

When you see someone who needs help, if you can, help them.

By Rabbi Susie Henson Moskowitz
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Today's sermon is a simple sermon with a simple message

When you see someone who needs help, if you can, help them.
Help them, when they need help.
Your humanity depends on it.

Right now there are people all over the world who need our help.
They are refugees, they are asylum seekers.
They are the 60 Million displaced people all over the world who are persecuted because of their religion or their beliefs.
Some are just on the wrong side of their government.
Most are running for their lives.
Nearly half of them are children.

Why should we help them? Because we are human beings,
Why should we help them? Because they are human beings
Why should we help them now? Because we are Jews.

We can come up with tons of excuses-
How do we decide who to help, there are so many people?
How do we help them? What do they need?
What if they are terrorists in disguise?
What if an influx of a group, and for many this fear is of Muslims, threatens to change our way of life?
These are questions worth asking,
but we cannot permit questions like these to prevent us from acting.

Yom Kippur is about tipping the scales of righteousness in our favor.
We need to put all these doubts and questions on one side of the scale and on the other side we need to put our humanity.

When you see someone who needs help, if you can, help them.
Help them, when they need help. Our Humanity depends on it.

Rachel Lasserson, is a British Jew who took her family to Calais, in Northern France where there is a large refugee camp. They packed up their van with clothing, pots and pans, tarps and sleeping bags, for the Syrian refugees who are stuck in France while trying to make their way to Britain.
Her 11 year old daughter is in the van with her. And she asks, in only the way an 11 year old can,
"Can we take a Syrian refugee family into our house and help them?"

Lasserson describes:

"My daughter has moved from horror to direct action since we first saw the mass movement of desperate people. From her 11 year old perspective, it is simple:

“Nicholas Winton brought children on the Kindertransport,” she says, invoking the British humanitarian she learned about in school, who rescued 669 Jewish children from the Nazis in Czechoslovakia. “So why don’t we bring Syrians? They could live with us.”ⁱ

Such a simple solution- when people need help, help them. A wise 11 year old – she sees human beings who need help and knows the right thing to do is to help.

Our son, Ari is studying in Budapest this semester. He picked Budapest because it has the best mathematics program in the world. When Shira was travelling to Rwanda last May, my mother said, can’t you go somewhere safe, like your brother. Little did we know Budapest would be front page news a week after he arrived. It was wild to look at the NY Times and see a picture of the Keleti train station full of refugees, the same train station Ari had showed me outside his apartment window during our Facetime chat a few days before. I suggested he do something to help the refugees. I even told he could use my money to do it. By the time he got back from a weekend away most of the refugees had moved. With any issue half way around the world, having a family member there, makes it even more real and more pressing and so I have been following the refugee situation very closely.

Let me take you to another train station in 1938 in Czechoslovakia.

It is December 1938. Nicholas Winton, is a 29-year-old London stockbroker. He is planning a ski vacation in Switzerland. Shortly before leaving he receives a phone call from his good friend Martin. “Cancel your vacation. Come to Prague instead. I need your help, Don’t bother bringing your skis.”

In Prague Winton confronts thousands of Jewish refugees living in appalling conditions. He knows he needs to help.

Winton set up an office in Prague and returns to London where he appeals to European nations to accept the children. Only two countries say yes! -Sweden and Britain. (The United States, by the way, says no.) He finds himself working tirelessly to raise funds and secure foster homes for the children.

Three months later Winton has his first success: a planeload of children leave Prague for England. Winton organizes seven more transports, the remainder by train. Each transport is greeted by waiting British foster parents in London.

On September 1, 1939 the largest transport of children is set to leave. On that day Hitler invades Poland. Germany closes all the borders. 250 children with foster families waiting for them in London perish in the fires of the Shoah.

Winton has said many times that he remains haunted by the faces of these children waiting eagerly at the Prague train Station for that aborted transport. In the end Winton saves 669 children. Their parents, as well as the majority of their families, were among the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis.

This past July Nicholas Winton, a hero by all accounts, died after living to 106 years. He did not consider himself a hero. No one even knew of his deeds until a suitcase of documents was discovered by his wife, 50 years later, in the ‘80’s.

