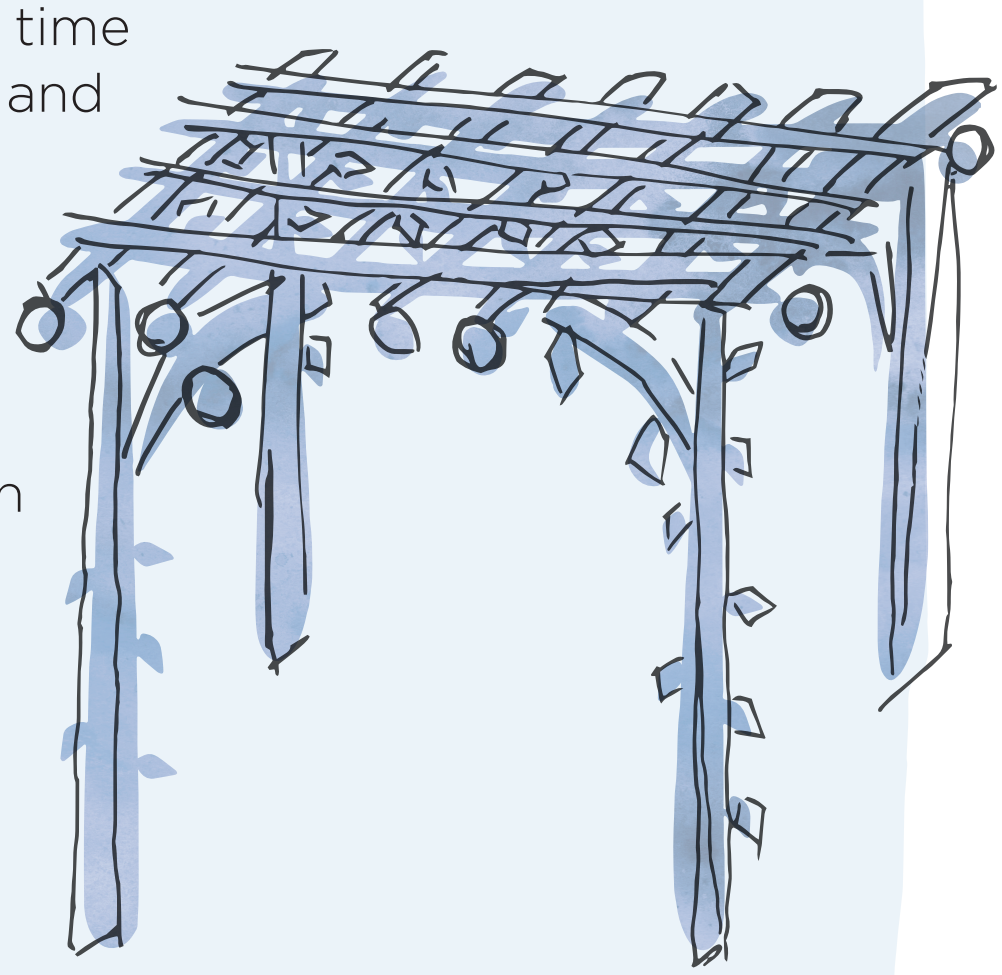
IN SEARCH OF A SHELTER OF PEACE: STORIES FROM TODAY'S REFUGEES

Each year, we recreate the huts in which our Israelite ancestors found refuge after escaping slavery in Egypt and wandering in the desert for 40 years. Sukkot allows us time to recognize our own fragility and reminds us that, for so many, shelter remains impermanent.



Today, more than 65 million refugees and displaced people still wander the earth in search of a safe place to call home. This Sukkot we invite eight of these individuals into our sukkah to tell their stories.

HIAS, the world's oldest, and only Jewish, refugee organization, rescues, resettles, and advocates for refugees so they can live in safety and with dignity. We work with refugees in eleven countries abroad and through our resettlement network in more than 20 U.S. locations. We also mobilize the Jewish community to respond together to the global refugee crisis.

For ways to take action for refugees, visit www.hias.org.

HIAS

NICIA* Boko, Congo

*Pseudonym used to protect the identity of victims of sexual and gender-based violence.
Photo Credit: Glenna Gordon for HIAS

I was 14 when war broke out in my village in Boko, Congo. My stepfather, a Mai Mai rebel fighter, took the family to the rebels' camp, hoping for protection.

Shortly after we arrived, a rebel approached my family asking to marry me. Even though I said I did not want to be married at such a young age, the man insisted and sexually assaulted me while my mother was away.

Instead of marrying the man, as is common under these circumstances, I tricked the man into providing me with money to set up a proper home for us, which I then used to flee for my life.

I made my way to Nairobi, Kenya. There, standing by the edge of a lake contemplating what to do next, a community leader found me and helped me get to HIAS, which found me a foster home with a woman named Grace.

Grace, who was also a victim of sexual assault, had fled Congo after rebels took her village and her husband disappeared. She already had five children living with her when she agreed to take me as a daughter.

Grace always says, "The most important thing is that God has given me strength."

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NAME UNKNOWN Darfur, Sudan

Photo Credit: Glenna Gordon for HIAS

"The last thing I remember from my life before the camp is that war broke out on a Tuesday.

I have lost most of my memories, but I remember that.

