

Rosh Hashanah Morning 2015 - Refugees

Rabbi Dean Kertesz

Temple Beth Hillel

Richmond, CA

<http://tbhrichmond.org>

In congregations where Rosh Hashanah is celebrated for two days, on the first day we read Genesis 21, the story of Hagar and Ishmael. The Akedah, which we just read, is read on the second day. But I want to turn to the story of Hagar and Ishmael this morning. If you want to follow along you will find it in your mahzorim beginning on page 238: “And she [Sarah] said to Abraham: ‘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)

Now jump ahead to verse 14, “So Abraham awoke early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water to give to Hagar -- 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 at a distance, and raised her voice, and cried.” (Genesis 21:14-16)

As most of you know, I rarely speak about politics. I avoid them because I am not any better equipped to talk about current political issues than any of

you. Further, politics can divide rather bring together and although I have my own particular point of view and my own biases and like everyone else I like to think I am right; I am aware enough to know that those with whom I disagree are just as sincere in their beliefs as I am and could be right. We just look at the issues differently.

But today I am going to talk about current issues. I just read this selection from the *mahzor* because I want to talk about the crisis of Syrian refugees and our moral obligation to them. There are no coincidences in Torah and I cannot think of a better way to understand the moral scope of the crisis and the personal cost than this Torah reading that our rabbis chose for the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

Perhaps this crisis is so important to me because, as most of you know, my parents were once refugees: from Czechoslovakia and Germany. They were both fortunate enough to have escaped Europe to the safety of England and thus survive the Shoah. Had they not, I would not be standing before you here this morning. My parents represent the lucky among the Jews of Europe, the ones who could get out. Remember, that there were millions more who desperately wanted to escape before it was too late, but could not because there was nowhere for them to go, because no one would take them in. Just to give you an idea of the magnitude: between 1938 and 1948 150,000 German Jews fled Germany and another 185,000 Austrian Jews tried to flee after 1938 when Germany annexed Austria.¹ In

¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Website:
<http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007698>

July 1938, at the behest of the US government, thirty-two countries met at Evian, France, for an international conference on these 335,000 Jewish refugees. While all expressed sympathy for the plight of European Jewish refugees, none, not the United States, not Great Britain, nor any of the other countries was willing to change their immigration laws or quotas to take in any additional Jews. Hitler and the Nazis took note of world's indifference and understood that there was little genuine sympathy for Jews beyond some well-meaning words.

Just to give you an idea of the magnitude of the human catastrophe in Syria, in the five years since the civil war began:

- An estimated 220,000 Syrian civilians have been killed, civilians, not combatants
- One million civilians have been injured or wounded
- 7.6 million Syrians have been “internally displaced”
- 4.1 million have fled the country, and we are now seeing that human tide began to wash ashore in Europe²

None of this should come as a surprise. This “crisis” is a slow-motion train wreck that has been developing for five years. Syria collapsed into a civil war in 2011 when the Syrian government violently repressed a protest movement that was part of the Arab Spring. While a war-weary United States stayed out of the fight and the rest of the world looked on, Iran and Russia backed the government of Bashar El-Assad with weapons, financing and cover at the United Nations. The Russians have their

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Website: <http://www.unocha.org/syria>

reasons. Syria provides the Russian Mediterranean fleet with their only naval base in the Mediterranean. For Iran, Syria is the lynchpin of their middle eastern strategy enabling them to supply weapons to Hizballah in Lebanon, have a military presence on Israel's Golan heights, Jordan's northern border, and Iraq's eastern border. The Syrian government slaughtered its citizens without interference, until they used chemical weapons in the suburbs of Damascus in September 2013. President Obama had warned the Syrians that the use of chemical weapons was a red line they could not cross without military retaliation. But, there was no retaliation. Rather, Russia negotiated a political solution enabling Syria to dispose of its chemical weapons. Today they use cruder chemical weapons on their enemies, mostly barrels filled with chlorine gas.

