**For You Were Strangers** Yom Kippur Morning Sermon, 5777 / 2016

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Last month at a HIAS, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, rally for refugees in Manhattan, I heard two speakers: Manny Lindenbaum and Sana Mustafa. Days before the Nazis invaded Poland, Manny Lindenbaum and his brother escaped to England as refugees as part of the Kindertransport. In 1946, HIAS, helped reunite Manny with an aunt and an uncle in New Jersey. Now Manny has turned his attention to helping Syrian refugees.

After Manny spoke, we heard from Sana Mustafa, a college student has neither seen nor heard from her father in more than 1000 days. Sana is from Syria and came to Bard College for what was expected to be a short time, but she has remained at the school because her homeland is caught in a bloody civil war. Her father, a liberal, educated man was imprisoned for peacefully opposing the Assad Regime and she doesn’t know if he is dead or alive. Her mother and sisters fled to Turkey to avoid torture and rape. Now, after two years of vetting, her mother and sister finally got US Visas but are trapped in Turkey because the Turkish government won’t release Syrians who have college degrees. Nor is she allowed to join them. On her way into the rally that evening Sana was accosted by people handing out flyers warning of the dangers of admitting refugees like her to the United States, because they see people like her as a threat. My words can’t begin to capture her courage or the struggles of her young life, but you can view a video on our Facebook page or by a link that I will share when my sermon is posted online. [https://youtu.be/pT7qald5TdU]

Immigrants are people who leave their home in search of a better life. Refugees are people who are fleeing their home and cannot return for fear of their lives. Today there are staggering 65 million people in the world who have been displaced by conflict or persecution, comprising a global refugee population larger than at any time since World War II. Half of them are children. Eleven million are Syrians who have fled their homes because of war. With Islamic extremist violence a threat, innocent refugees are scapegoated, as if they were the perpetrators and not the victims. Despite the vetting process that US refugees undergo, opposition to refugees has become a campaign issue. Over half of US Governors have stated their refusal to accept refugees in their states; and although they can’t keep them out they will not accept federal funding to assist them. With so many issues to engage our concern this Yom Kippur, why did I choose talk about refugees on this holiest day of the year? Because this is a Jewish issue. Not because other groups aren’t involved. But because this is an issue that should resonate with us in particular. As Jews, no one knows better than us what happens when a country shuts its doors to vulnerable people fleeing for their lives.

And care we do: As described by Rabbi Stephen Weiss of B’nei Jeshurun in New York City: “Za’atari, Jordan is the second largest refugee camp in the world…There, the needs of the over 80,000 refugees – 85 percent of them women and children – are being met by two groups providing funds for clean water food, medical aid and advocacy. One, the Jewish Coalition for Syrian Refugees, is Faith Alliance, formally involves partnerships and volunteers from all faiths. The overwhelming amount of money, staff and volunteers, however, are provided by Jewish donors and 24 Jewish organizations, including HIAS, the Joint Distribution Committee, AJC, ADL, the JCPA, and the umbrella organizations of the three major Jewish movements (Reform, Conservative and Orthodox). Its director, Dr. Georgette Bennett was herself born in Budapest in 1946 to parents who were Holocaust survivors.”

Why do Jews care so much about refugees? I believe that there are three reasons: our Torah, our history, and simply our humanity.

**First, our Torah.** We are told once to love our neighbor, but 36 times to love the Ger, the “stranger,” because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Rabbi Shai Held of Mechon Hadar in New York, taught a group of rabbis preparing for the Days of Awe, that the word “Ger,” may indeed mean someone who flees their home out of fear, a refugee. At every Passover Seder, we declare aloud that our ancestors were wandering refugees, and we promise to open our doors to others in need.

**Second: Our Jewish History**: Looking into our own family history, most of us have stories of refugees—or those who didn’t make it. At our most recent Bar Mitzvah last Friday, I shared a story that Reb Zalman wrote about his life as a young refugee in Vichy, France, a step ahead of the Nazis. If that young refugee had not made it, the Jewish people would not be the same and indeed I wouldn’t be standing here today as your rabbi. But not all were so lucky. Prior to Yom Hashoah, I listened as one of our Hebrew school teachers told how she was named after her grandmother who died in Auschwitz. Her father had escaped and come to the US. He was finally able to obtain visas for his parents, but a week too late. The doors were shut and they were unable to leave and were eventually murdered by the Nazis.

‘In the summer of 1938, delegates from thirty-two countries met at the French resort of Evian…During the nine-day meeting, delegate after delegate rose to express sympathy for the refugees. But most countries, including the United States and Britain, offered excuses for not letting in more refugees…Even efforts by some Americans to rescue children failed: a bill to admit 20,000 endangered Jewish refugee children, was not supported by the Senate in 1939 and 1940.” [Source: US Holocaust Museum]. A poll of Americans in 1938 after Kristallnacht, showed that a shameful 61% did not want to offer asylum to refugees from Nazi Germany and Austria, even to children. [Source: ADL]

The nadir of American rejection of Jewish refugees was the Saint Louis. In 1939 the ocean liner the Saint Louis sailed from Germany with 937 Jewish Refugees hoping to come to Cuba in transit to the United States. The Saint Louis was turned away in Cuba, and came so close to Miami as to see the lights of the city. But even an urgent cable to President Roosevelt would not win visas for these Jewish refugees in the xenophobic climate of the Depression. Neither would Canada admit them. The refugees were sent back to Europe, where many were killed in the Holocaust. After the Holocaust, we vowed, never again. Never let this happen to other human beings. That’s why hundreds of Rabbis and synagogues support the work of HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. That’s why Jewish congregations are stepping up to become involved, from communities in Vancouver, British Columbia who have adopted refugee families, to several congregations right here in Westchester who are awaiting the opportunity in the coming year.

