

*B'Rosh Hashanah Yikateivun uv'Yom Tzom Kippur Yechateimun.*

*On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.*

*Who will live and who will die.*

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*Who will live a long life and who will come to an untimely end.*

These High Holy days are referred to as the Yamim Noraim, Days of Awe, but also days of fear. Days in which we tremble before God. Yet, for many in this world, they tremble on a daily basis, living a life of fear.

In the middle of the night, they grabbed as much of their belongings as they could, leaving behind the precious items, the gifts, and the mementos for the essentials. They left in the darkness of night, not to be seen or heard, with a fear that if they were noticed, someone would rethink a policy change and go after those seeking freedom. They would camp out in the unknown, not knowing what the next day would bring.

As they left en masse, as refugees, fearful of their own safety, looking for a way out, they wandered, knowing that at any moment they would be spotted, being chased by the regime that they fear, by the dictator that causes them to tremble. And as those who would try to destroy tracked them down, some had second thoughts. “Are we better off in the unknown?” They thought. “Where will we go? Where will we call home? Our families have been here for centuries. This place is all that we know. Are we better off returning to a life of fear, to a place that we have called home?” they asked, “or do we keep going, and die along the way?”

And then, standing at the shore with the reality of violence and oppression behind them if they returned, and new opportunities in a new place on the horizon, the only option was to keep going. Even with the waters in front of them. To immerse in the waters and hope that they arrived safely on land.

Miraculously the sea split, and they -- we -- B'nai Yisrael, the People of Israel, journeyed through and entered into a new stage of life. We were refugees without a homeland. Wandering from place to place in the desert wilderness. It wasn't until we entered the land of Israel that we felt at home. It wasn't until we were embraced that we felt like we no longer had to wander, no longer had to struggle.

This story is our story. This story is part of our collective memory and our collective history. This is our journey. We retell it and relive it on Passover. We acknowledge this journey every Friday night when we recite the words of the Kiddush. Our exodus experience, our refugee experience, is what defines us. And while this story is a story as old as time itself, inscribed in scripture, a narrative in which a people - our people - leave oppression and seek out a safe haven, it is unfortunately, hardly an outdated and irrelevant tale.

I have to admit, this was not the sermon I was going to give. I had prepared something else. With many themes of the High Holidays, there is always a plethora of issues to touch upon. And with many issues in the news -- any one of which some think of as the most pressing issue in our nation or in the world to discuss -- I had plenty to share. And I had prepared something else. Yet, something in me changed last week. At my desk, making last minute preparations for the holidays, adding this and taking out that, I viewed something on my screen and began to cry. Maybe as a father, as a parent, I cried because you can't unsee such a thing. Maybe as a Jew, whose people have experienced too much genocide. Or maybe, maybe just a human being who was taught compassion, who was taught that every life is precious, that every person is sacred.

Last week, I – like much of the world - saw the disturbing images of the lifeless body of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, washed ashore on a Turkish beach. Aylan along with his older brother

five-year-old Galip, and their mother Rehan drowned while seeking a better life. When Aylan was born in Syria three year ago, there was already war. That was all he knew. Abdullah Kurdi had twice paid smugglers to help his family reach the Greek Island of Kos - both times they were unsuccessful. This time, he made his own arrangements, a third attempt on a 16 foot dinghy with twelve passengers aboard. After their asylum request had been rejected, they were still heading to Canada where they had extended family waiting to help them.

As the water became choppy, only 500 yards from the shore, the board capsized, and Abdullah tried holding unto his wife's hand, but she couldn't swim. He sons slipped from his arms. A day later, he was making arrangements from them to fly back from Turkey to the Syria border, before driving to his hometown, which had long ago been taken over by ISIS, to bury his family.

In order to apply for asylum, one must be formally designated as a refugee, but the vast majority of the Syrian Kurds residing in the UN Refugee Camps in Turkey have trouble getting their applications processed, and Turkey refuses to grant exit visas for those who do not have official refugee status. And these refugees are not alone. There are over sixty million refugees in this world. Over eleven million of these refugees are from Syria, each of them displaced from their homes because of war, conflict, and violence. For many, that is all they know. And they wander around surrounding countries, hoping to be taken in by democracies that give them a chance for safety and freedom, that give them a life.

Antonio Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said that Syrians are the largest refugee population from a single conflict in a generation. And now, they wander, waiting to enter their Promised Land - any land, that will take them in. The

number of global refugees and internally displaced people is at its highest point since World War II.

We must understand first and foremost what a refugee is - a refugee is not a migrant. Refugees flee armed conflict or persecution and seek refuge across international borders, knowing that if their asylum requests are denied, there may be deadly consequences. We must also understand who a refugee is. We are refugees. We were refugees when we left Egypt in darkness and cross a split sea to begin a life of freedom. We were refugees, when we feared for our lives and we left, wandering until we had a place that we could call home.

