

# Sermon Talking Points for HIAS National Refugee Shabbat October 19-20, 2018



## Introduction

National Refugee Shabbat truly could not come at a more critical moment. Over the last 21 months, we have seen this administration relentlessly try to close the doors of our country to refugees and asylum seekers through devastating changes to the United States Refugee Admissions Program and to our asylum system.

As of September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the United States had only resettled 20,918 refugees – less than half of the 45,000 ceiling, a number that was more than twice as high just last year. This number is particularly alarming given the fact that the number of refugees worldwide grew by more than 3 million this year.

Now is the time for us to raise our voices as a Jewish community to say that we will not stand idly by as our country abandons its long legacy of welcome and that this flies in the face of our Jewish obligation to welcome, love, and protect the stranger. We hope you will find these sermon talking points useful as you craft your message to your community for National Refugee Shabbat.

## The Facts

### Definitions

Depending on where your congregation's level of knowledge about immigration terminology, you may want to reference the technical definitions of refugee, asylum seeker, internally displaced person (IDP), and migrant. This helps put everyone on the same page. Here are those definitions:

**Refugee:** A refugee is a person who has been forced to flee their home country due to persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group (e.g., members of the LGBTQ community). The persecution a refugee experiences may include harassment, threats, abduction or torture. A refugee is often afforded some sort of legal protection, either by their host country's government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or both. In the United States, refugees are hand-selected by the U.S. government and are screened in advance. They are subject to background checks and security screenings by multiple U.S. agencies. Only after everything is approved are they brought to the U.S. to reside permanently.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Based on "Who is a refugee?" from <http://www.hias.org/FAQ/HIAS>.

**Asylum seeker:** An asylum seeker is a person who has fled persecution in their home country and is seeking safe haven in a different country, but has not yet received any legal recognition or status.<sup>2</sup> In several countries, including the U.S., asylum seekers are sometimes detained while waiting for their case to be heard.

**Internally displaced person:** An internally displaced person, or IDP, is a person who fled their home but has not crossed an international border to find sanctuary. Even if they fled for reasons similar to those driving refugees (armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations), IDPs legally remain under the protection of their own government – even though that government might be the cause of their flight.<sup>3</sup>

**Migrant:** A migrant is a person who chooses to move from their home for any variety of reasons, but not necessarily because of a direct threat of persecution or death. Migrant is an umbrella category that can include refugees but can also include people moving to improve their lives by finding work or education, those seeking family reunion and others.<sup>4</sup>

## The Numbers and The Facts

Here is some basic information that may be helpful as you try to put the global refugee crisis, as well as the recent attacks on refugee and asylum policy in the U.S., in context:

- There are now 68.5 million people worldwide who have been forcibly displaced due to persecution and violence. 25.4 million of those are refugees. Most of the remainder are internally displaced within the borders of their own countries (i.e., they have fled their homes but have not crossed an international border).
- 85% of refugees are being hosted in developing countries. This is largely due to geography; these countries are closest to the conflict zones people are fleeing. Turkey is the country that hosts the most refugees (3.5 million).
- 57% of the world's refugees come from just three countries: South Sudan (2.4 million), Afghanistan (2.6 million), Syria (6.3 million).
- Over half of refugees are under the age of 18.
- The numbers of displaced people – including refugees – are the highest in human history. Someone is displaced from their home approximately every 2 seconds. During 2017, conflict and persecution forced an average of nearly 44,000 individuals per day to leave their homes and seek protection elsewhere.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on "What is the difference between an asylum seeker, a refugee and an asylee?" from <http://www.hias.org/FAQ/HIAS>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c146.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Based on "'Refugee' or 'migrant' - Which is right?" from <http://www.unhcr.org/55df0e556.html>.

