

## My People Were Migrants, Too

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HIAS bills itself as “the world’s oldest refugee protection agency, fulfilling Jewish values and tradition by protecting refugees and displaced persons of all faiths and ethnicities. As the American Jewish community’s global refugee assistance organization, HIAS has the historic responsibility to ensure that the Jewish community is engaged in and committed to protecting all refugees.” HIAS likes to proclaim, “We used to help refugees because **they** were Jewish; now we help refugees because **we** are Jewish.”<sup>i</sup>

Previously known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, HIAS helped many of our ancestors and some of our current congregants resettle in this country. HIAS still makes a priority of helping Jews. However, had HIAS retained an exclusive focus on Jewish refugees, it would have become a very small agency, likely unable to support itself, in recent decades. Few Jews are refugees today, and few Jewish immigrants to this country require significant assistance.

So why does a Jewish agency continue to exist to assist refugees, most of whom are not Jewish? Perhaps part of the motivation is to keep a Jewish refugee agency alive, so that it remains viable with the capacity that would be required should a need to absorb large numbers of Jewish refugees tragically arise.

HIAS is far from the only refugee aid agency in this country. Catholic Charities, the resettlement agency for Afghan refugees in Central Arkansas, is a sterling example. Still, among many primarily white communities that found refuge on these shores, Jews stand apart. Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and groups that link themselves to heritage in central and eastern Europe may continue to gather to express their ethnic pride, but they do not typically coalesce to advocate for or assist immigrants and refugees.

Some regard the blessing of Jewish life in North America and Israel as precarious. Has a people, which lacked a home for nearly two millennia, actually found not one but two addresses which we may now regard as permanent and secure? For many, that’s a rhetorical question to which the answer is “no;” or at least, “We cannot be certain.” We would naturally remain concerned about refugees if we risked being among them once again.

Many more point to a Jewish religious imperative. No less than thirty-six times, the Torah bids us to be mindful of strangers, recalling how we were

mistreated as strangers in Egypt. God commands us to assure that others do not endure that terror, at least not on our watch.

Writing in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Rabbis Sharon Kleinbaum and Mike Moskowitz invite us to consider “Joseph’s journey from forced migration to redemption” as “a model for immigration justice.”<sup>ii</sup>

In the familiar story, Joseph’s brothers hate him because his father favors him and because he shares his dreams, which seem to suggest that he will one day lord over them. And yet, as Rabbis Kleinbaum and Moskowitz explain, citing classical midrashic interpretation, the brothers despise Joseph because he is different. They write, “He was not like the other boys. While they went into the field he stayed behind, curling his hair and [applying makeup to] his eyes. He walked with a lilt and wore a colorful coat that caught everyone’s attention...The other boys hated him...One day their hatred grew so intense that they tore off his clothes and sold him into slavery, at just seventeen years old. This began Joseph’s forced migration down to Egypt.”<sup>iii</sup>

At their synagogue, Beit Simchat Torah in New York, Rabbis Kleinbaum and Moskowitz “support immigrants from all over the world, 75 percent of whom are LGBTQ and/or HIV-positive, making [theirs] the only clinic with this special focus.”<sup>iv</sup> Beit Simchat Torah is a LGBTQ synagogue—the largest one in the world, in fact. Its members and these rabbis understand that many people must flee nations of origins where they are oppressed because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, much as Jews fled burning villages for centuries. The rabbis explain that Joseph’s “experience resonates with many LGBTQ folks who are forced from their homes and made to travel to foreign places in dangerous conditions.”<sup>v</sup>

With God’s blessing and his own talent and ambition, though, Joseph rises to great success and prominence in Egypt.

As the story continues, Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt seeking food in a famine. Now the brothers are forced migrants—that is, refugees escaping food scarcity, common to this day. Having viewed Joseph as their subordinate, they cannot imagine that the powerful viceroy enthroned before them could be the brother they sold into slavery. Joseph understandably does not trust them at first, and he puts them through a series of tests, up to the point of framing his brother Benjamin for stealing a silver goblet. Then, in this week’s reading, the brother who proposed selling Joseph into slavery, Judah, steps forward, offering himself as a slave in place of Benjamin.

Now, Joseph is ready to respond to his brothers as the repentant refugees who stand before him. While they fear that he will punish them, he assures them that their selling him into slavery was God’s will, so that he could ultimately save them.<sup>vi</sup> Rabbis Kleinbaum and Moskowitz explain that “because he is born into cycles of displacement and humiliation...he is...committed to ending it. Joseph’s ability to prioritize human dignity, unity, and forgiveness over hate, division, and fear produces the first set of biblical siblings who are able to get along with each other.”<sup>vii</sup> Joseph, we might say, remembers the stranger, for he was sold into slavery as a stranger to his own brothers.

Remembering our own experience as immigrants, however many generations past, our congregation is currently sponsoring a family of eight—an Afghan man who put his life at risk in the service of U.S. Armed Forces, his wife, and six of their children. So many others seek refuge in this country, fleeing poverty and persecution in Latin America.

As we have all become acutely aware this year, our nation needs more workers. Immigrants and refugees are not only willing but eager to start in jobs that most Americans do not want. Admitting many more would benefit our nation’s economy. Indeed, that’s why the United States had no laws whatsoever limiting immigration from Europe for this country’s first century and a half, when most Jews came to this country, seeking the same refuge and opportunity that migrants are eager to find here today.

And America’s soul would benefit, too. Like Joseph before us, we could welcome other members of our human family, granting them a place of refuge at their hour of need. Let us be mindful of the refugee, for our people, too, were refugees—in Egypt, in America, and in countless lands in between.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> “How HIAS still helps Jews in need,” [How HIAS Still Helps Jews in Need | HIAS](#).

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum and Rabbi Mike Moskowitz, “Joseph’s Journey from Forced Migration to Redemption: A Model for Immigration Justice,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, edited by Rabbi Barry H. Block, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, pp. 65-69.

<sup>iii</sup> Kleinbaum and Moskowitz, p. 65, citing B’reishit Rabbah 84:7.

<sup>iv</sup> Kleinbaum and Moskowitz, p. 66.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Genesis 45:5-8.

<sup>vii</sup> Kleinbaum and Moskowitz, p. 66.