We were refugees when we left Eastern Europe and came by the boat loads through Ellis Island to the land of opportunity. My family still has my great grandmothers shawl, the only thing she brought with her, what she wore around her shoulders as she sailed to a new life in America.

We were refugees when our ancestors left Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries, in the 50s and 60s, scared as a Jewish minority, with over 90% of the Jewish community leaving at that time.

We were refugees. When we left the Soviet Union. When after years of fear and uncertainty we could be free, and safe. We were refugees. When we left Ethiopia. In the middle of the night. And were resettled in our homeland.

And we were advocates. When hundreds of thousands rallied at the United Nations and marched in Washington to fight for the lives of so many. A decade ago, we proudly wore green bracelets that defiantly declared: "Not on my watch. Save Darfur." A decade later, I am still waiting for the Save Syria bracelets, or more precisely, the Save Syrians bracelets. We can talk about global warfare. We can talk about genocide. We can talk about chemical weapons. We can talk about the evil that is Syrian President Assad.



However, what is most important, and most pressing for us, not just as Jews, but as human beings, is that half of the country has been displaced. Homeless. Fearful about their future.

UK Prime Minister, David Cameron has been unclear on how England will welcome in refugees, and unwilling to commit to being a safe haven. Ironically, as if they have learned from their past, Germany, the cause of so many of our ancestors becoming refugees half a century ago, welcomed in 10,000 refugees in a single afternoon last week, most arriving by train from Austria and Hungary, while most European countries have yet to commit to taking in refugees.

The Torah is meant to guide us, to teach us right from wrong. That means that at times, we are guided by the words of Torah, and at times we learn from the mistakes in the narrative. We read in this morning's Torah reading that Abraham, following through on Sarah's wishes, sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness, kicking them out of their home,

making them refugees. Our job though, is not to follow the actions of Abraham. Instead, we are told to walk in God's ways. The Torah reading tells us: "*V'yishma Elohim et Kol HaNaar,*" that God heard the cry of the child. The angel of God then tells Hagar: "*Kumi Se'i et HaNaar v'HaChaziki et Yadech bo,*" come and lift up the boy and hold him by the hand. So to walk in God's ways, and to follow God's word, so appropriately read on Rosh Hashanah, at the beginning of the New Year, we must, hear the cry of those lost in the wilderness. We must - through our actions - lift them up and hold their hands. Congregation Beth El is a member organization of the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees and now is the time to lift these refugees up, to hold their hands, and act.

We are taught at such a young age, how to treat each other. We are taught -- ideally, that "love thy neighbor as thyself" is the most important lesson in the Torah. After all, in Mesechet Shabbat of the Babylonian Talmud, we find the well-known story of Shammai and Hillel.

When Shammai is challenged to explain the whole Torah while standing on one foot, he scoffs, saying that this is absurd and it cannot be done. Rabbi Hillel, *Al Regel Achat*, on one foot, responds “*V’Ahavta L’reicha Kamocha*,” love your neighbor as yourself. That is the whole Torah. Everything else is just commentary; what a beautiful idea and image. In fact, Rabbi Akiva went as far as to say that “*zeh klal gadol baTorah*,” that this is the greatest lesson of the entire Torah.

Yet, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, points out how easy this is. It is easy to love your neighbor as yourself because they are like you. They share the same interests. They share the same values. They live on your street, their children play with your children. They commute to work with you. You take turns having each other over for dinner. It is much harder, and much more vital then, to love the stranger.

Believe it or not, the commandment to love the stranger is mentioned more times in the Torah than any other commandment. More so than laws pertaining to Shabbat, or Kashrut, or prayer, or even belief in God. More times than any other law, we are commanded to love the stranger for we were once strangers in a strange land. We were strangers when we left Ethiopia. We were strangers when we left the former Soviet Union. We were strangers when we left Iran and the Middle East. We were strangers when we left Germany and Eastern Europe. We were strangers when we left Egypt, as refugees, in search of freedom and safety. In fact, HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the oldest international migration and refugee settlement agency in the United States, was founded because we were once strangers. So we must love the stranger. Here's how:

HIAS is asking the US Jewish community to sign a petition, urging the President and the US Government to resettle 100,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees in the United States, to start a new life of safety and freedom, and to increase the humanitarian aid we are providing to refugees in the region. HIAS also has opportunities to volunteer with refugees and asylum seekers in our area, something that we as a community will be participating in and taking part in in the New Year, something that I urge all of you to volunteer for and be a part of. Information about this petition and ways to volunteer are available on the table in the lobby.

The command to love the stranger is not a passive command. Loving is active. Loving involves embracing and advocating. Loving means that you stand up for another, that you pour your heart out for another.

Loving means that we are as interested and invested in the well-being of another as we are in our own well-being. Loving the stranger means that we must work to ensure their survival.

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In some ways, it is up to us. Let us act. Let us love the stranger.

And ensure that millions more are written in the book of life in the year to come. Shana Tova.