

Learning and Not Learning from History

Sermon for Parashat Vayeilech, Shabbat Shuvah 5782

September 10, 2021

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For Americans old enough to remember the 1970s, the images were haunting. Once again, we witnessed a harrowing evacuation of Americans and our allies at the end of a long, deadly, and costly foreign war.

We asked: Did America fail to learn the lesson of Vietnam? Did our leaders ignore repeated misadventures in Afghanistan, with one great power after the next failing to liberate that nation from Taliban tyranny?

Failing to learn history's lessons is not a new problem. This week, the Torah presents a conversation between God and Moses, as the Children of Israel stand on the precipice of the Promised Land, and Moses delivers a final prophecy. God tells him that, after entering the Land, the people will "go astray." They will "forsake" God and will therefore be "ready prey; and many evils and troubles shall befall them." God dictates a warning, which Moses will recite to the Israelites in next week's portion.ⁱ Still, the Israelites do sin. They worship other gods and oppress the poor in their midst. They have failed to learn the lessons of the Golden Calf. Ultimately, the Israelites are conquered, as God empowers the Babylonians to exact the punishment forecast centuries earlier on the banks of the Jordan River.

Mark Twain reputedly said, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes."ⁱⁱ In recent weeks, we could hear the rhymes. Journalist Jeff Caplan reminds us: "It was April 1975. America cut a peace deal with the communists and our troops came home. But the enemy kept fighting, and the South Vietnamese surrendered their country after 58,000 US troops had laid down their lives. As the enemy closed in on the US Embassy in Saigon, ... Armed Forces Radio played White Christmas, a signal that it was time to evacuate. It was chaos. Desperate Vietnamese tried to scale the embassy walls and get out of the country... One photo in particular stands out. An Air America chopper perches on the tiny roof of an apartment building just about a block away from the embassy. Blades spinning, evacuees crowded a rickety staircase or ladder, so desperate and so urgent the mission, that the ladder bowed under their weight as they scrambled to get up, get on and get out. And as they ran up that ladder and the helicopter readied for takeoff, a photographer snapped the shutter."ⁱⁱⁱ

In recent weeks, we have seen photographs that reminded us of that iconic image from Saigon. We have been all too aware of American troops' lives lost—not to mention devastating, life-altering injuries—in an effort that ended badly.

And we have seen Afghans as understandably desperate to leave their country as the Vietnamese before them.

Because of the way that “history rhymes,” we may be tempted to equate the two wars more than is warranted. On this twentieth anniversary of 9/11, we must remember: President Bush ordered the invasion of Afghanistan after terrorists based there and abetted by the Taliban had committed an infamous attack on the American homeland, murdering thousands of our fellow citizens. No such assault prompted U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

The end of American intervention in Indochina came after antiwar protests that divided the nation. By contrast, in 2021, the vast majority of Americans, including Presidents Biden and Trump, agreed that U.S. military needed to leave Afghanistan—that American soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen should no longer be put at risk of life and limb in a war we would not win. Similarly, Americans across the political spectrum were appalled by a botched evacuation, horrified by the deaths of thirteen marines who fell victim to ISIS terrorism, and deeply concerned about Afghans who had risked their lives to join the American-led effort. Americans have divergent views about opening our country to refugees more broadly but are remarkably unified in readiness to welcome and assist Afghans at their hour of need.

Those refugees offer America an opportunity to learn from history in a positive way.

In the mid- and late-1970s, more than a million Vietnamese refugees fled their country after the end of the war. As Thu-Huong Ha writes, “In 1975, when a first wave of refugees fled after the fall of South Vietnam, polls showed [little] support for welcoming them into the US ... In the late 1970s, a second, larger group of migrants, the ‘boat people,’ traversed dangerous waters to leave Vietnam. They paid exorbitant fees and risked abduction, rape, and death at sea to escape the reeducation camps that had sprung up after the northern victory over the south. In 1979, US president Jimmy Carter announced he would double the number of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos accepted into the United States from 7,000 per month to 14,000. A poll from CBS and the New York Times showed that 62% of Americans disapproved. He did it anyway.”^{iv}

American Reform Judaism opened its arms to Vietnamese refugees. With an identity as a community of immigrants and reflecting on a history that has often found our own people displaced as refugees, the Central Conference of American Rabbis resolved: “We deplore the sentiment in our own country which would close the gates to Vietnamese refugees or any refugee coming here to seek freedom. We

call on congregations to take an active part in the resettlement of refugees.”^v By 1979, the Union for Reform Judaism would tout our Movement’s having “organized a national effort with the goal of sponsoring a minimum of 1,300 refugees within our congregations and movement.”^{vi}

That work—stretching far beyond Reform Judaism, of course—was enormously successful. As Ha wrote in 2016, “Today the 1.3 million immigrants from Vietnam and their 300,000 or so children, along with their culture and cuisine, are just one more inextricable strand of the American fabric.”^{vii}

On August 19, Rabbis Hara Person and Lewis Kamrass asked us to repeat history: “Recalling the Reform Jewish community’s legendary support for the Vietnamese boat people, Reform rabbis demand that the Biden administration and Congress expedite legal immigration status for Afghans who are now at risk. We urge [Reform rabbis] and the communities we serve to join in the humanitarian effort that will be necessary when these refugees reach safe haven in the United States, Canada, and other allied nations.”^{viii}

Congregation B’nai Israel has pledged to sponsor an Afghan family, together with Trinity Cathedral and the Daughters of Abraham. When a family comes to Central Arkansas and is assigned to us by Catholic Charities, you will hear more about how you can help us indicate that we have learned America’s positive lesson.

On this Shabbat Shuvah, as we seek repentance, individually and collectively, let us resolve not to repeat our wrongdoing in the past—as individuals or as a nation. But at the same time, let us also look to those moments in our personal and national history when we were at our best, when America was at its best. And then, let us all work to multiply that goodness into the future.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 31:16-21.

ⁱⁱ The source of the quote is disputed.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeff Caplan, “My Minute of News: Why the fall of Kabul feels so much like the fall of Saigon,” *KSL NewsRadio*, August 16, 2021, [My Minute of News: Why the fall of Kabul feels so much like the fall of Saigon \(kslnewsradio.com\)](https://www.kslnewsradio.com/my-minute-of-news-why-the-fall-of-kabul-feels-so-much-like-the-fall-of-saigon).

^{iv} Thu-Huong Ha, “Forty-one years ago, the US took a big gamble on Vietnamese refugees,” *Quartz*, April 30, 2016, [Forty-one years ago, the US took a big gamble on Vietnamese refugees — Quartz \(qz.com\)](https://www.quartz.com/story/2016/04/30/41-years-ago-us-took-a-big-gamble-on-vietnamese-refugees).

^v “Vietnam Refugees and Amnesty,” Resolution Adopted by the CCAR at the 86th Annual Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975, [Vietnam Refugees and Amnesty - Central Conference of American Rabbis \(ccarnet.org\)](https://www.ccar.org/vietnam-refugees-and-amnesty).

^{vi} “Vietnamese ‘Boat People,’” 55th General Assembly, December 1979, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, [Vietnamese “Boat People” | Union for Reform Judaism \(urj.org\)](https://www.urj.org/vietnamese-boat-people).

^{vii} Thu-Huong Ha.

viii “Central Conference of American Rabbis Statement of Concern for the Afghan People,” August 19, 2021, [Central Conference of American Rabbis Statement of Concern for the Afghan People - Central Conference of American Rabbis \(ccarnet.org\)](https://www.ccarnet.org).