I understand our reluctance to get involved in the Syrian civil war. We fought two long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with nothing to show for them. We spent trillions of dollars, killed over 4,000 young American men and women, wounded, both physically and mentally, hundreds of thousands more and probably killed at least 300,000 Iraqis, mostly civilians, with no positive outcome or change. But there is a price for inaction too. As Syria fell apart, the Islamic State rose to fill the power vacuum, Syria's government's dependence on Iran grew as did Iranian influence on Syria. I read in the New York Times on Saturday, a week ago, that the Russians are now sending military advisors to Syria. And 4.1 million men, women, and children are refugees. The world dithers, a few ruthless dictatorships act in their own national interest and the human suffering is incalculable.

Things are only going to get worse, for a very long time, before they get better. Don't kid yourself.

There is a parallel here to the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939, where large elements of the Spanish Army led by Francisco Franco, rose up against the Spanish Republic. The western democracies refused to get involved and imposed an arms boycott while Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy supported Franco and later the Soviet Union supported the Republic. They fought a proxy war, that was considered be a rehearsal for the Second World War. After the Republic's defeat, tens of thousands of refugees fled over the border into France, where they were held in refugee camps awaiting resettlement because to return to Spain meant death. The western democracies said all the right things and did nothing, three ruthless dictatorships acted in their own self-interests and millions suffered.

I don't not think that the Syrian civil war is a dress-rehearsal for another world war. But there is another historical parallel that is unmistakable. No one can see or read about the Hungarian government putting Syrian refugees into locked train cars, without food or water, for hours on end in the late-summer heat and not remember that just 70 years ago the Germans were doing exactly that to us, all across Europe. Yes, these are passenger trains, not cattle cars. But the parallel does not have to be exactly the same to be true. Or that the refugees were promised to be taken to Germany and Austria if they boarded a train only to be taken to a concentration camp outside Budapest where they were herded by armed

police behind barbed wire fences. The most outrage seemed to be triggered by Czech police writing numbers on the hands of refugees with markers. Yes it was symbolic, but remember the Czechs didn't cooperate with the Nazis, like Hungarians. It was the Hungarians herding people onto trains without food or water that got me. Here again, I have a personal connection. My uncle, Denis, my father's brother, was impressed into a slave labor battalion by the Hungarians. Those battalions which supported Hungarian troops fighting on the Eastern front were an excuse to work Jews to death. My uncle escaped the battalion, was caught by Hungarian gendarmes and turned over to the Nazis, who sent him to Auschwitz.

Kenneth Horst, the executive director of Human Rights watch, said, "They must be oblivious because who would do that if they had any historical memory whatsoever."³ Which is such a touchingly naive statement, because the truth is we have no historical memory, whatsoever. A New York times article asked, how it is possible to forget the Shoah when there are memorials in almost every major city? It seems to me the answer is simple. It is easy to make memorials to the dead and it is easy to express sadness for the misdeeds of one's parents and grandparents. But, it is very hard to act differently than they did, when it is our turn. When are called to make a moral decision. What makes the actions of European governments even more reprehensible (and don't worry I will come to the United States in a moment) is that the annihilation of the Jews was the policy of the Nazi regime and the countries in which it was carried out were under military

³ "Treatment of Migrants Evokes Memories of Europe's Darkest Hour," The New York Times, Saturday, September 5, 2015, Vol CLXIV, No 56,980

occupation and, if you resisted the Nazis, you would most likely be shot. None of these conditions hold in Europe today. Rather, faced with the challenge of dealing with waves of refugees, fleeing terror, European governments and those who staff their police, military, and government have failed to do the right thing, while not facing possible death. The reasons are understandable: people fear foreigners, they fear Muslims, they fear that a wave of immigrants and refugees will change the character of their country, they fear their economies will not be able to handle the impact of taking care of so many people. There are always good rational reasons to stand by while human beings suffer. It's just that they are not valid.

