

Sermon Talking Points for HIAS Refugee Shabbat March 4-5, 2022



Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.

Introduction

We currently find ourselves in a moment of tremendous potential for reembracing the deeply Jewish value of welcome. In the United States and around the world, the combined forces of the COVID-19 pandemic and damaging policy choices nearly brought asylum and refugee resettlement systems to a halt. While it will take time and enormous effort to fully mend that which has been broken, there is evidence that progress is being made and there is reason to be hopeful. In the face of mass flight from Afghanistan, communities across the world have stepped up to welcome newcomers through resettlement, as well as co-sponsorship and private sponsorship models. Advocates and lawmakers in many countries are pushing for asylum laws that ensure people arriving at their borders can access their basic human right to seek protection. In the weeks, months, and years to come, HIAS will work together with other refugee agencies, our local resettlement partners, and supporters and activists – like you and your community – to help those who have been forcibly displaced from their homes access their right to pursue safety and rebuild their lives in dignity.

While we celebrate these gains and this hope, there is no rest for the weary! Now is the time for us to raise our voices even louder as a Jewish community to say that we will not allow what so often happened to us to happen to today's refugees. We are, all of us, here to say that we will welcome and protect those seeking safety from violence and persecution. We hope that you will find these sermon talking points useful as you craft your message to your community for this year's Refugee Shabbat.

The Facts

Definitions

Depending on 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.¹

¹ 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.² In several countries, including the U.S., asylum seekers are sometimes detained while waiting for their case to be heard.

Parolee: A parolee is permitted to enter the United States, usually for urgent humanitarian reasons, for a temporary period. While parole allows for lawful presence in the United States, the parolee technically remains an applicant for admission. Parole does not confer immigration status and does not provide a path to permanent residency. **Afghan parolees are authorized to work and will need to apply for asylum, a Special Immigrant Visa, or family reunification for permanent status.*

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.³

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.⁴

More about Refugees

Here is some basic information⁵ that may be helpful as you try to put the global refugee crisis in context:

- There are now estimated to be more than 84 million people who have been forcibly displaced due to persecution and violence. 26.6 million of these people 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 (3.7 million).
- 68% of the world's refugees come from just five countries: Syria (6.8 million), Venezuela (4.1 million), Afghanistan (2.6 million), South Sudan (2.3 million), and Myanmar (1.1 million).
- 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 3rd country), and

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

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

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

⁵ This information is based on an [updated mid-year report](#) from UNHCR released in December 2021. In June each year, UNHCR releases official numbers for the previous year, as it takes a rather long time to calculate these numbers. When UNHCR released the 2020 numbers in June 2021 in their annual [Global Trends Report](#), they noted that there were 82.4 million displaced people worldwide. An official count for 2021 will not be released until June 2022.

repatriation (for refugees for whom circumstances in their homeland change significantly enough that it is safe to return).

- In 2020 (the last full year for which concrete data is available), only 34,400 refugees were resettled globally, although there are tens of millions of refugees worldwide. That is just one-third the number resettled in 2019 (107,800). The U.S. used to lead the world in terms of resettlement; however, because the U.S. has decreased the number of refugees it resettles by more than 80%, it has contributed to significantly lowering the number of refugees resettled worldwide in the past few years.
- The U.S. has been resettling refugees for decades. In the aftermath of World War II, Congress enacted the first refugee legislation, providing refuge to over 650,000 displaced Europeans. Since the U.S. resettlement program was formalized through the Refugee Act of 1980, the U.S. has resettled over 3 million refugees.
- The Refugee Act created the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to ensure access to a uniform and effective resettlement of refugees to the United States.
- The USRAP is a public-private partnership between non-profit organizations and the U.S. Department of State. It includes nine national resettlement agencies, including HIAS, and a network of hundreds of local partner organizations that resettle refugees in communities around the country.⁶
- 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 (PD).
 - Since the USRAP's inception, the United States has set an average refugee admissions goal of 96,229 refugees and, on average, has resettled 85,000 refugees annually. Prior to 2018, the PD only dipped below 70,000 once, in 1986 when it was set at 67,000. In some years, the U.S. resettled up to 200,000 refugees.
 - For fiscal year 2022 (which began in October 2021 and will end in September 2022), the Biden administration set a refugee admissions ceiling of 125,000. However, following four years of cuts to the program – where we saw the previous administration drop the PD to 30,000 and then to 15,000 – paired with an emergency response to integrate evacuated Afghans with humanitarian parole, the U.S. is unlikely to meet this goal. As of late January 2022, the U.S. has only admitted 3,268 refugees.⁷
- 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 2020 (national): 11,814
 - FY 2016 (California): 7,909 vs. FY 2020 (California): 1,188
 - FY 2016 (New York): 5,026 vs. FY 2020 (New York): 623
 - FY 2016 (Michigan): 4,258 vs. FY 2020 (Michigan): 493
 - FY 2016 (Texas): 7,802 vs. FY 2020 (Texas): 902

⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement-in-the-united-states.html#:~:text=We%20also%20work%20with%20NGOs,affiliates%20located%20throughout%20the%20U.S.>

⁷ Refugee arrivals are tracked on a bi-weekly bases on the RCUSA website: <https://rcusa.org/resettlement/>

- Refugees are the most vetted individuals entering the United States and undergo complex security checks run by the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the State Department, the Department of Defense, the National Counterterrorism Center, and other U.S. intelligence agencies. It can take between 18-24 months, and sometimes longer, from the time a refugee is referred to the USRAP to the time of arrival.
- National security experts have repeatedly said that the refugee resettlement program advances our national security interests, is an important foreign policy tool, and contributes to keeping our troops safe around the world.
- Once resettled, refugees not only contribute to their new communities economically, but also play an active role in civic engagement, participate in the labor force, maintain a strong devotion to education, purchase homes, and become U.S. citizens.
- On average, 82 percent of refugees participate in the labor force, compared to the 62 percent national average. Refugees are twice as likely as native-born individuals to hold jobs in the service industry, and many industries like hospitality and meatpacking now rely heavily on refugee workers. Across the U.S., the low number of refugee arrivals is putting an unnecessary strain on businesses, especially so in rural areas.
- In 2017, a study was released showing that over a span of 10 years, refugees contributed \$63 billion more in taxes than what the U.S. had spent on their initial resettlement.

More about Asylum Seekers

Here is some information about seeking asylum, as well as recent attacks to the asylum process in the United States:

- Asylum seekers submitted 1.1 million new claims worldwide in 2020. The United States was the world's largest recipient of new individual applications (250,800) followed by Germany (102,600) and Spain (88,800). In the first half of 2021, which is the last time period for which we have official numbers, asylum seekers submitted 555,00 new claims.⁸
- It is legal to seek asylum. Under both U.S. and international law, the U.S. must hear the claims of asylum seekers, regardless of where or how they entered the country (e.g., at an official point of entry, between ports of entry, etc.).
- Policies meant to deter, block, or punish individuals for seeking safety in the U.S. are illegal. Turning asylum seekers away or deliberately slowing down asylum processing at ports of entry places asylum seekers in an increasingly more precarious and dangerous situation. In 2020, the global pandemic essentially ground what was left of the U.S. asylum system to a halt. You can read more about the pandemic's impact on the asylum system [here](#).

⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/mid-year-trends.html#:~:text=As%20the%202021%20Mid%2DYear,million%20reported%20at%20end%2D2020.>

