



## “SACRED HUMANITARIANISM”

Let us listen to our Shofar service:

“Remember, with mercy, the binding of Isaac; the sorrow of Sarah; Abraham’s words: “Here I am.”  
(Mishkan HaNefesh Rosh Hashanah p.267)

As we chanted the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, this morning, we could hear the ram’s horn echoing in our ears, thanks to our new prayerbook’s ordering of the service. There is a link between our ancient ancestor’s unthinkable response to God’s mind-boggling instruction (“Offer up your son!?”) to the Shofar’s call to action. How we wish that Abraham would respond differently? Why can’t he argue with God as he did at Sodom and Gomorrah? This year especially, I sense an air of desperation in Abraham’s voice and his actions. Perhaps he had no choice but to respond, “Here I am.” Maybe he is cornered and any possible response would seem extreme. I think I currently view Abraham’s inconceivable willingness in this light, because I sense a connection to the desperation currently on view across our world. Impossibly desperate situations call for painfully desperate reactions.

Warsan Shire, a Keyan-born Somali poet, gave voice to the sense of desperation that ripples through Europe’s greatest refugee and migrant crisis since the aftermath of World War II. Now living in London, Warsan Shire wrote:

“no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well  
your neighbours running faster than you  
breath bloody in their throats  
the boy you went to school with...  
is holding a gun bigger than his body  
you only leave home  
when home won’t let you stay...”  
 (“Home”, excerpt, with appreciation to Rabbi Eric Gurvis, <https://divreishalom.wordpress.com/2015/09/06/awakening/>)

Warsan Shire beautifully answers those who wonder why Syrians and Somalis would crowd onto a rubber raft, or walk over endless hard miles, or hide in hidden compartments in trucks, or pay smugglers their last dollar to reach Germany, England, or another Promised Land. The news stories finally built up over the last few weeks, but the dangerous exodus has been boiling over for several bloody years. A tragic photo finally shakes world attention, yet again. Consider 3 year-old Aylan Kurdi, drowned and sadly washed up on a Turkish beach, far from his home, war-torn Kobani, Syria. He was not the only one to perish in his family’s desperate flight. If we sit here or in Berlin and wonder how so-called migrants can endure such dangerous journeys and risk their offspring, than we should allow that former refugee poet’s words to seep into our souls:

“you have to understand,  
that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land”

Desperation may have influenced Abraham’s willingness to offer up Isaac. However, this awful emotion certainly motivates the hundreds of thousands of people from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and other countries attempting to flee into Europe. Can we blame them for heading towards the countries they consider the best places to land? Once Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey were overwhelmed by refugees and lacked the necessary resources, desperate eyes began to look further away. As Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States refuse to take true part in assisting their largely fellow Muslims in any meaningful way, these sad souls have been searching for a plausible, if perilous, option. As wars continue with no end in sight, individuals and families search for safe harbor.

It is understandable to be cautious about the long-term impact of these populations upon Europe and possibly the United States. The waves that will follow may be far larger. Also, as Emory University’s Deborah Lipstadt states:

“Maybe we have to differentiate between those who are fleeing a poor country and those who are fleeing a war zone like Syria.”  
(<http://forward.com/opinion/320609/reasons-to-think-before-acting-on-migrants/?attribution=author-article-listing-1-headline>)

Such concerns are surely valid, but the world’s response cannot stop only with a list of concerns.

The plight of these refugees and migrants should echo in our ears from so many different directions. Abraham and Sarah were migrants. Our ancient Exodus was a wave of refugees. David Wyman, the respected Christian scholar on Jewish emigration before and during the Holocaust, described how:

“The long, pathetic list of refugee ships, unable to find harbors open to them, testifies to the fact that the world of the late 1930’s and early 1940’s was a world without room for the Jews of Germany, not to mention the millions of their coreligionists in Europe.”  
(Paper Walls, American and the Refugee Crisis 1938-41, Pantheon Books, New York, 1985, originally 1968, p.39)

Our journeys in search of hope began in the Torah, but have been replicated endless times. Thankfully, we dwell in relative comfort, but we should not ignore our history. With an empathy matching that Somali refugee’s, the American Jewish poet Marge Piercy recalled our journey:

“The courage to walk out of the pain that is know  
into the pain that cannot be imagined,  
mapless, walking into the wilderness, going  
barefoot with a canteen into the desert;  
stuffed in the stinking hold of a rotting ship....  
So they walked out of Egypt. So they bribed their way  
out of Russia under loads of straw; so they steamed  
out of the bloody smoking charnelhouse of Europe

on overloaded freighters forbidden all ports."  
("Maggid", excerpt)

These lines come from a poem I study with our 10th Grade Confirmation Class each year. As Jews, we should care about refugees not only because our ancestors were once desperate, but also because we share a common humanity. As Americans, we should not only be concerned for migrants because they are in our Facebook feeds, but because our lives are the product of the courage of our parents and grandparents. Each year, BHC welcomes the New Year along with fellow congregants who were once refugees themselves. Thus Rabbi Harold Schulweis, who died during the past year, reached an enduring Jewish conclusion:

"Judaism gave the world not ziggurats or pyramids or mausoleums, but compassion and responsibility. We gave the world a sacred humanitarianism."