Nothing reminded the world of this more clearly of this reality than the picture of the little Syrian-Kurdish boy, three-year old Aylan Kurdi, his tiny dead body being carried by a Turkish policeman. He drowned off the coast of Turkey along with his older brother Ghalib and his mother Reyan as they all desperately tried to reach Greece in a rubber boat. Only their father, Abdullah survived. Suddenly, we were no longer counting people by the hundreds of thousands or the millions but by the individual. A little boy, the detritus of conflict, absolutely innocent, washed up on the beach. Cast there by our indifference, and cynicism, and war weariness, and rational calculation. His father stated the truth that picture showed us, "We are human beings, just like Westerners."⁴ Here is another image my daughter

⁴NPR:<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/09/04/437514664/drowned-syrian-boys-father-we-are-human-beings-just-like-westerners>

shared with me that she heard on the radio. A Syrian doctor, in his business suit - to show he is a professional - with a knee hurt so badly he can barely walk, bathed in sweat, limping along with aid of two sticks, clearly in pain. He refuses to take off his suit, despite his pain and the heat, because it is the symbol of his professionalism and his dignity, which he is desperately struggling to hold on to. These images remind us that every refugee is a human being, with hopes, fears, dreams, nightmares, families and a desire to live a normal life without the threat of death, rape, enslavement, or utter and total uncertainty in their lives. More than that, seventy years ago, we were them. Terrified people, looking for refuge, anywhere where we could be safe. Seventy years ago the world didn't care.

A moment ago I said that there are always rational reasons to turn your back on others in need. First of all I want to give credit where it is due. Of all the nations in Europe so far and for that matter the United States, only Germany has expressed the willingness to accept tens-of-thousands of Syrian refugees and that is what they are doing. Good for them. Second, today is Rosh Hashanah. One of the powerful things about the High Holy Days is that they remind us of the central issues of human existence: life, death, and what it means to be a good human being. These are the issues at stake today. Life, death and human decency. In the Talmud (Shabbat 127a) we read: "G'doh'lah hach'nah'saht or'cheem, may'hak'bah'laht p'nay Sh'chee'nah," welcoming guests is greater than welcoming the Divine

Presence! In other words, forget your piety, there are people in need of help. Help them!

Do we need more to understand our obligation to act? We know what the prophet Isaiah would say to our rational arguments explaining why we can't help these people. We will read it on Yom Kippur morning, "Is this not the fast I desire, to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home," (Isaiah 58:6-7) There is a reason we read this on Yom Kippur. It is our moral mission statement. It is to remind us of our essential task, as human beings and as Jews. God demands that we take care of the needs of the weakest.

Jeremiah said, "Do you think you are more a king because you compete in cedar? Your father was content with the simple necessities of life and dispensed justice and equity -- Then all went well with him. He upheld the rights of the poor and the needy -- Then all was well. That is truly heeding me." (Jeremiah 22:15-16)

What would God say? Perhaps this, "Cursed be he who subverts the rights of the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow." (Deuteronomy 27:19) Or this, "You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore do

I enjoin you to observe this commandment.” (Deuteronomy 24:17) I think God’s answer would be... really? You have been slaves and you have been refugees, and you have been persecuted. Now, when you see millions of human beings in need, you turn your back? Basic human decency and our own historical experience call on us to respond, as compassionate human beings, as *mensch*s. The good thing about the High Holy Days, with our extended meditation on life, death and morality is that it cuts through the nonsense to the moral heart of life. We must do something, immediately.

So what can be done. First, congratulations to Germany for accepting 10,000 migrants - in the last week - who have been on the road for a month and a half. I’m guessing they will accept many more. Of all the sordid behavior of the past weeks, months, and years Germany is a shining light. Maimonides says that the true sign of *t’suvah*, of repentance, is to act differently when faced with the same situation. The nation that once caused unimaginable suffering is today showing the world how to alleviate suffering.

President Obama said the US has said it increase the number of refugees it will accept from 8,000 to 10,000 in the coming year. So far, in the last four years, we have accepted 1,500, because our vetting process is so careful and slow. This too sounds familiar to me. If this reminds you of the *St. Louis*, the German refugee ship that was turned away from our shores and went back to Germany with its load of German Jewish refugees, it should. Ten thousand refugees is too few, and 1,500 to date is too slow. I

would suggest that we accept 200,000 refugees. I didn't just pull this number out a hat. It was suggested by Mark Hetfield, the head of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in an interview on NPR. He said this crisis is not business as usual.⁵ It is also the number of Vietnamese boat people we took in, in the 1970's and '80's. By the way, HIAS is the same organization that helped my father flee from Poland to England in 1939. We have the capacity to absorb that many refugees successfully... if we want to. If you read the papers you will find that most of these refugees are professionals and business people. They will contribute to our country. And if you worry that some of them are potential terrorists, I would suggest that the terrorists are not the ones who are fleeing. They are staying behind to fight and kill.