- For years, the U.S. government allowed individuals applying for asylum to physically remain in the United States while their cases were adjudicated. However, in January 2019, the Trump administration introduced the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the “Remain in Mexico” program, which fundamentally changed this process by forcing asylum seekers to wait in Mexico for the duration of their immigration court proceedings. This change has created incalculable suffering for asylum seekers along the border. Upholding the United States’ commitment to a humane and compassionate asylum system demands not only the immediate cancelation of the program, but a detailed plan to repair the damage it has caused. The Biden administration pledged to end this policy; however, following a court ruling that blocked it from doing so, the administration re-instated the policy with a wider scope. The program now includes asylum seekers from non-Spanish-speaking countries in the Caribbean such as Haiti.
- There are currently thousands of open immigration cases for people forced to wait in Mexico under MPP.⁹ While many of those people are no longer at the border – and the fates of many are unknown – the administration must find a way to bring those still waiting in Mexico into the United States in a humane and safe way. For additional information about the devastating impacts of MPP and HIAS’ proposed path to recovery, visit www.hias.org/publications/roadmap-to-recovery.
- One policy that the Biden administration has taken no steps to repeal is Title 42. This is an obscure, 75-year-old public health law that was implemented in March 2020, but it only applies to those seeking asylum; business travelers and tourists can cross the U.S.-Mexico border freely. The more than 1.1 million expulsions under Title 42 represent hundreds of thousands of people who have been denied their legal right to claim asylum. This policy disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, and Latinx asylum seekers entering the U.S. at land borders, while thousands of other travelers are able to fly in daily.
- The government does not provide legal counsel in immigration court, so many asylum seekers are forced to represent themselves. Numerous factors can impact asylum seekers’ access to counsel, specifically whether they are subjected to prolonged detention. Individuals in detention do not have the same opportunity to obtain legal counsel as non-detained individuals because they do not have access to attorneys or are unaware of their rights.
 - 14% of detained individuals acquire legal counsel compared to 66% of non-detained individuals.¹¹ This puts detained asylum seekers at a distinct disadvantage when facing government lawyers and complex immigration laws and can directly impact how long their case is pending or impact the final decision.¹²
- The asylum process can take months, and in many cases, years. During this wait, asylum seekers are left in limbo. Only after their case has been pending for months can asylum seekers apply for work authorization – a benefit that can take up to a year to obtain. Individuals who are eventually granted asylum may petition for immediate family members abroad to come to the U.S. After one year, asylees may apply for Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR) status. If LPR status is granted, the individual can apply for citizenship after four years.¹³

⁹ <https://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/mpp/>

¹⁰ <https://www.hias.org/title42>

¹¹ Women’s Refugee Commission (2017). *The Real Alternatives to Detention*. Washington, DC.

¹² TRAC Immigration (2017). *Asylum Representation Rates Have Fallen Amid Rising Denial Rates*. Syracuse, NY.

¹³ <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/asylum>

- In the summer of 2018, between 3,000 and 4,000 children were forcibly taken from their parents as a result of the Trump Administration’s “zero tolerance” policy against those seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border.
 - Years later, hundreds of families still remain separated, and some parents may never see their children again. The exact number is unknown due to poor record keeping under the Trump administration.
 - Even families who have been reunited suffer from ongoing legal issues, as well as the psychological distress caused by the ordeal.
 - As of January 28th, 2021, the Biden administration committed to ending the “zero tolerance” policy of which family separation is a part.
 - Although the policy of zero tolerance is no longer in effect and rates have decreased, these separations do still occur due to the U.S.’ widespread use of detention.

Jewish Values

Given the relative proximity of Refugee Shabbat to Passover, you may want to make connections between the Passover story and the contemporary refugee crisis. Look through the [HIAS Haggadah](#) for inspiration.

You can also, of course, talk about the broad principle of welcoming the stranger as a central Jewish value – one repeated more than any other commandment in the Torah. For a list of texts to support this teaching, take a look at [HIAS’ Refugee Torah](#).

You may also want to highlight the [historical Jewish experience of having been persecuted because of who we are](#). In particular, consider mentioning the times when Jews were turned away from safety (e.g., the United States turning away the MS St. Louis – a boat carrying hundreds of Holocaust refugees who were ultimately returned to Europe; most of the people on the St. Louis perished in concentration camps).

Additionally, you may want to make connections to the weekly parsha (Torah portion). While the Torah portion for Refugee Shabbat (March 4-5, 2022), Pekudei, does not make explicit mention of refugees or asylum seekers (“the stranger” in the language of Torah), there are themes that may be applicable to our work as refugee advocates and activists.

Asks

Visit 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.

While HIAS has put together several legislative priorities for the Biden administration as of the time of this writing (February 2022), it is possible that those priorities will shift before Refugee Shabbat 2022. Watch the [Take Action](#) page on the HIAS website for new actions as we get closer to Refugee Shabbat, and email Andrea Gagne (andrea.gagne@hias.org) for more information.

Suggested Additional Reading

- 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.
- www.hias.org/blog – Stories of HIAS clients, updates on changes to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and asylum system, and more.
- 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.
- www.welcome.us – A network of national and local organizations, leaders, and businesses involved in welcoming Afghan newcomer families into our communities.