

Refugee Relief Mission: The Moral Imperative

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Twenty-five of us are traveling to Greece and Germany at the end of May.

Why are we going?

We are not doing “refugee tourism.” We are not looking to have a good time. In fact, I hope we have a miserable time. I hope when you ask us in June how was the experience, we can truthfully respond, “it was awful.” We are not seeking to disrupt the daily toil of aid workers who labor to relieve suffering. To the contrary, we want to bring attention and support to their heroic work. We are not going so that manicured westerners can pop in on misery, buttressing their humanitarian credibility.

By going, we are not neglecting Jews. I have heard these rumblings: “Jews have plenty of problems of our own. Why should we care and why should we concern ourselves with refugees from the Middle East? They hate Jews; they seek to destroy the Jewish state.”

We are a Zionist congregation that affirms the centrality of the Jewish people. These beliefs are, precisely, the reason we care not only about Jews. Our purpose is to be a light to the nations. The day Jews act for Jews alone - is the day we betray Jewish values:

Ve’etenecha li’vrit am, le’or goyim

“I have created you and appointed you a light to the nations, opening eyes deprived of light.”

Ve’nivrech uvecha kol mishpechot ha’adama

“And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves through you.”

We are going to Greece and Germany for three reasons:

1. To express our humanity

We have obligations to fellow human beings. We cannot shed these obligations. We may ignore them; we may disregard them; we may discount them, but we cannot rid ourselves of them. They cling to us by virtue of the simple fact that we are human. The stronger we are the greater our obligations to the weak.

As the ancient Greek playwright, Aeschylus, wrote from Eleusis - some twenty-five miles from our hotel in Athens: The human task is to “tame the savageness of Man and to make gentle the life of this world.”

We speak a lot about rights in this country – quite rightly. The emergence of the rights of Man propelled the West out of the Dark and Middle Ages of excessive cruelty. We are right to emphasize rights.

We speak far less of obligations. To speak only of rights and not duties is wrong.

In reality, obligations come first. Obligations create rights. I have the right to life and liberty – and even some happiness – because you recognize and honor these as your obligations to me. If you do not affirm my right to free speech as your obligation, I will have no effective right to free speech.

In Jewish thought, the obligations that one human being has to another are about earthly needs, not heavenly rewards. It is not my job to save your soul from eternal damnation. It is my job to save your body from damned starvation. As the Kotzker Rebbe taught: “Take care of your own soul and another person’s body, rather than your body and another person’s soul.”

All of us need nourishment, clothing, hygiene, medical attention. But that is not all we need. We need liberty. We need equality. We need honor and dignity, security and justice. These needs are universal. The poor have these needs. The weak have these needs. Refugees have these needs. Muslim refugees have these needs. Muslim refugees who hate Israel have these needs. And these needs create in us obligations by virtue of the simple fact that we – and they – are human.

We also have a need for roots. The brilliant thinker, Simone Weil famously wrote while living in England, exiled from her French homeland during World War II: “To be rooted – is – perhaps – the most important and least recognized need.”

Refugees, like the rest of us, have a human need – to not be refugees. And we, the strong, have an obligation to provide roots – a home for the homeless. It is a moral obligation that is also in our self-interest. Uprooted-ness is not only wrong, but dangerous. It leads either to spiritual lethargy – a kind of static existence resembling living death – or to a passion for revolution, an overthrowing of the state of deprivation.

Jewish teachings affirm this. Slaves often exhibit existential listlessness, uprooted from hearth and home, and lost in a moral maze of cruelty and injustice. The alternative to this listlessness is often a passion for violent revolution: to overthrow those who are rooted.

We see some of this in the political culture of our times. We can attribute, in part, the populism sweeping the Western world to a sense of alienation felt by large swaths of our population. Whoever is rooted, himself, tends not to want to uproot others, or dismantle a governing system without regard to consequences.

It is often in our self-interest to do the right thing. Had we not turned a blind eye to the savagery in Syria, we would have devised a response that would have spared not only vast human suffering, but also would have prevented a wave of human desperation that has shaken the very foundations of Europe, and coarsened American society. We were supposed to be, and saw ourselves, as the shining city on a hill, the land of the free; a beacon of light, a torch of liberty in a dark world, beckoning the tired, the poor, the wretched refuse of humanity that yearns to breathe free. We did not see ourselves as a miserly, xenophobic, egotistical nation that couldn’t

care less about the rest of the world: America first, America last, America, America, only America.

2. To express our Judaism

The second reason we are going is to express our Judaism.

The obligation to protect human life is at the center of Jewish tradition. If human life is at stake, practically every other Jewish obligation is suspended. The most oft-repeated warning in the entire Torah is the admonition not to wrong a stranger. Jewish sages debated whether it is mentioned in thirty-six or in forty-six places in the Torah. Either way, no other command is articulated as often. According to the rabbis, wrongful treatment includes even verbal abuse.

“You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

“You know the soul of a foreigner, for you were foreigners in the Land of Egypt.”

The Bible instructs us that God defends the orphan and the widow. God loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. Loving and attending to the needs of a stranger are an attribute of God.

God hears the cries of the oppressed:

Tsa'a'kat bnai Yisrael ba'ah elai, ve'gam ra'iti et ha'lachatz asher mitzrayim lochatzim otam.

“The cries of the children of Israel have reached me. I have seen their oppression.”

Hatred of foreigners is one of the oldest human passions. Judaism urges us to suppress these feelings. You were foreigners. It is the reason that God made us the archetypical foreigners: so that we would fight for the rights of the foreigner, the stranger, the weak, the dispossessed and the downtrodden.