So first of all, write President Obama, Secretary of State Kerry, Senators Boxer and Feinstein, your congressional representative and demand that we open our borders to 200,000 Syrian refugees and accelerate the process before it is too late. We claim to be world leaders. It is time for the US to lead, not Germany. Israel, should also offer to take in Syrian refugees. I don't know if the refugees would accept the offer. I know there could be risks. It doesn't matter. This is an extraordinary moment. Israel was created for our people because we had nowhere to go. It is time to show we too have memories. That our suffering motivates the Jewish state to act for the good of others and the world. Last Sunday, Prime Minister Netanyahu said, "Israel is too small to absorb any Syrian refugees." Israel

⁵NPR: <http://www.npr.org/2015/09/04/437596917/hias-president-u-s-europe-treating-migrant-crisis-like-business-as-usual>

is not too small, but Netanyahu's imagination is. Isaac Herzog, the leader of the opposition said, "Netanyahu has forgotten what it means to be a Jew." We must not forget, because we were once slaves in Egypt and we were once refugees in Europe. So write the Prime Minister as well and demand that Israel accept Syrian refugees.

Second you can give money to organizations that are helping refugees. The vast majority of Syrian refugees are living in horrible conditions in camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Only forty percent of the money pledged for refugee relief has been paid. There is not enough money. You may feel your donation will not make a difference. That is a rationalization. Let it go. This is a crisis. Whatever you can give will help. Last night and again to day you will be asked to support Food for Thought. You must support this effort. We have to feed our hungry here. But you can also give something, it doesn't matter how much, in addition to help these refugees.

Here is a list from the Public Radio International Website:

[1. Migrant Offshore Aid Station](#)

This charity exists to save children like Alan Kurdi, with a fleet of rescue boats patrolling the Mediterranean to save migrants lost at sea.

[2. Refugees Welcome](#)

Dubbed as a kind of "[Airbnb for refugees](#)" this German nonprofit matches people with spare rooms with refugees in need of housing. If you don't have a spare bed in Germany, you can still donate [here](#).

[3. The Worldwide Tribe in Calais](#)

A group of social activists documenting stories in the Calais migrant camp, they also raise relief funds.

[4. Small Projects Istanbul](#)

Provides classes and cultural enrichment and scholarships to Syrian children in Turkey.

[5. Karam Foundation](#)

A US-based charity that works in Turkey and is also focused on educational opportunities for Syrian children, currently raising funds to rebuild schools in Syria.

[6. Hand in Hand for Syria](#)

One of the few organizations that directly provides aid on the ground in Syria, including food, clothing, water, sanitation and crucial medical assistance to “help people to stay in Syria instead of fleeing to another country.” They accept donations via [their page on JustGiving.com](#).

Charity Navigator has a list of highly ranked charities [currently helping Syrian refugees](#).

Among them are Globalgiving that supports grassroots support for Syrian refugees, International Medical Corps, and Medical Teams International, which provide medical care to refugees. I will post a list of organizations on

our website for those of you who would like more information, or better still do some research of your own and share it with all of us.

These are easy things to do. They require very little effort. The payoff could be enormous. By the way, Hagar - the mother of Ishmael - who's story I read at the beginning of this drash - means the stranger. God rescues Ishmael and Hagar at the end by revealing a well of water. Both survive. We live in a different time. Aylan Kurdi was not saved. He drowned off the coast of Turkey. God will not save these refugees, so we must. In this time our actions are God's hands and God's will. Rosh Hashanah is *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgement. You may not believe that God is judging you today, but I think future generations will judge us by how we acted today, in the face of this crisis. How do you wish to be judged. היום היום יום ידין Today is the judgement. Let us do what we must. Let us do what we can. Let us do what is right.