

Jacob the Refugee

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He was a refugee. Syria was part of his flight. He had left with a well-founded fear of persecution; a powerful leader wanted him dead. He fled through the desert. But he was one of the lucky ones. He had family in the place where he sought refuge, family who could take him in while he got on his feet. He succeeded and, finally, when things improved at home, he returned.

This refugee's name was Jacob, although eventually he would acquire a new name, Israel. To this day, the Jewish people is known as *b'nei yisrael*, the Children of Israel. We are the descendants of a refugee.

Jacob fled from his brother Esau, who intended to kill him for taking Esau's birthright and blessing. Jacob headed toward Haran, which is present-day Syria. As we just read, he came to the land of the Easterners. He learned that the well there was covered by a stone. His mother's relative Rachel appeared, and Jacob did as many immigrants do: he did the work that no one else wanted to do. He moved the stone.

Last week, terrorists from the so-called Islamic State killed hundreds of innocent people in Paris. It hasn't stopped since. Islamic terrorists targeted a Jew in Marseilles and killed him. Today, at least twenty-one people were killed when Islamic extremists raided the Radisson Hotel in Bamako in the Republic of Mali.

As to the Paris attackers, a Syrian refugee passport was found by the body of one of them. Greek officials confirmed that the holder of this document had traveled through Greece last month. It isn't even certain that the terrorist was the one whose passport this was. However, using this slender reed of evidence, politicians have chosen to call for us to close our borders to refugees, both external borders and internal ones.

Several governors, including our own Charlie Baker, have stated that don't want Syrian refugees to enter their states. In at least one case, a Syrian family was supposed to come to Indiana this week. The father once ran a clothing store, and he had escaped with his wife and their four-year-old child. Indiana Governor Mike Pence declared that Syrians are unwelcome. The family managed to find a place to settle in Connecticut.

Yesterday, the House of Representatives voted to require that the Director of the FBI, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Director of national intelligence would all have to certify that each refugee applicant from Syria and Iraq posed no threat at all before that applicant could be allowed into the country. It passed by almost a veto-proof majority and now heads to the Senate. The President has vowed to veto this bill, but no outcome is certain yet.

Many Presidential candidates support this measure, or even something stronger. Governor Jeb Bush says that the United States should allow in Christian but not Muslim refugees, which would seem to run afoul of the First Amendment's prohibition on the establishment of religious tests. According to the *Boston Globe*, "On Monday, Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey said the nation should not accept even young orphans right now; on Thursday, Ben Carson likened refugees fleeing Syria to 'rabid dogs' that would

put the country at risk.” Yesterday, Donald Trump called for keeping a registry of all Muslims in the United States; today, after critics suggested that this was not different from when Nazi Germany required Jews to wear yellow stars, Trump walked the suggestion back.

I want to talk with you about these proposals to stanch the flow of Syrian refugees as a way of protecting us from a Paris-style attack. In case you can’t tell, I’m against them. First, it isn’t a flow at all; it’s a trickle. We have absorbed fewer than 2,000 Syrian refugees since 2012. Second, the concern about refugees as a source of terror is extremely overblown. Scott Hicks, an immigration lawyer from Cincinnati, has written about this. As he says, “The [American] refugee screening process is multi-layered and is very difficult to get through.” It can take months or even years for a refugee to be admitted. That hardly seems the best way to plan a terror attack. Now, the situation in Europe is different, but we’re talking about coming to this country.

He continues: “Frankly, there is more screening of refugees than ever happens to get on an airplane. Of course, yes, no system can be 100% foolproof. But if that is your standard, then you better shut down the entire airline industry, close the borders, and stop all international commerce and shipping. Every one of those has been the source of entry of people and are much easier ways to gain access to the U.S.”

And Nicholas Kristof, the *New York Times* columnist, has suggested in a similar vein that a much easier way to put a mole into this country would be to have the person apply for a student visa, which nobody is talking about shutting down. Or the Islamic State could send French or Belgian citizens as tourists. Are we going to end foreign tourism? As Kristof also notes: “Of 785,000 refugees admitted to this country since 9/11, just three have been arrested for terrorism-related charges....”

In addition to logistics, we need to look at history, especially we members of the Jewish community. It wasn’t that long ago that we were refugees. My own mother, a thirteen-year old girl at the time, was among them. She couldn’t get into the United States. Why? Because, as Kristof also reminds us, “Americans feared that European Jews might be left-wing security threats.” Rabbi Louis Newman of New York pleaded the obvious: “Jews are not Communists.” But some were, and that was enough for most Americans. In 1939, a poll showed that two-thirds of them – a veto-proof majority, as it were – felt that the United States should not take in 10,000 Jewish refugee *children* from Nazi Germany. That year, our government turned away a refugee ship, the *Saint Louis*, with Jewish refugee children. It returned to Europe. Many were murdered.

Closing our doors to the people who are themselves the victims of the Islamic State as a way to fight the Islamic State is perverse. It is not going to be effective. It throws away the lesson we have been taught by history. And it is not the moral thing to do.

Many faith leaders and some government officials recognize this. Among the latter is Senator Elizabeth Warren, who has called us to hear the better angels of our nature: “We are not a nation that delivers children back into the hands of ISIS murderers because some politicians doesn’t like their religion, and we are not a nation that backs down out of fear.”

As to faith leaders, Cardinal Sean O’Malley yesterday said that “the barbaric attacks in Paris, which demand a strong response and require policies that as best possible prevent recurrence, should not be used to efface the memory of Syrians and others from the Middle East and Africa who are desperately in need of shelter, support,

and safety.” The predominantly Protestant Massachusetts Council of Churches has made a similar call.

Nor have we in the Jewish community been silent. Canada has already let in 23,000 Iraqi refugees and is going to let in 25,000 Syrian ones this year, as opposed to the President’s plan to let in 10,000. The Reform Temple in Vancouver has sponsored a family, and congregations across denominational lines there are working together to sponsor others. Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, in Peterborough, Ontario, a mosque was firebombed the day after the Paris attacks. A local small Reform congregation, smaller even than ours, has opened its doors for the mosque to meet in its building.

In Boston, too, the Jewish Community Relations Council and the Jewish Vocational Services have called for “action motivated by freedom and tolerance, rather than hate or fear.” According to the *Globe*: “They added that they were guided ‘by our own history as refugees as well as our shared biblical and prophetic mandate to protect and welcome the stranger.’”

At Erev Rosh Hashanah services this year, I spoke to you about Aylan Kurdi. He was the boy in the red t-shirt and blue shorts whose lifeless body washed onto a Turkish beach. He was the face, and the body, of the Syrian refugee crisis. It would be the greatest victory for the Islamic State if they could erase his picture from your memory.

Don’t let them. Whether born Jewish or brought into this community, we come from a long line of refugees. Perhaps that is why we are told 36 times in the Torah not to oppress a stranger, for you know what it was like, as you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt. Let us remember that, and let us live up to the best in our heritage, we descendants of Jacob, we children of Israel.

Kein y’hi ratzon, be this God’s will.¹

¹ Sources include: Facebook post by Scott Hicks; Nicholas Kristof, “They Are Us,” *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2015; Renee Ghert-Zand, “Moved by moral imperative, Canadian synagogues sponsor Syrian refugees,” *The Times of Israel*, Nov. 20, 2015; Eric Moskowitz, “O’Malley embraces Syrians’ plight,” *Boston Globe*, Nov. 20, 2015.Kr