He was just a being human. He saw people who needed help and he helped them.

As Jews we know what it is like to be homeless. To be stateless. We know what it is like to escape persecution.

Well, actually less and less of us really know. And while that is a blessing, to have prospered in America, it also distances us from remembering.

But our tradition is about remembering. Judaism reminds us, over and over again of our story – whether it is the notion “My Father was a Wandering Aramean” or “we were strangers in a strange land.”

Or whether it is family stories like mine, of escaping the pogroms, or like some of yours of fleeing Nazi Germany,

Our stories constantly remind us that we were refugees- a people who were forced to flee their native land because no other option existed.

Not only is this our story as Jews. But we are all here, every single person in this sanctuary, Jewish or not, is here, because someone in our past ... emigrated to America. We are a nation of refugees- who fled persecution and had to depend on the kindness of strangers to survive.

“The difference is that now, suddenly, we have become those strangers.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What will we do? How will we respond?

This is the crucial question - Our Judaism and our humanity will be enhanced or diminished depending on how we respond.

Let’s look to the Rabbis of the Talmud for some guidance. They too were worried that people would turn a deaf ear to cries for help. That the problems of others would seem so immense that people would build walls to keep out “the others.” What they were most afraid? Indifference.

In Tractate Baba Batra it says:

Construct your cities in such a way that indifference is impossible

To be able to hear the cries of the poor – build your door close enough to the outside, so that when they cry out, you hear them

Put the lock and the handle on the outside of your doors – so that the needy can come in.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is referring to the poor, But it does not just apply to the fiscally challenged, the same lesson – do not turn a deaf ear to the cries of the poor; do not build walls to keep them out – applies to the refugees. The Torah commands us -Lo tuchal l’hitaleim. Literally it is “do not hide yourself”, but it is usually translated – Do not remain indifferent. –Do not remain indifferent to the problems right outside your door or around the world.

Indifference can lead to a harden heart.

We believe that we should help the refugees because **THEY ARE HUMAN** and need our help.

Rabbi Bradley Shavet Artson teaches us:

Recall that Moses goes into Egypt and says, “Let my people go,” and Pharaoh’s heart is hardened.

Any Jew who can look at a human being in need and not hear God's call to "let my people go," to do something, becomes a Pharaoh.

You don't have to be evil to be on the side of evil.

You simply have to remain indifferent. ...

To fail to act, is all it takes to create a society of inequity and of callousness.

By refusing to lend a hand, we become the Pharaohs of our age.^{iv}

I don't want to be Pharaoh. I don't want to harden my heart and be indifferent. I want to help.

The image of the SS St Louis remains imprinted on our collective conscious. We were Pharaohs. Our very own beloved country, the United States of America, acted with indifference and turned away a boatload of German Jewish refugees seeking to escape the impending Nazi onslaught. "We have too many refugees. They are just Jews. If we let this boat in, we will have to let more in." In 1939 it was returned to Germany where the majority of its passengers died in the Shoah. Historians believe that this was a turning point in the Nazi regime's thinking. They knew that the world would not rise up to defend the Jewish people. They understood that the world would remain indifferent. Lo tuchal l'hitaleim. You must not remain indifferent. You cannot hide from the world's problems.

Of course it is easy to say this current problem is half way around the world. I'm not a refugee. That is why we turn to our Jewish tradition. Not because we don't know the right thing to do, We are all moral human beings, who know right from wrong.

But because we forget sometimes and need to be nudged back on the right track.

I liken this to the beep, beep my car makes when I forget to put my seat belt on. I know I'm supposed to wear my seat belt when I'm in a car and I usually do, even in taxi cabs when you have to dig in the seat cushions to find them. But I have this strange habit of not wearing it when I'm backing out of my driveway onto our cul de sac. But as soon as I've gone a ¼ of a mile down my street, to the yellow house, I hear the beep, beep and I'm reminded to do the right thing. The thing that I had meant to do all along.

