



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Shavuot 5773 By Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

Ever since it was given over three thousand years ago on Shavuot, the Torah has offered Jews a vision of how the world should work. I was thinking about this vision this past December when I was asked to represent HIAS (the 120-year-old Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) at a United Nations conference in Geneva dealing with the status of refugees. The UN invited faith-based organizations to reflect on, among other things, how lessons learned from their religious traditions could offer guidance to the treatment of refugees today. In preparing my opening statement for the conference, I reflected on a subject I had never previously thought about in any systematic manner but that is clearly a pressing issue in the world, as the UNHCR estimates that there are currently 15.1 million refugees worldwide.

What does the Torah tell us about refugees and how they should be treated?

A great deal, I soon learned. Let me cite four examples.

Genesis, the Torah's opening book, reminds us that when we think of modern refugees, we should also be thinking of our most esteemed ancestors. Abraham and Sarah, Judaism's patriarch and matriarch, had to flee a famine in the biblical land of Canaan and go to Egypt to obtain food. Hundreds of years later Moses fled Egypt when the Egyptian Pharaoh sentenced him to death; he stole away to Midian, where he was taken in by the priest Jethro.

Famine and political oppression, the circumstances that motivated the moves of Abraham and Moses, remain two of the most common reasons people still seek refuge. If the problem of needing refuge applied to Abraham, Sarah, and Moses, how remote can any refugee be to us today?

One of the Torah's 613 laws is unfortunately little known today but remains highly applicable to contemporary refugees seeking asylum. Deuteronomy 23:17 legislates: "You shall not return a runaway slave to its master." This law applies, for example, to those who flee totalitarian regimes in which all the citizens are in effect slaves of the state (North Korea, for example) or those who flee societies in which the group of which they are members is targeted for discrimination or violence and sometimes death, such as ethnic minorities who have fled to Thailand from Burma. Indeed, does not this law, over 3,000-years-old, compel us to work to protect asylum seekers?

Other biblical teachings equally relate to this discussion. Leviticus 19:16 rules, "Don't stand by while your brother's blood is shed." To remain a bystander and an observer when one is in a position to help an endangered person is to make one complicit in the oppression and bloodshed that follows. As the late Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban used to comment, doing nothing when one can help is like being neutral between the firefighters and the fire.

Finally, among the Torah's 613 laws are three laws that explicitly command love. Two of them are well known: "You shall love the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). The third is less known but it shouldn't be: "You shall love the stranger as yourself" (Leviticus 19:34). The same verse reminds us, "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." The Torah intends for us to learn from our ancient slavery experience in Egypt how awful it is to be a stranger, and to be mistreated and unloved. We are asked therefore to do

what we can do to spare contemporary strangers, in this case, refugees, from the sort of suffering that was inflicted on our ancestors when they were strangers and powerless. One would think that such a command wouldn't be necessary, that those who have suffered would naturally help others; but this is unfortunately not the case; mistreatment often causes the mistreated to mistreat others. As the poet W. H. Auden put it: "Those to whom evil is done, do evil in return." Perhaps Auden's line describes reality, but this is a reality the Torah commands us to resist.

Four points to remember:

- Our first patriarch and matriarch, and our greatest prophet, were refugees.
- It is forbidden to return a runaway slave to its master.
- It is forbidden to stand by while your neighbor's blood is shed.
- It is forbidden to mistreat the stranger; rather, the sight of the stranger should cause us to remember that that we were strangers in the land of Egypt—and how difficult that was.

Quite a lot to learn and practice from a 3,000 year old text!

One final thought: On Shavuot, we read the biblical Book of Ruth, which tells the story of Naomi's family being refugees in Moab as they flee a famine in Israel. Then later, they become poor and have a difficult reintegration when they return to Israel. As we read of refugees like Naomi and her impoverished daughter-in-law, Ruth—ancestress of King David and from whom, the Jewish tradition teaches, the Messiah will one day descend—let us commit to work to protect the rights of refugees around the world. Any one of these people might be another Ruth, another Abraham, Sarah or Moses—and what deed could be greater than protecting such a person?



Joseph Telushkin is the author of *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People and Its History*—the most widely selling book on Judaism of the past two decades. He has also authored two volumes of *A Code of Jewish Ethics*, the first of which was the recipient of the National Jewish Book Award as the Jewish book of the year. He has authored an additional 13 books, including *Words that Hurt*, *Words that Heal*, which became the motivating force behind Senators Joseph Lieberman and Connie Mack's 1996 Senate Resolution to establish a "National Speak No Evil Day" throughout the United States. His current book project is a study of the life and impact of the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Rabbi Telushkin was ordained at Yeshiva University in New York.

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