

Rabbi Daniel Kirzane
The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah
12 October 2016 / 10 Tishrei 5777
Yom Kippur morning

Because We are Jewish: Responding to Refugees at Home and Abroad

Two thousand years of roaming the world are enough to humble any nation, or what's left of one. Two thousand years of fleeing an oppressive homeland, only to be oppressed by the next one, have etched into the Jewish mind-set a keen memory of traumas past and a nervous premonition of traumas to come. ... From the Exodus to the Holocaust, the Jews remember.¹

This reflection on Jewish memory is the center-piece² of Lev Golinkin's memoir about his family's perilous 1989 journey from East Ukraine to West Lafayette, Indiana.

The Golinkin family fled the Soviet Union's brutal and repressive regime in search of a land where they wouldn't have to be afraid to be Jewish. Stripped of all their documents and possessions at the Soviet border, the Golinkins depended on the generosity of strangers for transportation, housing, and food as they made their way slowly to Vienna, Austria. From there, with the aid of a German baron whose father was a Nazi, the Golinkins immigrated to America. They were resettled as refugees by the hundred-year-old³ Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (known today as HIAS⁴), the Jewish organization that made the entire relocation possible.

For some here this morning, the Golinkins' story is your story. Kansas City became home to 1,300 Soviet Jewish refugees in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, and many are still members of B'nai Jehudah.⁵

For others, the Golinkins' story is like the story of a family you welcomed to Kansas City. Our congregation has a proud history of adopting Soviet Jewish families, with congregants volunteering their time and resources to help newcomers make a life and a home here.

Indeed, the combined effort of Jews around America was essential in enabling the Golinkins and hundreds of thousands of others to resettle in the United States from the former Soviet Union. B'nai Jehudah stands as a sterling example among

¹ Golinkin, Lev. *A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka* (Anchor Books, New York 2014). 146-147.

² Page 147 is halfway to the book's conclusion on page 294 (excluding epilogue and acknowledgements).

³ <https://ontherescuefront.wordpress.com/2016/09/06/hiass-unfounded-foundings/>

⁴ HIAS changed its name, dropping the outdated "Hebrew," in 2014. See here: <http://jewishtimes.com/32667/alphabet-soup/news/national-news/>.

⁵ <http://forward.com/culture/4326/after-25-years-soviet-emigr-c3-a9s-still-strangers/>

congregations in the city and across the country as activists in the movement to free Soviet Jewry.

To take one example, in the 1970s, our congregation's Soviet Jewry project began a relationship with the prominent refusenik Evgeny Yakir, along with his wife, Rimma, and son, Alexander.⁶ In 1985 our congregation "adopted" the Yakir family, formally requesting permission for their emigration from the Soviet Union.⁷ The next year, members and leaders of our congregation, including – as I understand – Louise Hipsh and Stephanie Wolff, *zichronah livrachah*, visited the Yakirs in Russia.⁸ A year after that, members of our congregation traveled again, this time to Washington, D.C. to receive a telephone call from Yakir in the office of Senator Bob Dole, then the Senate Republican Leader. As documented in the Senate Congressional Record, Senator Dole was so moved by this visit as to write a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev himself, then the General Secretary of the Communist Party, with a personal request to allow the Yakir family to emigrate.⁹ Nine months later, in November of 1987, the Yakir family finally left the Soviet Union after more than 10 years of waiting.¹⁰ They moved to Israel, where they still live to this day.¹¹

Our community committed itself to making the world better for our oppressed brothers and sisters. Through sustained political action and innumerable acts of kindness and generosity, we fulfilled the central commandment of this afternoon's Torah reading: וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִי כְמוֹתָּךְ, "Love your neighbor as [you love] yourself" (Lev. 19:18).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the successful resettlement of over one million Jews in Israel, the United States, and throughout the world, American Jews have by and large retired their advocacy for refugees. However, conflicts around the world have continued to displace persecuted families, creating more refugees today than at any other time in recorded history. Now is the time to continue our people's proud legacy of action and activism in behalf of refugees seeking safe haven around the world.

There are in the world today 21.3 million refugees, 40.8 million internally-displaced persons, and 3.2 million persons seeking asylum in a new country.¹² To put those numbers in perspective, one in every 115 humans is now either a refugee,

⁶ See <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00010090/02499/7j>, <http://www.jta.org/1977/11/02/archive/the-soviet-jewry-project-of-temple-bnai-jehudah>, and http://www.beth-torah.org/worship/sermons/citizen_or_consumer_-_erev_rosh_hashanah_5752.aspx

⁷ <http://www.jta.org/1987/10/21/archive/six-long-term-refuseniks-get-permission-to-emigrate>

⁸ Personal correspondence with Rabbi Mark Levin, October 6, 2016.

