issues together. And, three, they sometimes inspire classes or sermons. I am always enriched.

This morning is dedicated to all of you who have sent me pieces on this topic.

Five-year old Omran Daqneesh has become known throughout the world. If his name is not familiar, you’ve certainly seen his image – big brown eyes staring out from his dust covered face – sitting in an ambulance after being pulled from the rubble in Aleppo.¹ He is alone, patiently waiting. Do you remember his face?

Also, there is Rouwaida Hanoun, a Syrian 5-year-old who was wounded during an airstrike on Aleppo in mid-August.² Her bloodied face was presented to us on front pages as well. People sometimes find these images offensive, inappropriate. Indeed.

In response to this, Nicholas Kristof wrote a pointedly uncomfortable op-ed in the New York Times that began like this – brace yourself:

“On April 30, 1941, a Jewish man in Amsterdam wrote a desperate letter to an American friend, pleading for help emigrating to the United States....

A volunteer found [that plea](#) for help in 2005 when she was sorting old [World War II](#) refugee files in New York City. It looked like countless other files, until she saw the children’s names.

‘Oh my God,’ she said, ‘this is the [Anne Frank](#) file.’ ...

We all know that the Frank children were murdered by the Nazis, but what is less known is the way Anne’s fate was sealed by a callous fear of refugees, among the world’s most desperate people....

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/18/boy-in-the-ambulance-image-emerges-syrian-child-aleppo-rubble>

² http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/25/opinion/anne-frank-today-is-a-syrian-girl.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share&_r=0

[President Obama](#) vowed to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees — a tiny number, just one-fifth of 1 percent of the total — and [Hillary Clinton suggested](#) taking more. Donald Trump has repeatedly excoriated them for a willingness to welcome Syrians and has called for barring Muslims. ...almost no one wants [Muslim refugees] any more than anyone wanted a German-Dutch teenager named Anne....

[Back then] The obstacle was an American wariness toward refugees that outweighed sympathy. After the 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom against Jews, a poll found that 94 percent of Americans disapproved of Nazi treatment of Jews, but 72 percent still objected to admitting large numbers of Jews.

The reasons for the opposition then were the same as they are for rejecting Syrians or Hondurans today: We can't afford it, we should look after Americans first, we can't accept everybody, they'll take American jobs, they're dangerous and different....

[Back then] News organizations didn't do enough to humanize refugees and instead, tragically, helped spread xenophobia. [In those days] The [NY] Times published a [front-page article](#) about the risks of Jews becoming Nazi spies, and The Washington Post published an editorial thanking the State Department for keeping out Nazis posing as refugees.

[Kristof concludes] In this political environment, officials and politicians lost all humanity.”³ Way back then, that's what happened.

I did not come across this article on my own; I had missed it. When I received it in my email, I felt many things; devastated and outraged that this problem has reached such a pitch; frustrated with my own powerlessness. I felt an urge to action, as we all feel. I felt berated by Kristof for the thinly veiled accusation of my inexcusable hypocrisy as a Jew. Of all people, how can I be deaf to the pleas, blind to the images, passive during the reality of genocide? Honestly.

You know, for years, I've been a conscientious objector during the chorus of 'Never Again' at Holocaust memorials. Why? Of course I want to proclaim my commitment to preventing such atrocities. But, alas, I cannot; because genocide did not happen once. It happens all the time. It hasn't stopped happening. I officially ceased any 'Never Again' talk during the years of posters, t-shirts, drawstring tote bags, and buttons begging me to Save Darfur. And, what is happening there now? Here's what we currently know: “in September 2004, President George W. Bush

³ Ibid.

declared the crisis in Darfur a ‘genocide.’ Despite the world's outcry, the violence continued and in recent years has spread....”⁴

I am spiritually and logistically stymied. We are aware. We are *all* aware. I guarantee there is not a soul in this room who doesn’t know about the crisis of refugees throughout the world fleeing genocide and abject murder. Awareness is not the problem. We are forced, then, to look in this mirror, to reflect on this new day of a new year and ask ourselves, what will be new? Will we do something to stop this? What on earth will it be?

I’ve been growing more agitated by a deep, enduring spiritual and logistical torment that knowing about a problem – or, let’s go ahead and call it an atrocity – might just have absolutely no bearing on our ability to do something about it. Could that be true? What if it is? People stopped believing in God during and post-Holocaust. How could God let this happen? But, I want to know, how can *we*? Should we stop believing in *God* again – or start questioning a *God* that would let his happen? I believe in God more than ever; it’s my faith humanity that is imperiled.

