



CHAG v' CHESED:
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AJWS
at 30

Sukkot 5776

Don't Turn the Page

By Rabbi Jennie Rosenn

I read with horror the news that 71 people died in the back of a truck on an Austrian highway. They were likely refugees from Syria packed one on top of another in the broiling summer heat, taking desperate measures to escape the violence in their homeland. When only a few weeks later I saw the wrenching photo of Aylan Kurdi, a small boy whose body washed up on a Turkish beach after his family attempted to reach safety by boat, my heart broke open. I know I was not alone. A few days later I saw a photograph of a man holding Aylan's body. I could feel the weight in my arms, a physical memory of my own sons at the age of three.

But the plight of the Syrian refugees seeking safety in Europe is only the most recent crisis to reach our consciousness. Closer to home, Central American children and families fled ruthless violence this summer, crossing mountains and deserts to reach our land, only to be held in jail-like detention. Earlier, the world watched as hundreds of Rohingya Muslims from Burma took to the sea on boats to flee persecution; many of them died of thirst, starvation and exposure. Refugees are risking their lives and fleeing from many places. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Colombia, Sudan, Ukraine... the list goes on and on.

Every day when we open the newspaper we are confronted with the faces of people from all corners of our world who have endured persistent persecution and left everything they know behind and fled in search of safety.

What do we do when we encounter these stories? We may read a bit; we may not. But then we turn the page. We are overwhelmed. We are not sure how we can make a difference, and it is difficult to comprehend the depth of their vulnerability.

On an unconscious level, perhaps it reminds us of our own vulnerability. Hearing about the lives of refugees magnifies losses we too could face—loss of loved ones, homes, jobs, health, life as we know it today. Hearing their stories reminds us that it could be us experiencing these losses; that it has been us. Just a few generations ago, it was us on those boats being turned away. It was us making the unbearable choice to send our children into the woods or onto trains in those final moments as we

were herded to camps. And thousands of years ago, it was the ancient Israelites who wandered in the desert after fleeing from the Egyptians.

This confrontation with our existential and historical vulnerability lies at the core of the holiday of Sukkot. The final prayers of Yom Kippur have been sung and we breathe a sigh of relief that we have been sealed in the Book of Life for another year. But what is our first act? Jewish tradition teaches that immediately after Yom Kippur we should begin to build a *sukkah*, a hut reminiscent of those we dwelt in after escaping persecution in Egypt.

The Torah instructs us: “You shall live in booths (*sukkot*) seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God.”¹ The rabbis go on to mandate that the structure must be temporary, not permanent; and there are lengthy rules about how to build it accordingly. It cannot even *appear* to be permanent, lest there be any confusion.

The *sukkah* is thus a physical reminder, not only of our journey in the desert, but also of our abiding vulnerability. According to the Talmudic sage Rava we must leave the comfort of our realm of permanence and move to the temporary.² The *sukkah* demands that we relive the feeling of insecurity our ancestors experienced during their years of wandering in the desert.

But does the *sukkah* symbolize only our vulnerability? Does it not also symbolize God’s sheltering presence, the very presence that enabled the Israelites to survive their journey? In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva debate this very question. Rabbi Eliezer understands *sukkot* as “booths” that represent the fragile huts of the Israelites in the desert. Rabbi Akiva, however, interprets *sukkot* as “coverings,” a reference to the clouds of glory that accompanied the Israelites and protected them.³ The later Medieval commentators Rashi and Rambam also understand *sukkot* as clouds of glory and suggest that the phrase intimates the miraculous presence of God. We can conclude that the *sukkah* holds both of these truths: the fragility of life and the miraculous strength and abundance of the spirit.

This teaching reminds me of young refugees I met earlier this year in Uganda. Two dozen teenage girls, all of them impregnated by rape, gathered together with a counselor to begin to confront the traumas they had endured, to talk about their losses and fears and to envision the kinds of mothers they could become.

Toward the end of the session, the girls stood up one-by-one and began to sing. Clapping and dancing to their robust song, their mournful faces visibly shifted as their voices rose. There would be plenty more days of tears, anxiety and real hardship, but for those few minutes, their spirits lifted and soared; they drew strength from a well difficult to fathom. It is a well I would not have believed existed had I not seen these women draw from it. I realized that I have seen others reach down to this well of strength, and in my own less dramatic way, drawn from it myself. It is the resilience of the human spirit. It is the clouds of glory.

¹ Leviticus 23:42-43

² Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 2a

³ Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 11b

The clouds of glory are not wholly separate from us. God’s glory is expressed through our work in the world—through the actions we take to strengthen the spirit of the most vulnerable. This is the work we must take up as Jews in the world today.

Today’s refugees are among the world’s most unprotected people. This Sukkot, I challenge us not to turn the page when confronted with their faces, but rather, to learn more about them, seek out opportunities to volunteer with refugees in our own communities, advocate on refugee issues or give *tzedakah*. We must also address the root causes of refugee crises around the world, by helping to build just societies where each person is valued and persecution is not tolerated.

Whether we build our own *sukkah*, sit in a friend’s or simply remember that there is a holiday after Yom Kippur, this is the time for us to confront the fragility of life and to ask ourselves what kind of sheltering presence we can be.



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About this Publication

This essay is part of American Jewish World Service’s Chag v’Chesed (“Celebration and Compassion”) series. Written by prominent leaders in the Jewish community, Chag v’Chesed draws on teachings from the holidays to inform our thinking about Judaism and social justice. AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors a broad spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author. To subscribe to Chag v’Chesed, please visit www.ajws.org/cvc.

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