- Refugee advocates often refer to three durable solutions for refugees. These durable solutions include local integration (for refugees who can safely rebuild their lives in the country to which they fled), resettlement (for the most vulnerable refugees for whom life is not safe in the country to which they fled and so require permanent resettlement in a 3<sup>rd</sup> country), and repatriation (for refugees for whom circumstances in their homeland change significantly enough that it is safe to return).
- Less than 1% of refugees are resettled, and the U.S. has traditionally led the world in terms of resettlement. Though, because we have cut the number of refugees we resettle by more than half, we have also cut the number of refugees resettled worldwide by about a half.
- The maximum number of refugees resettled in the U.S. in a given year, which is referred to as the ceiling for refugee admissions, is determined by the annual Presidential Determination.
  - For more than a decade, the annual ceiling was set at 70,000, which includes both Syrian refugees and refugees from all other countries.
  - Former President Obama’s administration raised the ceiling to 85,000 for 2016 and to 110,000 for 2017.
  - The Executive Order issued by the Trump Administration on March 6, 2017 dropped this number to 50,000.
  - In October 2018, the Trump Administration announced that the Presidential Determination for 2018 would be 45,000.
  - As of September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the United States had only resettled 20,918 refugees – less than half of the 45,000 ceiling.
  - A Presidential Determination of 30,000 for 2019 was announced in September 2018. Despite repeated pleas from refugee assistance organizations, faith leaders, policy experts, and hundreds of elected officials, this is the lowest number ever set by any president since the Refugee Act became law in 1980.
- Some helpful comparisons on refugee numbers to illustrate how much admissions have dropped (you can find our state information [here](#)):
  - FY 2016 (national): 84,994 vs. FY 2018 (national): 20,405
  - FY 2016 (New Jersey): 536 vs. FY 2018 (New Jersey): 144
- Since January 2017, the United States has been closing its doors on refugees. Initially, this was done through Executive Order and through lowering the Presidential Determination. However, the administration has been even more effective in shutting out refugees behind-the-scenes, through tiny and incremental changes to the program.
- In April 2018, the administration announced implementation of a zero-tolerance policy. This policy meant that individuals apprehended crossing the border not at a port-of-entry would be criminally prosecuted, which led to not only criminal prosecution but also detention and then the separation of families.
  - The zero-tolerance policy is in violation of international and domestic laws.
  - Seeking asylum is not an illegal act, and asylum seekers should not be punished for doing so.
  - The Department of Homeland Security has 300,000 pending asylum cases, and immigration courts have a backlog of over 700,000 cases.

- In 2017, there were 20,455 people granted asylum. However, that was before the new regulations, all of which have made it much, much harder for anyone to successfully be granted asylum. The numbers for 2018 are not available yet, but they will be far lower.
- A judge ruled that all children that were separated from their families due to the zero-tolerance policy had to be reunited.
  - In total, about 2,500 children were separated.
  - The ruling called for two deadlines – July 18 for children 0-5, and July 26 for children 5-18. The government failed to meet either of these goals, and, as of August 2018, nearly 500 children remain separated from their families.
  - As of July 2018, 463 parents have been deported without their children.
  - After this ruling, there was a shift from efforts to separate families to detaining families together, which is still inhumane.
  - Asylum seekers are being forced to wait, frequently for days, on the Mexican side of the border, sometimes being told that ports-of-entry are full, and sometimes being told that the U.S. is no longer accepting asylum applications.
- There has been devastating new proposed guidance on asylum, which includes:
  - Individuals apprehended at the border for not entering at a port-of-entry will no longer be eligible for asylum.
  - Gang violence and domestic violence would not qualify individuals for asylum (victims of gang violence and domestic violence were formerly considered members of a social group).
  - Anyone who had traveled more than 2 weeks, or passed through more than 1 country to get to the U.S., will not be eligible for asylum.
  - [Mexico Safe Third Country Agreement](#)
  - Requirement that immigration judges clear 700+ cases annually.

## Connections to Torah Portion

*If you do give a sermon on National Refugee Shabbat, please email a copy of the text to Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer at [rachel.grant.meyer@hias.org](mailto:rachel.grant.meyer@hias.org) for HIAS' files.*

The Torah portion over National Refugee Shabbat is Parshat Lech Lecha, which tells the story of God commanding Avram to leave his home and journey towards a land that God will show him. God promises Avram that, through his travels, a great nation will come from him, he will be blessed, and God will make his name great. As Avram heads south from his home, famine forces him to detour to Egypt. While Avram would not technically be considered a refugee by modern definitions, as someone who is forced to leave home not of his own volition and as a stranger in a strange land, he does still experience many of the same challenges that today's refugees experience.