(Jews and Judaism in the 21st Century, Edited by Rabbi Edward Feinstein, Jewish Lights, Vermont, 2007)

"Here I am," should not remain solely the answer of those who take desperate measures. "Here I am" should be our answer when presented with the opportunity to practice sacred humanitarianism. We should take action to alleviate human suffering, even if we can't necessarily stem the violence, indifference, and hatred behind this wave of humanity.

Our sacred humanitarianism should lead us to support efforts being undertaken by such groups as HIAS, formerly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees, which includes such groups as the Joint Distribution Committee, American Jewish Committee, Jewish Federations of North America, and Union for Reform Judaism. HIAS is calling upon President Obama and our government to resettle a significant number of Syrian refugees in this country. Let us at least engage in a debate that weighs the various concerns and considers screening policies. (<http://www.hias.org/>) HIAS also continues its core mission of assisting in resettling immigrants. The Multifaith Alliance is focused on aiding those refugees at each stage of the journey. (<http://www.multifaithalliance.org/>) Both these groups are worthy of our support on multiple levels, and there are others. Pay attention to the work of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in this area as well. ([www.rac.org](http://www.rac.org))

Let us note the inspirational work accomplished by Baltimore Hebrew Congregation members in 1980 to resettle Vietnamese Boat People, as they were then called. The online magazine Tablet had a beautiful article this May describing the efforts of our late congregant Stanley Wagner and the others involved in the effort. At that time, we chose to support one Vietnamese family in their resettlement process. Some members assisted them with finding housing and employment. Another member taught them English, sprinkled with a little Hebrew. Stanley and others helped organize general acculturation and family celebrations. Other than the photo outside my office, we don't think of this magnificent effort often. The Boat People project mirrors current challenges, even more than our efforts to resettle our own from the Soviet Union. The icing on the cake was that one of the offspring of that Vietnamese family was given the middle name Stanley.

(<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/191226/from-the-mekong-to-maryland>)

Unlike the Pope, I am not suggesting that every congregation,

even ours, adopt a specific Syrian family. However, I do think we, as individuals and a community, should be concerned regarding the plight of today's refugees. We should be wary of those in Slovakia and Hungary, for example, who have expressed concern about the migration of non-Christians into Europe. At the same time, we should consider demographer Barry Kosmin's warning: "Under current political conditions, a more Muslim Europe is bad news for Jews."

("The Immigration Debate in Europe and the Jewish Problem," Sh'ma, March/April 2007, p.16)

The situation has gotten worse since Kosmin made that comment in 2007. The tone found among many Muslims in Europe is deeply concerning, however so is an approach that weighs human worth solely based on religious heritage and assumptions of prejudices. Let us remember our tradition's sacred humanitarianism and our own history of treatment in Europe.

It is uplifting to watch the robust moral and policy discussion in Israel regarding this refugee crisis. One might be tempted to think the only policy debate regarding Israel this summer was related to the foreboding possibilities of Iran's continued pursuit of a nuclear bomb. Yet, the Israel's leaders have engaged in a debate balancing the real threat of accepting refugees from an enemy neighboring country at war and the historic Jewish mandate for sacred humanitarianism. This discussion takes place in light of ongoing Israeli medical aid for Syrians at its border and with memories of Israel's embrace of 300 Vietnamese Boat People in the late 1970s.

Yes, there are concerns and complications, but these are also desperate human beings, be they technically refugees or migrants. A Hungarian novelist said it beautifully this week: "These people walking all the way from Syria, however, are definitely not suicidal. They are hungry for life." (Neomi Szecsi, "How Europe's Other Half Lives," New York Times, September 9, 2015, p.A31)

Another Shofar passage in our prayerbook offers:

"...today we stand before the shofar to hear its voice of hope—resilient and strong, proclaiming freedom, promising redemption." (p.281)

Desperation has long been the catalyst for human reaction, leading to choices that are often risky and unavoidably dangerous. We are connected to that desperation and the search for safe harbor. Consider the link between Abraham, Isaac, and the final shofar sounds about to come. May we pay heed to the call towards sacred humanitarianism. L'shanah Tovah.