



**International Refugee Shabbat 2020/5780**  
**JIAS Toronto Canadian Content Supplement**  
*To the [HIAS Programming Resource Content](#)*

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## World Refugee Crisis & Canadian Context

This year for the first time, [JIAS Toronto](#) is partnering with our American counterpart [HIAS](#) to encourage congregations across Canada to participate in a **International Refugee Shabbat** (“Refugee Shabbat”). While we operate in different countries and within different political contexts, HIAS and JIAS are united in our joint mission to protect and serve vulnerable refugees.

Participation in **Refugee Shabbat** can be as simple as a discussion around a shabbat table with family and friends, or taking a moment -- whether in a synagogue service, a school assembly, or around your own table -- to be conscious of the fact that **over 70 million people** around the world today have been forced to leave their homes and communities due to conflict and persecution. Among them are nearly **25.9 million refugees** (living in temporary, transitory circumstances outside of their country of origin) -- over half of whom are **under the age of 18**. We are living in the time of a **world refugee crisis**.

In recent years, **Canada has garnered a reputation as a world leader** in refugee resettlement. According to a United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) report released last year, **Canada accepted 28,100 of the 92,400 refugees who were resettled across 25 countries in 2018**; the United States was second with 22,900. This marks the first time that the United States slipped behind another country in the history of the United Nations refugee program, which began in 1946 in the wake of WWII. Since 2016, the US has lowered refugee admittance caps from 110,000 down to 30,000 last year -- at a time when the number of refugees worldwide seeking resettlement is at an all time high.

The data also shows that Canada gave citizenship to the second largest number of people who had arrived as refugees — a figure that helps to measure how well countries are integrating refugees. **Canada has a unique approach to refugee resettlement**, accepting both UNHCR recognized refugees for government-sponsored resettlement, and working in partnership with Canadian citizens/organizations to help bring refugees to safety through Canada’s [Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program](#) (PSR), which accounts for two-thirds of Canada's resettled refugees. Private sponsorship offers hands-on, **community-based support for refugees** that has been shown to help refugees achieve slightly better outcomes and become better integrated into their communities than government-sponsored refugees.

## **JIAS Toronto & Private Sponsorship of Refugees**

JIAS Toronto is proud to be a [Sponsorship Agreement Holder](#) (SAH) with the Canadian government. As a SAH, JIAS has the privilege of working with dozens of individuals, community groups and institutions to sponsor and bring refugees to safe haven. Long before these refugees arrive in Canada, JIAS staff work to submit the application and prepare for their arrival. We then work closely with the sponsorship group to ensure that refugees are welcomed upon arrival and supported during their settlement process.

As the **only Jewish SAH in Canada**, JIAS has **partnered with dozens of synagogues/temples as well as other community groups to privately sponsor refugees**. These community groups/members provide the funds to financially support the sponsored refugees through their first year in Canada, and commit their own time and energy as volunteers to provide hands-on settlement support and guidance to these newcomers as they transition to life in their new country. Since 2015, JIAS has partnered with private citizens & community groups to sponsor over 200 refugees from countries including Syria, Iraq, Rwanda and Eritrea.

JIAS was founded almost 100 years ago in response to the need to resettle Jewish refugees fleeing Europe. **We honour our Jewish history and our roots as an organization by continuing to protect refugees and upholding the Jewish value to “welcome the stranger.”**

## Participation in Refugee Shabbat

**Refugee Shabbat 5780** is a moment for congregations, schools, organizations, and individuals around the country to dedicate a Shabbat experience to refugees.

Whether you are participating as part of a congregation, school, or as an individual, it is an opportunity to **educate** about the world refugee crisis, to think about **Jewish responsibility** towards refugees today, and to **acknowledge** the incredible efforts of so many in our community who support refugee protection and resettlement -- whether as advocates, educators, volunteers, charitable donors, or private sponsors of refugees to Canada.

If you are part of a congregation or school that has been involved in refugee sponsorship and/or settlement, Refugee Shabbat is an opportunity to **revisit and share that experience with the broader congregation/community**. As an individual, you can infuse **refugee-related content** into a shabbat dinner or lunch with family or friends – or host a parlour meeting with a speaker or DIY educational programming drawn from HIAS/JIAS resource materials. Refugee Shabbat can be a moment to simply focus on learning more about the global refugee crisis in a Jewish context, an opportunity for intercultural exchange with refugees in our community, or the time to chart a course of action. The choice is yours.