Yom Kippur is a Beep, Beep. It puts us back on the right track for the coming year.

A few minutes ago we read a list of sins that we have committed. It includes:

- the sin of indifference;
- the sin of callousness;
- the sin of our inaction;
- we beg Your forgiveness.

Yes, I want God's forgiveness, but a part of me knows I'm not talking to God during this prayer, I'm talking to myself. I'm reminding myself that I can do better,

that I can get more involved in the problems of the world. That I can help more people.

I am reminding myself that I have missed the mark in so many ways. But I am also reminding myself that I have the power to change. To not make the same mistakes again. That I can elevate my humanity right now.

At this moment I cannot think of anyone who exemplifies the power of response more than Faiz Abu Hamadiah, a Palestinian man who saved five American yeshiva students from lynching just outside his home in Hebron earlier this month. The young men are driving to the Tomb of the Patriarchs. They take a wrong turn into a residential neighborhood, and are attacked and injured with stones and a firebomb.

Faiz, steps in and shelters the students until Israeli security forces can arrive. In so doing he puts his own life, and those of his family, in danger. He is now facing death threats against him.

But he would do it again.

This is my worldview," he explains. "Either you are human, [and you do it] or you don't do it and then you aren't human."^v

We need to help.

Why? Because we are human, you they human and we are Jewish.

But I know that some of you are still concerned about the potential Syrian, Muslim terrorist threat.

Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, executive vice president of the New York Board of Rabbis, who I respect very much, is concerned about letting too many refugees in.

"The heart tells you that you have to help, but the head tells you to be careful and not assist those who want to hurt you," "There are people who are certainly against the U.S., and if the U.S. admits those who are against us, it creates a problem."

His caution is warranted but it doesn't help our neshamot, our souls. The risk right now is minimal.

Steve Chapman of the Chicago Tribune points out:

"While the Syrian exodus sparks fear of terrorism, " people who trek hundreds of miles on foot" or risk death in rubber rafts "do it to escape violence and extremism, not to spread it."^{vi}

And Melanie Nezer from HIAS, says

"The United States admits a million legal immigrants a year, Most are students, or come on tourist visas. Anyone who wishes us harm would not do it through the resettlement process."

They can get on an airplane and enter the United States.

Right now we have human beings who need help. Who should we help and how should we help them?

We have a large immigrant population right here on Long Island and they could use our help. Long Island is an area with one of the highest immigrant populations in the country. We also live in one of the most segregated parts of the country, which makes it easy for us to remain blissfully unaware.

I could quote lots of statistics that are quite overwhelming about the number of immigrants legal and illegal living on Long Island. Many of whom are contributing to our economy and to society in very meaningful ways. Many of whom are children. But I won't do that. I'll make it simpler. Open your eyes and your homes.

Invite an immigrant family in your child's school over for a BBQ or a playdate. Get to know their stories. Help them to navigate the system if they are having issues. Just be a friend. Model these values of caring and welcoming the stranger for your children and grandchildren.

This past summer when I was in Israel I met with other refugees. Today in Israel there are some 50,000 refugees from Africa, primarily from Sudan, Darfur and Eritrea. The majority of these are Muslims.

Here are people who literally walked across 1,000 miles of desert, through the Sinai desert, to make their way to the land and State of Israel. Sound familiar? They ran from civil war and persecution. At first Israel accepted them, although not with open arms. Israel soon built a fence to slow the flood of refugees. How could such a small country grant citizenship to these refugees, especially given that they are not Jewish? While these questions remain unanswered the 50,000 refugees need assistance and want to be integrated into Israeli society.

One of the refugees told our group, "I would rather be in jail in Israel than be forced to go back to Sudan. I would prefer to go back home but I would be killed if I went back today. So let me become part of Israeli society, to serve in the army, to go to school, to get a job."

The government, like so many other governments, worries about how many refugees they can absorb. No country can welcome an infinite number of refugees.

But what touches my heart the most was visiting a makeshift daycare center created by caring volunteers in Tel Aviv. They created Elifelet, Citizens for Refugee Children, as a response to 5 children dying in refugee nurseries.