Sunday was market day, the next day we were warned that the war was coming, and the day after, it happened.

At the beginning of the war, many members of my family died in attacks on my village. Others died later because they were too old to run and could not leave and then died of hunger because there was no food. I came to the refugee camp alone, with only one friend, but without my family.

Here in the camp, we do not have enough to eat because there are terrible food shortages in the camps in Chad. Before the war there was lots of food—tomatoes, millet, mango—and we had lots of livestock. During the war, we lost everything."

RAWAN Qamishli, Syria

Photo Credit: Taylor Smith / taylorsmithjournalist.com

Rawan is my 4 year-old son. His father, older brother, and I fled our hometown in Qamishli, Syria over three years ago.

Because Rawan does not remember our homeland, I tell him stories about it every night so he will have a connection like the rest of us.

My husband fled to Germany last year, leaving the rest of our family behind.

Here in Akre, I work on the Castle Art Project, a program through the Rise Foundation that empowers the youth who live here to paint murals on the walls of our new home, which is a former Saddam Hussein prison.

With almost 3 million Syrian children out of school, this project helps keep our children engaged and gives them hope for a life of dignity and possibility.

Somehow, despite the difficulties we face, Rawan is just like any other boy his age. He is incredibly mischievous, loves to be flipped upside down, and takes giant bites out of your food when you are not looking.

HIAS

CARLOS Sapuyes, Colombia

Here in Ecuador, if you are from Colombia, they assume you are a drug dealer. When the economy is not doing well, we become the scapegoats.

Even though I own my own Chinese food business, it has taken me over 7 years to gain the trust of the community here. Since I fled Colombia in 2009, I have struggled to make my business successful, but now everyone knows I am honest and hardworking.

Still, the landlord who rents space to me overcharges me for the space because I am Colombian.

In Colombia, I worked as a farmer in Túquerres, where it was common to see the guerrilla fighters. One day, there was a massacre on the farm. The paramilitary self-defense group of the farmers killed the workers after accusing them of being part of the guerilla fighting group. My friend and I were saved only because we were hidden by the cattle we were tending, but, because we witnessed the attack, we knew we must flee in order to stay alive.

KAMAL Afghanistan

Photo Credit: SideXSide Studios / sidexsidestudios.com

I left Afghanistan with my family when I was just a small child. My father was targeted by the Taliban because of his service in the Afghan army, which put our whole family in danger.

We passed through many countries—Turkey, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Iran. Finally, we landed in Russia, but we found little welcome there.

People don't like you if you say you're Muslim. I remember that twice they beat me because … I don't know why.

It took 17 years, many difficult security screenings, and a long vetting process before my brother and I were finally resettled in the United States. We found refuge in the most unexpected place: San Damiano Friary, a Franciscan retreat center.

Who met us at the airport and found us this place to stay? The Jewish Family Service of the East Bay.

It's really amazing—Muslims, Jews, and Christians all coming together.

FATUMA Somalia

*Fatuma's face has been obscured for her privacy and protection.

When I was not yet 21, I fled my homeland of Somalia. As a paraplegic, paralyzed from the waist down, I was subjected to intense ostracization, and I feared for my life.

Though I made it safely to Kenya, I was still in danger because I did not have a strong support network and could not work. My friends let me stay with them, but I often have to move from house to house when they tire of hosting me. They say that I am just an "extra mouth to feed" because I cannot help pay the bills.

I recently met a community outreach worker from HIAS who provided me with a tricycle. The tricycle, which I pedal with my hands, allows me to move across the city by myself, giving me more independence and making me feel more self-sufficient. I am even planning to set up a small business.

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MARIAM Darfur, Sudan

Photo Credit: Glenna Gordon for HIAS

After I fled the violent genocide in my native Sudan, I came to the refugee camp here in Chad. In Sudan, I received twice as much money for my work as a birth attendant, even though I work twice as hard now. Here, I often receive at least five women a day and work 30 days a month.

I live with my four grandchildren because their parents are still in Sudan. My husband lives in another refugee camp, so I have to provide for my grandchildren on my own. The money I get as a birth attendant is not enough for us to live on, but I am too old to go to work in the fields as many others do. We have a food card that dictates the rations we receive based on the number of people in our family. Only two of my grandchildren are registered, so the five of us have to live on rations for three people.

People ask me what I wish for, but I don't wish for anything because wishes don't come true.

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AHED Aleppo, Syria

My life in Syria was a really good life with my family and friends.

When the revolution began six years ago, my family fled Syria, but I decided to stay. My friends and I wanted to be able to speak what was on our minds without having to be afraid. The Assad regime made that impossible. We organized protests and demonstrations, immediately putting our lives in danger.

Even though I worked as an accountant and had no medical background, I went to volunteer at a hospital. Eventually, the hospital was bombed to the ground. A friend in America asked me if I wanted to come to the U.S. to meet government officials and speak about my experiences in Syria. I said yes, and she arranged for a visa in November 2015. Just a week before I was supposed to fly to the U.S., my car exploded, probably because of my activism. Thankfully, I was not harmed.

I want people to know that Syrian refugees are not criminals. We are victims of the Assad regime and ISIS, and we have paid the highest price.

THIS SUKKOT,
WE STAND
WITH REFUGEES.

HIAS

#JewsForRefugees