For a series of programming suggestions for Refugee Shabbat, please see [HIAS' Programming Content Resource](#), which includes several do-it-yourself-style educational programs. You may find this resource helpful as you build out your programming. In addition to programming ideas, the Programming Content Resource includes a liturgical reading, sermon talking points, and a text study.

In Canada, we are blessed to be part of a community where **many individuals, community groups and congregations** have taken the initiative and made the commitment to **privately sponsor or otherwise provide support for refugees** since 2015. If you or someone you know -- perhaps a family at your school or a member of your congregation -- is directly involved in sponsoring or volunteering with refugees, ask them to speak, whether at an intimate shabbat dinner, a school assembly, or during a shabbat service. **Ask them to share their motivation, their experience, the challenges they faced, and the rewards.**

## **Canada Action Items**

This is a short list of ways that we can help support refugees in Canada, as a lead-up or take-away from Refugee Shabbat. Feel free to share widely so that more in our community can help “welcome the stranger.”

1. **Share knowledge** - Resettling refugees is a proud and important part of Canada’s humanitarian tradition and demonstrates to the world that we have a shared responsibility to help people who are displaced and persecuted. However, there are a number of unfounded and negative myths that surround Canada’s refugee resettlement. You can help by being well informed and sharing knowledge to debunk myths, promote tolerance, and help build a stronger and more inclusive Canada. (Click [here](#) or see [Myths & Facts](#))
  
2. **Have a Difficult Conversation** - Commit to having at least one conversation with someone in your life who has expressed doubt about welcoming refugees to Canada or has even made disparaging remarks about immigrants and refugees. Be proud of your commitment to supporting refugees, and feel confident grounding your position in Jewish text and the Jewish experience. Refer to [Welcoming the Stranger](#) and [Myths & Facts](#) in this resource guide.
  
3. **Volunteer** - Volunteer with JIAS Toronto or another organization/group working locally to support refugees. Research has shown that volunteers have a significant impact on refugee integration, acting as a key defense against social isolation and newcomer despair. Volunteers can help in so many ways, including:
  - Being a friendly face
  - Helping with conversational English
  - Boosting basic life skills (how to use public transit, how to grocery shop on a budget, how to use a smartphone to navigate the city, etc...)
  - Offer professional skills (dental, physio, counseling) pro-bono

Contact [volunteer@jias-toronto.org](mailto:volunteer@jias-toronto.org) to learn more

4. **Give support** - Help refugees struggling to rebuild their lives on very modest budgets to cover unanticipated costs of living, such as rent supplementation (in high density areas with affordable housing shortages), non-medicare covered health expenses, school supplies and extra-curricular activities for refugee children, etc... [JIAS Toronto](#) accepts donations to a **Refugee Assurance Fund** to support these and other needs.
  
5. **Save a life** - Find out whether your synagogue/temple is sponsoring refugees and join their efforts, gather friends to form a [Group of Five](#), or call [JIAS Toronto](#) to learn more about helping to sponsor refugees through Canada’s [Private Sponsorship Program](#).

## **Refugees in Canada: Myths & Facts**

**MYTH:** *Refugees pose threats to Canada's security.*

**FACT:** Refugees are seeking security and protection from threats to their own lives.

Government and privately sponsored refugees coming to Canada from overseas undergo a multi-layered screening before arrival, including identity confirmation, health screenings, and rigorous security checks.

**MYTH:** *Refugees jump the queue over more deserving immigrants.*

**FACT:** Refugees are forced to flee their homes while economic immigrants have the ability to choose where and when to move. Canada recognizes this by having completely separate programs for refugees and economic immigrants. There is no queue.

**MYTH:** *Refugees take jobs from Canadians.*

**FACT:** Refugees create jobs and expand the domestic market. Immigrants don't take jobs away from Canadians but increase jobs for all by stimulating the economy. They are eager to contribute to building Canada into a prosperous country for all. In fact, as Canada's birth rate continues to remain low and the aging labour force nears retirement, the integration of immigrants and refugees helps to maintain a stable economy.

**MYTH:** *Refugee healthcare costs are a burden for Canadians.*

**FACT:** The cost of healthcare for refugees and refugee claimants is only a fraction of that of other Canadians. Health care costs are disproportionately for the elderly: the average age of refugees is much lower than that of Canadians.

**MYTH:** *Refugees receive more financial support than pensioners do.*

**FACT:** Refugees do not get more financial assistance from the federal government than Canadians pensioners do. Refugees come to Canada in a variety of different ways. Privately sponsored refugees are financially supported by the sponsoring citizens and are not eligible for any social assistance during their first year in Canada. Government-sponsored refugees will receive only minimal financial support from the federal government for a limited time to meet basic food and shelter costs. Refugee claimants in Canada receive Interim Federal Health, limited legal aid and in some provinces such as Ontario, some social assistance.