These twists of free will – human evil perpetrated – are not God’s to correct. This one is on us. And, we all know it. People ask me all the time, what can we do? What is the answer, the plan? What are our options, really? A few weeks ago, I tuned in to a national webinar called *Yearning to Breathe Free: The Jewish Response to Today’s Refugees*. The blurb advertised this: “As a people, Jews have experienced persecution and forced migration throughout our history. Today, in the face of the largest global refugee crisis of modern times – one that now even surpasses the number of refugees after World War II – how do we learn from this history and respond? ... Join us to learn more about today’s refugee crisis, the U.S. refugee admissions program, and how the American Jewish community is taking action in meaningful ways.” I was a cautiously hopeful. The experts on the panel have devoted their lives to this; no doubt, there will be something to learn.

These were the learnings from the hour-long presentation: it is our duty to raise awareness; write to our congressperson; and, also you should know, some resettlement is happening, but not nearly enough to even make a dent in the magnitude. And, by the way, the panelist concluded, the only reason this is a crisis is because we have made it so. By we, she meant the human race. The speaker told us we have to decide **what kind of human beings we want to be in the face of this**

⁴ <http://savedarfur.org/>

crisis. That stung; and, I sort of resented the implication about the efficacy – or more realistically, the *lack* of efficacy – of my personal choice to rescue refugees or not.

At the conclusion of the webinar, we were directed to a website for High Holy Day prayers meant to awaken and sensitize the soul. I went to check it out. Guess what? It features the exact same prayer as last year. I guess it can be considered current, and it didn't need updating since the only thing that's different about the situation is that it's worse.

Let's review this overwhelming quandary. We've been forced to literally look into the eyes of anguished children, families, individuals who are fleeing subjugation, torture, and genocide. I have audibly gasped at their stricken faces, their bloated drowned bodies awash on a beach, their torn limbs. I have been told this is happening on my watch – that is to say, because *I* am letting it happen, it will continue to happen. You have sent me articles that have shown you feel the same way and are wondering if there is anything we can do. Of course you are wondering; of course you are troubled.

I have spent the past month in conversations with the change makers at HIAS. For over 130 years, the mission of the global Jewish non-profit HIAS (originally the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) has been to protect and assist refugees of all faiths and ethnicities, to rescue people whose lives are in danger..., to help them build new lives and reunite them with their families in safety and freedom.”⁵ I have begged them to give us a way to help. I have pleaded that they tell us what a room of almost 1,000 brilliant, devoted, sophisticated, generous people can be asked on this Rosh Hashanah day – if they don't know, who does?

I asked what it would take financially to bring even one family to peaceful resettlement here. They said they don't have any resettlement partners in New Orleans. I suggested it doesn't have to be in our backyard, and we don't even need pictures of every birthday party as the children grow to feel satisfied with our contribution. But, what would it take? They said it's not that easy. The U.S. immigration policies make it nearly impossible to do very much resettlement. I asked what advocacy work we could do – they said we must be in touch with our legislators directly. I asked about resources for refugees in transit. They said there's a very successful program in Greece that is threatening to be closed down for lack of funds – we could donate to that. Our funds donated to HIAS will all be used productively and meaningfully toward the frontline work of support, advocacy and education.

⁵ <http://www.hias.org/hias-what-does-hias-stand>

I felt so daunted by the complexity and intractability of this that I almost threw this whole sermon in the trash. It's been a long time since I've been tempted to just ball the whole thing up and toss it. I felt like unless I can wind this up with some inspiring solution, I might as well not upset everyone. But, then, I thought, then we'll all still be alone in this predicament. And, I decided I'd rather be confounded together with you. Because if it's our human fault, and we made this problem, then, together we can figure it out. If not in one big action, then in many small actions. If not today, then tomorrow. It's astounding to behold the damage and destruction we humans can collectively pull off. Perhaps even more astounding, though, is our collective capacity for decency and healing.

“If the entire human species were a single individual, that person would long ago have been declared mad.” These are the words of science writer Jeffrey Kluger. [He goes on to say] “The insanity would not lie in the anger and darkness of the human mind—though it can be a ... raging place indeed. And it certainly wouldn't lie in the transcendent goodness of that mind—... The madness would lie instead in the fact that both of those qualities, the savage and the splendid, can exist in one creature, one person, often in one instant.

[Kluger continues] We're a species that is capable of almost dumbfounding kindness. We nurse one another, romance one another, weep for one another. Ever since science taught us how, we willingly tear the very organs from our bodies and give them to one another.

