



WHY WE MUST CARE ABOUT REFUGEES

The Passover story and our shared history of oppression

By Rabbi Laurence Rosenthal

What defines the Jewish people? While some have argued that Jews are defined as a race or religion, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the British Commonwealth, posits that the Jewish people are united over a common story—the story that we tell ourselves every year about slavery, exodus and freedom. We share this common story when we read the Torah, when we bless the wine on Friday night, and especially around our seder tables each Passover. Through those words, through those memories, we are one.

The Exodus story is, at its core, a refugee story. We found our way down to Egypt and we were oppressed there, subjugated, enslaved and abused. As people with different customs and a distinct identity, we were seen as a threat to the ruling power. Through the help of God, we were set free and traversed the wilderness looking for hope, security and a land that we could call home. Each year we tell this story and are reminded of who we are.

Today, most Jews in the U.S. are privileged to have put our years of persecution and wandering behind us; we sit relatively comfortably in the land we call home. But roughly 65.6 million refugees and displaced peoples in the world¹ don't have such privilege. Their homes have been torn apart by war, disease and famine. Many of them are living their own "exodus" story, wandering their own wilderness across borders and into camps in search of refuge. Many have nowhere to go and yet nothing to go back to.

This is happening right now to the Rohingya people of Burma, an ethnic minority who have suffered brutal violence and persecution by the Burmese military in Rakhine State. Burned, beaten, raped and murdered in their villages, more than 688,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh in recent months, carrying children, a few belongings and the memories of atrocities that are nothing less than "ethnic cleansing."

As we hear the story of the Rohingya people, we feel the familiar pull of our own story. The Burmese military is acting like a modern Pharaoh, who viewed us—an ethnic minority—with contempt and fear:

And he said to his people, Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we; Come on, let us deal wisely with them... and so get them out of the land. (Exodus 1:9-10)

The Torah reminds us more than 30 times that we were strangers in the land of Egypt, and so we must never mistreat, abuse or ignore the stranger in our midst. The Torah is teaching us that we must do what we can to prevent the oppression of another.

continued>>

¹ "Forced displacement worldwide at its highest in decades," Adrian Edwards, UNHCR (<http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/stories/2017/6/5941561f4/forced-displacement-worldwide-its-highest-decades.html>) This figure from 2016, the last complete year on record, does not include the major Rohingya exodus from the summer of 2017.

We learn a similar lesson from a modern chapter of the Jewish story—if only world powers had done more when the Nazis occupied Europe and launched the atrocities they perpetrated against the Jews and others during World War II. When the nations of the world had an opportunity to provide refuge to the Jews to prevent their annihilation, they closed their borders and were silent. Because of this complicity, the Nazis weren't the only people responsible for the murder, starvation and death of millions of souls. As the great theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel posited, “Few are guilty, but all are responsible.”

Today, we too are being given the same test. Rohingya activists are asking the international community to provide humanitarian aid, sanctions and accountability for the perpetrators of the violence against them. The Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act (S.2060), which is currently in the Senate, is one way the United States can respond to that call. You can urge your Senator to [co-sponsor](#) the bill, or thank them if they already have.

Our story, our history, and our spiritual life all scream at us to not sit idly by. We must act!

Whether it is within our own communities or a world away, defending the plight of persecuted minorities must be a top concern for all of us who share in the Jewish story this Passover. To sit by and do nothing is an abomination to the All-Mighty and an affront to the memory of our own history.



RABBI LAURENCE ROSENTHAL is one of the rabbis of Ahavath Achim synagogue in Atlanta, Georgia, where he and his family have lived for almost a decade. Rabbi Rosenthal was an AJWS Rabbinic Fellow from 2014 to 2015 and currently serves on the AJWS leadership council of Atlanta.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This essay is part of American Jewish World Service's Chag v'Chesed (“Celebration and Compassion”) series. Written by prominent leaders, 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.

Sign up to receive more holiday resources at www.ajws.org/holidays.

ABOUT US

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is the leading Jewish organization working to pursue justice and fight poverty in the developing world. By supporting hundreds of social change organizations in 19 countries, we respond to the most pressing issues of our time—from disasters, genocide and hunger, to the persecution of women and minorities worldwide. With Jewish values and a global reach, AJWS is making a difference in millions of lives and bringing a more just and equitable world closer for all.

For more information, visit www.ajws.org.



45 W. 36th Street New York, NY 10018
212.792.2900 or 800.889.7146