As Rabbi Neil Kominsky writes in his commentary on the portion, in Parshat Lech Lecha, Avram – who becomes Avraham in this portion – “set[s] a pattern for much of subsequent Jewish history . . . in countries all around the modern world [where] Jews have lived as immigrants, an identifiable minority

within a different host culture.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this parsha is the first time we hear Avram described as “*Avram Ha’Ivri*” – Avram, the one who crosses over. The Jewish people will come to be referred to collectively as “*Ha’Ivrim*” – the ones who cross over.

In your sermon, consider exploring what this name (“*ha’ivrim*”) has meant and could mean for us, both as a people with historic refugee experience and as a people who now are not predominately refugees.

Questions to spark your exploration:

- The text does not only say that Avram left home. It says that he left his land, his birthplace, and his father’s house. What is the significance of naming these three locations? What do they tell us about the meaning of home and the multiple layers of loss involved in leaving home?
- In her commentary on this Torah portion in *New Studies in Bereishit (Genesis)*, Nehama Leibowitz points out the unusual order of country, then birthplace, then father’s house. She explains that we would have expected a move from father’s house, to birthplace, to country. What do you make of the order? What does it tell us about the difficulty of leaving each place?
- Once Avram leaves home, he is described as “*Avram Ha’Ivri*” — Avram the one who crosses over. Of all the descriptors that could have been chosen for Avram and for the Jewish people (*Ha’Ivrim*), why choose to focus on the idea of crossing over/crossing boundaries as a definitive feature? How might this shape our understanding of the formation of Jewish identity?
- In what ways does the legacy of crossing over/traveling in search of home and safety inform your own Jewish identity? How has it been reflected in your family’s experiences? (You might also bring in stories of congregants or other well-known Jews, like Albert Einstein, who you know came to this country as refugees.)
- For the first time in history, the Jewish people are no longer predominately a refugee people. What, then, does it mean to embody our name in the context of the contemporary refugee crisis?
- In our country’s increasingly divisive political climate, what does it mean to be “the ones on the other side” when it comes to fulfilling our obligation to welcome, love, and protect the stranger? What are all the ways we can cross boundaries as we fulfill this obligation?

## Asks

Visit <https://www.hias.org/take-action> for the most up-to-date ways that you can ask your community to take action for refugees, including ways to speak up for refugees, directions for planning an action or rally, how to volunteer locally, educational resources, and more.

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<sup>5</sup> From Rabbi Neil Kominsky, *Our Immigrant Ancestor*, <http://www.truah.org/resources/our-immigrant-ancestor/>.

Because the context and landscape of refugee and asylum policy in the United States are in flux, we ask that you email Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer at [rachel.grant.meyer@hias.org](mailto:rachel.grant.meyer@hias.org) on Monday, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018 to find out whether there are specific and timely policy-related asks for the weekend of National Refugee Shabbat. At this time, we are awaiting decisions in a number of areas that may greatly affect the future of both refugee resettlement and the asylum system in the United States, and we want to ensure that you have the most current information in time for National Refugee Shabbat.

### **Suggested Additional Reading (and Listening!)**

- <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/> – Comprehensive information about refugee arrivals and admissions in the United States, including from which countries refugees are coming and how many refugees have been resettled in your area over the last year.
- <http://www.hias.org/blog> – Stories of HIAS clients, updates on changes to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and asylum system, and more.
- <http://www.rcusa.org> – State-by-state information on refugee resettlement, as well as updates on changes to U.S. refugee policy from Refugee Council USA, a coalition of 24 U.S.-based non-governmental organizations dedicated to refugee protection, welcome, and excellence in the U.S. refugee resettlement program.
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/09/refugee-admissions-trump/569641/> – An incisive look at the Trump Administration’s dismantling of the U.S. refugee resettlement program.
- <https://www.thenation.com/article/trump-creates-a-worldwide-border-crisis-for-refugees/> – A frightening look at how the Trump Administration’s policies are creating a worldwide crisis for refugees.
- <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/656/let-me-count-the-ways> – A powerful hour-long overview of the myriad ways the Trump Administration is cracking down on immigration, refugees and asylum in the United States.