**MYTH:** *Canada Doesn't need more Immigrants.*

**FACT:** Canada Depends on Immigrants - unlike many other countries, it actively seeks out and recruits economic immigrants. Business groups estimate that if Canada were to close its doors to immigrants, our economy would shrink significantly.

## Welcoming the Stranger - Why is the World Refugee Crisis a Jewish Issue?

### ***Responsibility to ourselves, and to others***

JIAS, like so many Jewish organizations, was founded on the principle of “Kol Israel areivim ze ba ze” -- the idea that as Jews we are responsible for one another. Over the last century, JIAS has helped resettle thousands of Jewish refugees in Canada. Today, JIAS maintains its status as a SAH and has the ability to sponsor Jewish refugees if there is such a need. However, most Jewish immigrants do not come to Canada as refugees.

At the same time, the world is facing a massive and dire refugee crisis, which begs the question: what is our responsibility to others? Why is the world refugee crisis our concern? Why should we care -- and beyond caring -- are we responsible to act, to help, to actually do something?

### ***We were strangers in a strange land***

As Jews, we do not have to look back very far to know that we were regarded as the stranger, even in countries where we felt at home and part of society. In the last century, hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees sought resettlement -- from pre and post-war Germany and Poland, from Morocco, the Soviet Union, and Hungary -- among others.

A well known Canadian book by well known Canadian historians Irving Abella and Harold/Hesh Troper made famous the response by an unidentified Canadian immigration agent, asked in 1939 how many Jews would be allowed in Canada after the war: “None is too many.” The phrase has since entered common parlance in Canada, and reminds us that we were refugees, and we were not wanted. With all the contributions to Canadian society that the Jewish community can be proud of -- in 1939, “none [was] too many.”

As Jews we also know that our history as the stranger goes back much further; it goes back as far back as we can remember. In the Torah as in our prayers, we repeat over and over again that we were slaves in Egypt. We were strangers in a strange land and this shapes us, and how we treat others.

### ***“Welcome the Stranger”***

In the Torah we are commanded again and again to welcome, befriend and even love the stranger -- no less than 36 times! Here we look at 3 of them from Shmot, Dvarim and Vayikra:

שמות כ"ב:ב'

(כ) וְגַר לֹא-תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי-גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Exodus 22:20

(20) You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

דברים י"ז:ט

(ט) וְאַהֲבַתֶּם אֶת-הַגֵּר כִּי-גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Deuteronomy 10:19

(19) You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

ויקרא י"ט:ל"ד

(לד) כַּאֲזַנְחָ מִכֶּם יְהִי לְכֶם הַגֵּר | הַגֵּר אֶתְכֶם וְאַהֲבַתְּ לּוֹ כְּמֹדֶךָ כִּי-גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Leviticus 19:34

(34) The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the LORD am your God.

This concept of us having been strangers -- and more importantly, of this experience shaping how we must treat others -- is everywhere. One commentary on why the Torah repeats it so many times suggests that *even though* it is our experience, *even though* we should know instinctively based on having been the stranger, it does not necessarily come naturally. We need reminding.

### ***“In our Midst”***

How does this all relate to the current refugee crisis? The Torah talks about the stranger “in our midst” -- and as we all know, most of the world’s refugees are not “in our midst.” We have the luxury of having an ocean between us and most of the world’s refugees. We are not living on the Hungarian or Turkish borders where these strangers are literally knocking on our door. We are not in sub-Saharan Africa where 10 million people are displaced -- nor are we even, though we are closer at least spiritually, in Israel, where there are some 33,000 African asylum seekers from Eritrea & Sudan.

But we are living in a vastly different time than even a decade ago. Today, horrors reach us in minutes. Technology, smart phones, cable news channels -- we get so much information so fast, that we are bombarded by it and in fact we may even become desensitized. But if we look, it’s there. The world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record, with 1 person forcibly displaced almost every 2 seconds as a result of conflict or persecution. This is a global crisis that affects us all.

Canadian Jews are not far removed from the refugee experience. Some of the most successful and philanthropic members of our community came to Canada as refugees and immigrants, and have helped build our community and our country. **We honour our Jewish history and experience by upholding the Jewish value to “welcome the stranger.”**

Thank you for participating in Refugee Shabbat  
Follow us on [Facebook](#) & Instagram @jias\_toronto  
Learn more at [www.jiastoronto.org](http://www.jiastoronto.org)  
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