This has nothing to do with political philosophy. It is not a liberal or conservative position. It is just Judaism. To be unconcerned about others; to be absorbed only with yourself; to build barriers of moral and emotional separation – is un-Jewish. Furthermore, persecution, oppression, exile, wandering, and otherness have been the historical experiences of the Jewish people from our very beginnings up to, and including, the present day.

Abraham, the first Jew, was commanded to leave his homeland and go to a foreign land. When he arrived, he was forced to wander again, because there was famine in the land. His son, Isaac, was forced to wander. Jacob fled to Egypt. Joseph fled to Egypt.

The Bible emphasizes the pervasiveness of hatred and suspicion of foreigners. Even Joseph never really acclimated. Despite his immense contributions to Egyptian society and his assimilation into Egyptian culture – he looked so Egyptian that his brothers didn't even recognize him – nonetheless, the Egyptians continued to suspect and even hate Joseph because he was a foreigner:

As the Bible tells us: “The Egyptians didn't eat with the Hebrews for they were detestable to them.”

History has cast us into the role of perpetual wanderers – the wandering Jews. We are a refugee people. We know what it feels like. We are – or should be – especially sensitive to the well-off turning their backs on human suffering, unwilling to stare it in the face, or only pretending to care. Just this week, new documents emerged proving that already in 1942 the Allies knew of the systematic murder of two million Jews. They knew what the Nazis intended for the remaining Jews of Europe. We still rage that our own government callously turned back the St. Louis in 1939, condemning over 250 passengers to eventual death. They sailed so close to Florida that they could see the lights of Miami and freedom. They cabled the president. FDR never responded.

The Bible cautions:

“Beware and watch yourself very well, lest you forget the things you saw with your own eyes, and lest these things depart from your heart...and you shall make them known to your children and your children’s children.”

We know what it feels like to be uprooted. That is why we are going to the uprooted. To make it known to our children and our children’s children – and other people’s children. We know what it feels like to be dislocated. That is why we are going to the dislocated. We know what it feels like to be exiled; to be scorned and hated. We know the loneliness, the sadness – the emptiness that never fully disappears.

The ancient poet in Babylonian exile expressed the sentiments of all refugees:

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat – and we wept – when we remembered Zion. How shall we sing God’s song in a foreign land? If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not raise Jerusalem above my highest joy.”

Exile is a violent rupture. It is not the voluntary departure for a better job. Return is out of the question. The Jews know this.

The Medieval poet, Yehuda Halevy, who lived a thousand years after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, expressed the age-old Jewish feelings of exile: feelings of abandonment, loss, mourning, perpetual otherness and the ever-lasting sadness and emptiness of being ripped from family, friends, tradition, culture and nation:

My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west

How can I find taste in food? How shall it be sweet to me?

How shall I render my vows and my bonds...

A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain

Seeing how precious in mine eyes to behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary.

3. Do good in the world

The third reason we are going is to do some good in the world, to offer the milk of human kindness to those malnourished of love and compassion.

Despite our problems, we live in the most affluent city in the freest country in the history of the world. Individually and collectively, we have more capacities than practically any group on the face of the earth.

This knowledge – alone – creates an urge to help, no? To do something for others, to give back. Perhaps it might even generate in us that rare awareness of how fortunate we are, and how unfair and unkind life could be.

We want to help people, don't we? We do not see ourselves as economic units of production and consumption locked in competition with everyone else: Right? When we look into a Syrian orphan child's eyes, don't we see a human being there, not a quota system, extreme vetting, a Muslim ban or a terrorist security risk?

I hope that you agree with our philosophy, irrespective of your political views. I hope you are proud of the synagogue for taking action, for doing something that expresses Jewish and American values. I hope you will tell your friends, share our moral indignation and resolve to do something yourselves.

I hope you get involved with our refugee and immigration task force. There are now well over a hundred fellow congregants signed up.

I hope you get involved in the mission itself. We still have room for you, even at this late date. Just decide tonight that you will call the office on Monday, follow the instructions and meet us in Athens at 2:00 p.m. on Wednesday, May 24.

For the rest of us – I hope you support the refugee relief campaign we have launched. We are traveling in your name. We carry your heart in ours. We reflect the moral sentiments of thousands of SWFS members.

We do not want to come empty-handed.

You will see flyers around the synagogue and online. Do something for the cause. We are collecting smartphones and tablets for a computer literacy shelter in Berlin. We are collecting hygiene kits for teenage boys in Greece. The nursery and religious schools are collecting art supplies and books for children. One four-year-old came into my office this week and told me with such pride, his eyes gleaming with warmth, that he was bringing his books to nursery school the next day for the children who don't have books.

There is also an opportunity to make a modest financial contribution. We have opened a fund at the synagogue; we will transfer a hundred percent of your contributions to our partner NGO's on the ground. A hundred dollars buys a stroller. Three hundred dollars buys a wheelchair. There are opportunities to support English lessons and teachers.

Get involved in some way. Pay attention, lest you forget the things you saw with your own eyes all those years ago. Make known to your children and to your children's children the meaning of being human, being Jewish and being a proud American.

R. Shlomo of Karlin taught: "If you want to raise a person from mud and filth, do not think it is enough to keep standing on top and reaching a helping hand down to him. You must go all the way down yourself; down into mud and filth. Then take hold of him with strong hands and pull him and yourself out into the light."