⁹ <http://digitalcollections.library.cmu.edu/awweb/awarchive?type=file&item=642725>

¹⁰ <http://www.jta.org/1987/10/21/archive/six-long-term-refuseniks-get-permission-to-emigrate> (as above)

¹¹ Personal correspondence with Rabbi Mark Levin, October 6, 2016 and <http://www.jewage.org/wiki/en/Profile:P0457873499> (Alexander Yakir).

¹² <http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7>

internally displaced, or seeking asylum. If this were the population of a country, it would be the world's 21st biggest, between Thailand and the United Kingdom.¹³ The current situation is a humanitarian crisis that faces the entire world; it's not somebody else's problem to solve.¹⁴

This afternoon, a few verses after "Love your neighbor as [you love] yourself," we'll read another commandment that our tradition regards as even more important: "You shall love [the stranger] as [you love] yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Lev. 19:34). It is our Jewish mission to love not only our neighbor – the person who is similar to us – but also the stranger – the one who couldn't be more different.

B'nai Jehudah is answering this moral summons. I am proud to announce the unanimous support of B'nai Jehudah's rabbis, Social Justice Committee, and Board of Trustees for three areas of response to today's refugee crisis: education, advocacy, and support. We are one of more than 200 congregations to join HIAS' Welcome Campaign in support of welcoming refugees to the United States.¹⁵ We hope that every member of our community will become involved in one of the many refugee-oriented projects we're coordinating in the weeks and months ahead. We make this commitment aware of the concerns some have, and we shall seek to address them. Ultimately, we are motivated by Jewish values and Jewish history to open our hearts and our homes to those who need us most.

We read in this morning's haftarah portion Isaiah's timeless call to help those who are most vulnerable in our society:

This is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke.
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
and to take the wandering poor into your home (Isa. 58:6-7).

We today are just like Isaiah's contemporaries 2800 years ago. We focus mainly on our own lives, reluctant to disturb our routines for the downtrodden and invisible. Indeed, it's human nature to watch out for our own and to let others worry about

¹³ Sentiment taken, with figures recalculated, from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2015/6/558193896/worldwide-displacement-hits-all-time-high-war-persecution-increase.html>. Population figures from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_\(United_Nations\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_(United_Nations)).

¹⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2015/10/eight-solutions-world-refugee-crisis/>

¹⁵ Read more about the Welcome Campaign here: <http://www.hias.org/ask-your-congregation-join-hias-welcome-campaign>.

themselves. But our moral tradition urges us to transcend this basic nature and to strive to embody the divine ideal of loving the stranger.¹⁶

In the 20th century, we were driven to action because Soviet refuseniks were *our people*. In the 21st century, refugees are no longer Jewish, but helping them is no less essential to who we are. As HIAS phrases it so elegantly, “We used to help refugees because they were Jewish. Now we help refugees because *we* are Jewish.”¹⁷ The Torah is unambiguous on this issue. We read in Deuteronomy: “God loves the stranger, providing them food and clothing. You, too, must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:18-19).

In addition to supporting those in our own community, our history also compels us to stand up for those who take refuge in other countries who need a safe place to call home. As a community, we remember the desperation of seeking escape with nowhere to turn. Today’s refugees are not fleeing another Holocaust. Nevertheless, they do fear for their lives, they are persecuted for their religion, and they depend completely on the goodwill of the nations for their survival.

We know from our own past what happens when good people choose to do nothing. And we also know – from our tremendous successes with the movement to free Soviet Jewry – what happens when good people choose to do something. It is for these reasons that B’nai Jehudah is committed to action.

We have made this commitment at a time of heightened apprehension about refugees. In particular, many Americans fear that terrorists seeking to enter the United States may infiltrate our refugee resettlement program and take advantage of our good will to harm us. This is a concern based on incorrect or incomplete information. The security screenings for refugees are the most vigorous measures applied to any individual who seeks to set foot legally on American soil. Here’s a brief summary of the refugee resettlement screening process.

First, a refugee flees “conflict or persecution”¹⁸ in his or her home country to a second country of refuge.

Then, a refugee must be received and recorded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This agency makes recommendations to the United States about which refugees may be strong candidates for resettlement in America.

These candidates are processed by an American resettlement support center on foreign soil. There, they undergo biographic and biometric security checks and

¹⁶ Cf. BT Bava Metzia 59b. Cf. also Deut. 10:18 where God is identified as אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה, the One who loves the stranger.

¹⁷ Cf. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/09/19/refugees-united-nations-conference-hias-jewish-human-rights-holocaust-column/90618892/>.