And at the same time, we slaughter one another. ... we've visited untold horrors on ourselves—in Mogadishu, Rwanda, Chechnya, Darfur, Baghdad, Israel, New York City, ... {this was a 2007 list – Syria hadn't even made an official appearance yet, nor Honduras, nor Iran},—all of the(se) crimes committed by the highest, wisest, most principled species the planet has produced. That we're also the lowest, cruelest, most blood-drenched species is our shame—and our paradox.”⁶ Our old, blue Gates of Prayer siddur echoes this sentiment in a meditation; you may remember it: “We see imperfection, disorder, and evil all about us. But before our eyes is a vision of perfection, order and goodness.... There is evil enough to break the heart, good enough to exalt the soul.”⁷

In recent days, I've enjoyed an email correspondence with a mentor of mine who is at Oxford right now at the third annual conference of the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable

⁶ http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1685055_1685076_1686619,00.html

⁷ Gates of Prayer, p. 210.

Conflict (can we spend a moment just to take in that name?); he is a senior fellow. When I asked him how it's going, he replied, "My brain is buzzing." There, he has encountered officials with the UN High Commission on Refugees – UNHCR –who are working very hard on the ground to meet refugees in landing spots such as Greece, Lebanon, Jordan, Ethiopia, to name a few. The UNHCR is currently pushing hard to engage the private sector in fundraising, "ensuring that refugee issues figure prominently on the agenda of the philanthropic world..."⁸ They are onto something by trying to galvanize our outrage and mobilize those "who are eager to help drive change and find innovative solutions to the challenges facing refugees."⁹ We could be getting somewhere with this kind of thinking.

We sit here on this Rosh Hashanah day wrestling with our humanity in an often inhumane world. Aware we are, in the words of Jeffrey Kluger, both "splendid and savage"; fabulous and flawed; kind and cruel; generous and grudging; gentle and callous. We see it in ourselves, our loved ones, our neighbors and friends. We see it in our co-workers, our politicians. We are beings striving to be better – sometimes flummoxed by the possible ways. How do this human thing better?

Maybe it would be easier if a refugee family somehow made it to the door of Touro Synagogue. I have the most endearing picture in my mind of us falling over each other to lend a hand. Jeffrey Kluger said it well: "Our species has a very conflicted sense of when we ought to help someone else and when we ought not, and the general rule is, Help those close to home and ignore those far away. That's in part because the plight of a person you can see will always feel more real than the problems of someone whose suffering is merely described to you. But part of it is also rooted in you from a time when the welfare of your tribe was essential for your survival but the welfare of an opposing tribe was not—and might even be a threat."¹⁰

That's some very complicated wiring we're dealing with. And, it may explain – but, not excuse – our situation. It may explain our feeling of utter impotence when it comes to refugee families and our simultaneous eagerness to hop on a meal train for one of our own having a tough time. But, our Jewish ways and our Jewish history implore us to reach as far we can reach, and the reach even a bit farther.

⁸ UNHCR Global Appeal 2015 Update.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1685055_1685076_1686619,00.html

I wish we could have a more hands-on, satisfying experience of solving this exceptionally vexing problem we're calling the worldwide refugee crisis. A crisis, by the way, is defined as "a difficult or dangerous situation that needs serious attention; an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending."¹¹

Jeffrey Kluger wrote: "Merely being equipped with moral programming does not mean we practice moral behavior. Something still has to boot up that software and configure it properly, and that something is the community."¹² We are that community he speaks of.

It doesn't feel pleasant as a community to face a crisis without a clear solution. The stakes are just so frightfully high. But, it feels important to say donations to the UNHCR and HIAS; contact with lawmakers; extra generosity and the steady practice of goodness in our own midst – these are not nothing. They are something. They are steps toward our own highest expression of humanity, made even greater by our community. And those steps begin to answer the challenging question posed by the webinar panelist from HIAS – who do you want to be in all of this? We will be the community who makes a difference; we always are. How exactly? We will meet to talk about this on **Sunday morning, November 13**. Will you come? (I'll remind you as it gets closer).

This is a parable taken from our own High Holy Day machzor:

*Once two Sages were walking very early in the valley
And they saw the light of the morning star.
Said one to the other,
"This is how the redemption will be.
The dawn breaks with a single ray of light
and bit by bit the sky is illumined,
until morning comes and the darkness is gone.
So the redemption will occur little by little,
growing steadily and gradually
until the world is full of light."*

¹¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>

¹² http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1685055_1685076_1686619,00.html

*Do not wait for a miracle
Or the sudden transformation of the world.
Bring the day closer, step by step,
With every act of courage, of kindness,
Of healing and repair.
Do not be discouraged by the darkness.
Lift up every spark you can
And watch the horizon for the coming of dawn.
Look Closely!
It has already begun.*

Can we work on this this year, and for as long as it takes? I know us well, and I've seen what we can do. It has begun – watch the horizon for the coming of dawn.

Shanah Tovah.