This daycare center was two rooms – one inside and one outside – a covered patio. As I walked in to the courtyard a little 1-1/2 year old girl came over to and I picked her up. Then another one, maybe she was 3 joined us, and I picked her up too. They understood a mixture of Hebrew and English. We played and colored. The little one wanted to color with the "big kids" so my job was to take the crayons out of her mouth – sounds like any 1 year old!

This center – Miss Margaritte's had around 24 kids. A larger one down the street had 60 kids and only 2 employees- they depend upon volunteers for the additional help that they need.

My 24 year old cousin, Yael, volunteers there. Originally she was working with the youngest kids but she says it was too hard. Sometimes their parents wouldn't come to pick them up in the evenings – maybe because they got stuck at their menial labor jobs, maybe because they didn't have anything to feed their children for dinner that night and they knew the center had some food. It is just too hard.

Now Yael volunteers with the 8-12 year olds in an afterschool program. When we visited it was one room and they had 16 children in the program. They are hoping to double in size this year. 24 kids... a drop in the bucket.

Inside of trying to solve the political questions, these volunteers are focusing on the human needs in front of them. These children are innocent. They need food and shelter. They, like all children, are our hope for the future.

What can we do?

We can help the Hartman Institute to establish a new daycare and learning center that can help more children ages 3-6, the most at risk group. They are working with Elifelet which cares for more than 600 children and infants. These children are released from their day care environments at 1:30 every afternoon and have nowhere to go and no one to watch over or care for them, until their parents return home from work in the evening.

Let's partner with Hartman and Elifelet and help human beings.

What can we do **For the Syrian and Middle Eastern Refugees**? I recommend donating to HIAS- The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society

HIAS – has been around for 130 years and began as an organization to help absorb Jews into America the 1880's. They directly help refugees throughout the world and do advocacy work to assure that displaced people are treated with the dignity they deserve. They are working on mobilizing the Jewish community to demand that the US government take a leadership role in helping to bring this crisis to resolution.

The next step is work directly with the refugees in Europe and here to provide legal services, trauma counseling and working to identify refugees in need of resettlement.

They started by helping us and our families when we were stranded. Now we can be the strangers whose kindness helps others.

We know that the best way to show empathy is to remember what it feels like to be cast away. This can stem from a personal memory or from our collective memory.

This poem by WH Auden was written in 1939 and reminds us of what it felt like as Jews, to be displaced from our lives. He titles it Refugee Blues. I'll share part of it with you.

Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,
Every spring it blossoms anew;
Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that.

The consul banged the table and said,
"If you've got no passport you're officially dead":
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive;

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
Asked me politely to return next year:
But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go to-day?

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said;
"If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread":
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

...

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.

...

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,
A thousand windows and a thousand doors:
Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.

...

I don't believe that the Holocaust, or that any tragedy comes to teach us lessons.
But I do believe that one of the only ways to redeem the world from tragedy is to learn from the lessons that are presented to us.
If the horrors of the Holocaust motivate us to save even one life, then we have learned something.
If those lessons can help us to save millions of lives, then maybe the whole world can learn something.

Maybe the whole world can learn that in the face of evil, reaching out and helping another human being is the only way to save our souls.

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Why should we help them? Because they are human beings
Why should we help them now? Because we are Jews.

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Help them, when they need help. Our Humanity depends on it.

And maybe one day.... [Cantor sings One Day by Mattisyahu]

ⁱ Rachel Lasserson, The Forward, Sept 25, 2015. "British Jews Ponder the Role of Rescuer." P. 4

ⁱⁱ Rachel Lasserson, The Forward, Sept 25, 2015. "British Jews Ponder the Role of Rescuer." P. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Baba Batra 7b and Rashi

^{iv} <http://www.on1foot.org/text/rabbi-bradley-shavit-artson-tikkun-144-%E2%80%9C-mitzvah-tzedakah%E2%80%9D-p-58>

^v <http://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinian-gets-death-threats-for-saving-us-jewish-youths/>

^{vi} (Steve Chapman, Chicago Tribune) The Week 9/25/16