¹⁸ <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/refugees.html>

personal interviews from four American security agencies. These measures require 18 to 36 months, and an application can be denied for any number of reasons. Around one half of one percent of refugees worldwide are resettled in America, and those who are generally achieve stable – if low-income – households within 5-20 years.¹⁹

This process works. Of the 745,000 refugees resettled in America since 9/11, only two have been arrested for terrorism-related crimes – they are alleged to have donated money to al-Qaeda.²⁰ The process is professional and reliable, and it has kept America safe.

Of course, no system is perfect. Opening your home to strangers always incurs some risk. But risk is an unavoidable byproduct of living in a global society. When our tradition's most primal ethical values are on the line, a small amount of risk is worth the moral reward.

B'nai Jehudah is answering our tradition's call to welcome the stranger and provide sustenance for the needy, and we've organized a variety of ways for every member of our community to be involved.

First, I want to recommend the Jewish Vocational Service's mentorship program. JVS mentors are matched with a recently-resettled family to provide guidance and friendship in the family's first six months in America.

Jessica, Jeremiah, Esther, and I have recently become mentors through this program, and we've been blessed to come to know the Ogole family [show picture]. Joseph, Dorica, Rebecca, Victor, Peter, and Simon Ogole are a Christian family who fled tribal warfare in the Congo. They lived as urban refugees in Entebbe, Uganda for fourteen years, and in 2013, they were recommended for resettlement in the United States. After three years of security checks and anxious waiting, they arrived in Kansas City on August 8. Following a few more arrivals, the Ogole family is now all in Kansas City, and the eleven of them live in a single home in the Indian Mound neighborhood of Northeast KC.

Some of you met Rebecca when she joined me as a guest at Shabbat services recently. Rebecca is twenty years old; she speaks English, French, Swahili, Lingala, and multiple Congolese tribal languages; and she is working on her GED. She and the rest of her family have high hopes for the life they intend to build here in the US. My family has been greatly enriched through getting to know Rebecca and her family, and we've appreciated the rare opportunity to mentor them about life in America. I am eager to speak about JVS mentorship with anyone who's interested.

¹⁹ See the Migration Policy Institute's *The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees* available:

<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/integration-outcomes-us-refugees-successes-and-challenges>

²⁰ <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21674694-america-should-reclaim-its-role-beacon-those-fleeing-persecution-and-war-yearning?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/yearningtobreathefree>

Mentoring a family isn't for everyone, of course, and there are several other ways you can be involved in helping refugees. No need to write these down; we're going to email you a reminder in a couple of days.

Starting this afternoon and continuing through the holiday of Sukkot, B'nai Jehudah is hosting a Su-coat drive. Please bring new or gently-used coats to Shabbat and holiday services, the Sukkot Family Festival, religious school, or any time you come into the building. Cindy Parkans is coordinating this effort with the support of our adult b'nai mitzvah class. See any of them for more information.

We're also planning a birthday party for local refugee children. Some refugees come from cultures without birthdays, so when they arrive in America, they're assigned the birth date of January 1. Last January, JVS threw a party for these refugees, and this year, we've agreed to do the same. Two volunteers have stepped up to lead the planning, so please speak with Rosanne Rosen or Andrea Bourke to learn how you can be involved. Also look for calls for volunteers for the party itself in a couple months.

Finally, there are two great opportunities to learn more deeply about this topic. First, this afternoon, Jill Maidhof and I will lead an advocacy session that will give an overview of the current legislative landscape. At that session, we'll also complete a volunteer project specifically requested by JVS. And secondly, please join us on Monday, November 7 at the Jewish Community Campus for a refugee forum and Q&A cosponsored by B'nai Jehudah, JVS, the Jewish Community Relations Bureau | American Jewish Committee, and the Rabbinical Association of Greater Kansas City. This will be an opportunity for the entire Jewish community to learn more about the refugee resettlement process.

Of course, please reach out to me anytime with questions, suggestions, or concerns.

During the High Holy Days, B'nai Jehudah signals our core values by literally unfurling banners that announce what we're all about. This congregation cares about *kedushah*, sacredness; *derech erez*, common decency; and open hearts. As we resolve to align our lives in the year ahead with the moral instruction of our people, may these values be our guide.

Let us honor *kedushah* by affirming the divine spark within every human being, whether neighbor or stranger.

Let us engage in *derech erez* by clearing pathways to our land for the persecuted and the vulnerable who turn to us for refuge.

And let us open our hearts – even and especially if it scares us – so that we may commit ourselves to our tradition’s ancient and sacred embrace of love.

G'mar chatimah tovah – may each of us be inscribed for a good year in the Book of Life.