

Syrian Refugees: Hearing the Cry for Freedom at Passover
Shabbat Chol Ha-Moeid Pesach 5777

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Did you know that Moses's name is never mentioned at the Seder? The sages who developed that ritual left out God's primary human partner, lest we deify Moses and imagine that God couldn't have liberated our people with divine power alone.

In his weekly Shabbat message, Rabbi Ciment offers a different reason for Moses's omission from the Haggadah. If we talk about Moses, we tie the Seder exclusively to salvation from ancient Egyptian bondage. However, even though we recount that long-ago liberation, Passover points not only to the past, but also to the present and future. We proclaim the theme shortly before the gefilte fish:

In every generation, each of us should see ourselves as though we personally went free out of Egypt. Still we remember: It was we who were slaves, . . . we who were strangers. And therefore, we recall these words as well: You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. When strangers reside in your land, you shall not wrong them, but love them as yourselves.

Memory is powerful in Judaism, never more than on Passover. We remember the Exodus, not merely to recall liberation in the past, but to affirm our responsibility to bring freedom to the captive in our own day. Some will work to combat illness, healing bodies that have become prisons. Some will fight poverty, hunger, and homelessness, liberating our neighbors from lives of privation and despair.

Sometimes, the call to fight for freedom comes from a distant land, from a place we have never visited and never will, from people who seem very different from ourselves. At Passover, 5777, the people of Syria cry out like Israelites, enslaved in their very own Egypt. Their wicked Pharaoh is a brutal dictator who thinks nothing of massacring his own people, raining fire and poison on men, women, and children. But Bashir al-Assad is not the only evil Pharaoh of Syria in 2017. Many who would depose him and rule that land in his stead are brutal murderers themselves – call them ISIL or ISIS or Da'esh, Al-Qaeda by another name, or worse.

We have all seen the horrific photographs: The mangled bodies and bombed-out buildings. The elderly woman strangled by sarin gas. The child washed up on the shore. The angry, frightened protestors in Europe and America, spawning a new nativism: People of that skin color, with that headdress, with that faith, not wanted here.

So the Haggadah is right: No festival of freedom can be so bound to one man – to Moses, even – tied exclusively to one moment of a distant past. We who have been freed from slavery share the greatest responsibility to liberate others. Not by coincidence were Jews disproportionately represented among white Civil Rights activists. Not by accident do Jews and synagogues commit themselves to women's rights, to LGBT equality, to combatting vexingly persistent American racism.

And yet, maybe the Haggadah also got it wrong. Moses is key to that story of liberation. Yes, God could have freed us without human assistance; but the God we worship calls upon us, Jews, indeed all human beings, to be God's partners in the process of liberation. If the Seder misleads by omitting Moses, the Book of Exodus offers an antidote. There, in Torah, God works with Moses and through Moses to free the Children of Israel.

Who will be Moses today?

Moses is an improbable partner for the Divine. After all, he has killed a man. He stutters. He is not eager to take on the job. God works through human beings. If the Syrian people are to find freedom, then imperfect partners will need to play Moses, bringing God's liberation to Earth.

In January, the Confirmation class, Eileen Hamilton, and I went to Washington, D.C., as we do annually, to participate in the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism's *L'taken* Social Justice Seminar. As many of you heard last week, we were in our nation's capital when the President's first Executive Order on immigration was released. We could've attended a protest. We chose, instead, to stick with the program, and to visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

As we were about to enter the museum on that Shabbat afternoon, I asked the class if they had ever heard of the voyage of the *St. Louis*. None had. I charged them all to come out able to explain it to friends and family. They did me one better. Three of our confirmands spoke about that ill-fated ship when they pled

with Senator Boozman, Senator Cotton, and Congressman Hill's staff about refugee resettlement two days later.

The *St. Louis* was a luxury liner, filled with European Jews who could afford to escape Hitler's nightmare, or so they thought, paying full price for passage to Cuba, which had issued entrance visas. As they approached the coastline, though, Cuba revoked the offer. Thankfully, Florida, the United States – promised haven for the tired, poor, and huddled masses – was a short distance away. And yet, this great nation refused entry like Cuba before it; the *St. Louis* returned to Europe, where most of its passengers ultimately perished at Hitler's hands.

"We have been strangers in the land of America," our Confirmation students told our Senators. "We are not free, even in this great land, until all are free."

Our Senators heard their plea and responded respectfully, even thoughtfully. They asked: "Do you know where those Syrian refugees would really like to go?" Our students assumed the answer to be America; but our Senators were correct: Syrians would prefer to live in Syria, safe and at peace. We know that, too, from our own history. For millennia, our people prayed to return to our ancestral home, to the Land of Israel. And there's more: When World War II ended, and the Concentration Camps had been liberated, where did most of the survivors want to go? Home. Not to Israel, or even to America, but back to their villages in Poland, in Hungary, and the Ukraine; to their apartments in Amsterdam, in Paris, and in Brussels. There, certainly in Eastern Europe, but often even in the west, they found their homes occupied by Europeans who had collaborated with the Nazis. Jews remained unwelcome. They returned by the tens of thousands to the Concentration Camps, now Displaced Persons Camps, as refugees, like so many unwanted Syrians in our own day.

So I asked our Senators: What would our new President do to make Syria habitable? His predecessor did not share his isolationist bent, but had utterly failed the Syrian people, proclaiming chemical weapons to be a "red line" for America, then meekly seeking and fecklessly failing to obtain congressional approval to fulfill his promise. Our Senators were hopeful about the new President, though none would have predicted that day that he would defy the Russians in April, bombing the Syrian air base from which those chemicals of death were delivered.

Our President tells us that he was deeply moved by the horror he witnessed: Syrian men, women, and children, choked to death by grotesque inhumanity. Why, then, is he unmoved, when those same men, women, and children peacefully seek refuge on our shores?

I wish our President success, and he may indeed succeed, to prevent future chemical weapons strikes. However, nobody has a plan to replace Bashar al-Assad with a humane regime. Syria will continue to produce hopeless refugees – people who would prefer to live in Syria, but who are running away for their lives.

The Seder is not only about the past, the Egyptian exodus, or even the present, our obligation to free the captive in our own day. The Seder is also about the future. We invite the children to open the door to Elijah, to the possibility of messianic redemption, a future without a cruel Pharaoh, whatever his name; without a chemical weapon, a nuclear warhead, or even a supposedly-conventional “Mother of All Bombs;” a future of perfect peace. Children open that door, that they might learn to stand in the place of Moses and Miriam in the future, bringing peace and justice to this world.

Already, some are doing the good work that brings the world just a little closer to redemption. Bombing that airbase may be one step toward a better future. Even a bomber can be a peacemaker. Now, let the President who dispatched the bomb join Canada’s Prime Minister, Germany’s Chancellor, and Reform congregations across North America that have opened their doors and their hearts to Syrian refugees.

Tonight, we read the Haftarah for this Shabbat during Passover. Ezekiel prophesies to the exiles in Babylon, comparing Israel to a field of dry bones. God’s message: Those bones will once again bear flesh, and that flesh will again be animated with soul. Even the most devastated of lands, even ancient Israel, even Syria of 2017, can live again.

Amen.