**For our third reason to support refugees is simple Humanity**. To see the image of God in the photo of the drowned three-year-old refugee Aylan Kurdi, on a beach in Turkey, or in the shocked impassive face of a little boy, Omran Daqneesh, who was pulled from the rubble of a bombing in Aleppo. Yet, these who made our news are just two of thousands of wounded, dying, and deprived children, children like our own. How can a human heart not be broken open to care?

This summer Rabbi Jason Navarez from nearby Congregation Shaarei Tefillah in Bedford Corners went on a fact finding mission to Berlin with IsraAID, the Israeli relief organization, to learn about Refugee issues in Europe. He wrote of the dire needs, the tears of refugees separated from their families, the overwhelmed societies trying to cope, and the imperative of American involvement, and told the story of Devya, “a 22-year-old young man from Damascus. He had been an aspiring engineer, but Deyya left everything in 2011 to unite his disabled sister and her two children with her husband who was already in Germany. Their grueling journey took them through Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, and Switzerland, paying smugglers thousands of Euros to be stuffed into overcrowded trucks, cars and rubber boats; walking for long hours, some without shoes that had been lost. They finally reached Germany, only to be faced with a search for scattered relatives and unreachable friends.”

According to Rabbi Navarez, “Young men like Deyya urgently need to know they have a future. Left to wallow in desperate circumstances, some of them will become sitting ducks for slick ISIS propaganda that promises a way out.” In other words, to fight extremism, we need to help refugees now.

Judaism is a religion of action. So I always ask, what are we here to do today?

When we feel a little discomfort on Yom Kippur from fasting, from not washing, it is not a punishment for our sins. It is a spiritual exercise of empathy. Can we imagine living in a war zone where we aren’t sure where our next meal is coming from? When we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah in the Haftarah: “Share your bread with the hungry and make the wretched poor into your home,” do we think he was speaking to us? People in Sweden have literally taken refugees into their homes. Can we in Westchester at least help to give a few refugees a decent home? When we hear the book of Jonah this afternoon, Jonah who was sent to help the people of Assyria, an enemy country at war with his own people do we think the message is for us, today? Will we be like the Americans of 1938, or take this opportunity to integrate refugees into our society, to build friendships between Muslims and Jews?

We have made a modest start as a community. We have joined The Westchester Refugee Task Force. As part of that group of 30 organizations, we helped to furnish an apartment for a Syrian Refugee family of six in New Haven. The family has four children, including 16 year-old girl who was left a paraplegic from a gunshot wound. Our fellow congregations in this part of Westchester are already gearing up to do much more, since HIAS is hoping to bring 50 Syrian Refugees to settle in Westchester in the coming year. I want to see PCS be part of that mitzvah.

**First** we must grow our Tikkun Olam team: PCS is small—but look around you—not so small. Congregants told our Vision Committee that Tikkun Olam and Social Action are truly one of our top priorities, yet our Social Action committee has 4 members. That would be about 1% of Holiday attendees. I have to ask, do we mean what we say, because if Social Action is truly a top PCS priority, why don’t we have 10 or 20 or 30 people on the committee planning and making big things happen? As we say in Texas, are we just talking the talk or are we walking the walk? After my sermon, our chairperson Leslie Mack will speak and ask for you to become involved.

**Second**, we can help to open hearts. In the current climate, one of the best things that we can do just to listen to the stories told by refugees and to share them with others. To help people learn to see refugees as human beings like us. Watch Sana’s video for a start. On January 11, our fellow congregation CSI will host three refugees to talk about their lives, and offer a follow up workshop on January 15 to discuss our responses. I hope that 10 or 20 or 30 of us can attend and get involved.

**Third,** we can get involved individually to support HIAS. I have brought some of their materials, so you can take some as a reminder to to their website, HIAS.org and learn about this remarkable 130 year old organization, what it did to save Jewish refugees, and what it is doing today, and get involved and support them and their work.

A colleague shared this teaching from a Hassidic master:

The Slonimer Rebbe teaches that “the passion in the corrective action needs to correspond to the passion in the transgression. It’s just like the way that we kasher dishes. For example, if you have a dairy cutting board, which is only used to cut cold things, and you accidentally put a piece of meat on it, all you have to do make the cutting board kosher again is rinse it with cold water. For things whose use is cold, cold is enough to fix it. On the other hand, if you drop a piece of meat into a dairy pot on the stove, to render the pot kosher you have to boil water in it. If it is used for hot, it takes hot to fix it.

“A lukewarm response is suitable to lukewarm issues and problems. …The serious problems that we face in the world today— [like the refugee crisis]—are not going to be resolved with lukewarm responses: they call for a high degree of passion.”

Our sages said that the main purpose of a fast is to motivate us to do *Tzedakah*, righteousness and giving. This Yom Kippur, I invite you to feel your Jewish passion for Tikkun Olam, a passion born of our Torah, our historical experiences, and our human hearts. To quote a wise Uber driver I heard this summer, himself an immigrant, too many Americans don’t realize that refugees are human beings just like us, that we, too could be in the same boat. My friends, we were in the same boat. Now it is time to lend a hand and bring them to shore.