

On Saturday night a little more than a week ago, we watched a movie and chanted the Selihot service, ushering in the music and the liturgy of the Yamim Nora'im, days of awe. The movie was called Nicky's Family, telling the story of Sir Nicholas Winton, dubbed the English Schindler for the 669 children that he saved by what later became known as the Czech kindertransport. Ultimately, 10,000 children were taken in by Great Britain.

Another story: Aylan Kurdi, three years old, along with his 5 year old brother Ghallib, his mother, Rehan, and his father Abdullah were refugees from Kobani, a town on the Syrian border with Turkey. The town saw heavy fighting and ISIS occupation. Earlier this month, the family got across the border into Turkey, hoping ultimately to get to Abdullah's sister in Canada.

There is a refugee crisis in Europe. They are overwhelmed by the numbers of largely middle-class families fleeing the war in Syria, fleeing areas in which ISIS is taking control. Greece is on the European side of Turkey, so that's where many enter the European Union. Because the economy of Greece is in shambles they keep going, many into Hungary, who is trying to fingerprint and register the refugees but can't keep up. The rules for processing asylum seekers were never meant to handle 100,000 at a time, the number who arrived in the last month alone.

In July, 1938, President Roosevelt convened a conference in Evian to respond to the plight of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. Representatives from 32 countries and 39 private organizations met for 8 days. Golda Meir was there, represented British Mandate Palestine, the only Jewish constituency holding land, but she was not allowed to speak or participate in any way other than as an observer. The conference was a complete failure. The United States, Canada, South Africa, Great Britain, among the other countries, either refused to accept Jewish refugees or accepted an almost trivial number. The Australian delegate summed up the reason that Jews were not wanted: "as we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one," he said.

I can imagine the delegates saying about the Jews, "They move into their insular ghettos, and transform lovely neighborhoods, into the same over-crowded, dirty, crappy, streets anyone would recognize who has ever been to one of their shtetls," as they concluded their conference with a general agreement that they tried to address the Jewish problem, but there was unfortunately no solution.

That line, however, was shared on Ravnet, my Conservative Rabbi's email group, by one of my "colleagues" this past week as the refugee crisis was being discussed: "They move into their insular ghettos, and transform lovely neighborhoods, into the same over-crowded, dirty, crappy, streets anyone would recognize who has ever been to an Arab Moslem city." He also said, "I sure as hell don't want more of those people here," another line that could have been uttered in 1938 by Henry Ford or Father Coughlin.

In December of 1938, Sir Nicholas intended to go on a skiing holiday in Switzerland, but changed his plans and went to Prague instead to help a friend who told him about the Nazi threat to the welfare of the people. He was there just after the German occupation and Kristallnacht and witnessed panicked Jews with no place to go being turned out of their homes. When it became known that he was working on behalf of the refugees, he was besieged by parents asking him to help them get their children to a safe place. He began compiling a list of children and raised the money required by the British government for a guarantee before they would issue an entry visa - £50 per child, the equivalent of about \$4500 today. Through the summer of 1939, photographs of

the children were shown to prospective foster families in England, a match was made, and the children were placed on a series of eight trains to be transport through the Netherlands to a boat to England.

Last month, the Kurdi family fleeing Syria boarded a boat from Turkey to the Greek island of Kos, just 2.5 miles away. They never made it. The boat sank, and only Abdullah survived. Young Aylan's body washed up on a Mediterranean beach, face down in the sand – wearing a soaked red shirt, cropped jeans and tiny Velcro sneakers.

The picture was heartbreaking and the story that went with it shook the world free of its shackles of apathy and self-interest. We blow the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah as a cry of alarm. Get moving! the shofar cries. Examine your life! Assess your priorities! The picture of Aylan lying dead on a beach, and of an aid worker gathering him in his arms was a shofar. It forced all of us around the globe to confront the dark reality of the refugee crisis and called out to us to answer our moral responsibility to act, to do our part to bring an end to the suffering. Unlike my unnamed Ravnet colleague, my friend and colleague Rabbi Stephen Weiss wrote a powerful sermon highlighting this responsibility that he is delivering this morning. He was the inspiration and the source for some of these remarks.

But wait! You, like my unnamed Ravnet colleague, might object and I understand the concerns. These are the people who have attacked the World Trade Center, twice. They attacked targets in Copenhagen, Paris, Lyon, Toulouse, Frankfurt, Stockholm, Madrid, Brussels, London, Holland, Boston, and Texas just to name a few places.

Why should we have sympathy for people coming from a regime that has been dedicated to the destruction of Israel for each and every one of its 67 years of existence? Moslems have been waiting for the chance to take over Europe every since 1492, the year that the last Islamic state lost its foothold in Grenada, Spain. In contemporary times, through immigration, they have slowly been taking over the cities of Europe, turning neighborhoods into miniature Islamic strongholds. Why should we assist another 100,000 more individuals who are trying to take over the West? The Arab world has tremendous wealth. Why should we be responsible for taking care of their refugees - let them take care of their own problem!

My answer comes in the form of a Midrash on this morning's Torah reading. The Torah tells us that Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. Hagar despairs and leaves Ishmael to die under a bush. God hears the voice of the boy ba-asher hu sham – where he is, and God provides a well of water to slake his thirst. God saves Ishmael, and generations of commentators are left to struggle with this question: How could God save Ishmael, whose descendants, the Arab people, would cause the Jewish people such grief?

The answer is found in Midrash Tanhuma based on the phrase ba-asher hu sham – where he is, which it explains with the following legend:

When Ishmael was dying in the wilderness and God was about to save him, the ministering angels object. "Master of the universe," they protested, "What are you doing? If you save this boy today, his descendants will one day kill your chosen people, the children of Isaac! Let Ishmael die now, to prevent what his offspring will one day do to a people you love."

God responds: "What is Ishmael right now? Righteous or wicked?" And the angels are forced to admit: "At this moment he is only a boy, and he is righteous." God then tells the angels: "According to his present deeds will I judge him."

God says of Ishmael: “I will judge him ba-asher hu sham – where he is now – that is, in his present state, not according to what he or his descendants might do in some time in the future.”

And so we must say of the current refugees. We cannot know what the impact of this Muslim migration will be on Europe, on the already tenuous future of Europe’s Jewish communities, or on the EU’s relationship with Israel. We cannot know whether a refugee child will grow up to be good or bad, filled with love or hate.

So here are two things you can do to answer the cry of the suffering ba-asher hu sham – where they are now. We must see them as they are now: as fathers, mothers, children trying to survive, seeking to escape the ravages of terror, oppression and war.

First, you can contribute to organizations and agencies providing refugee relief. I am proud of the fact that the World Jewish Relief agency and HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society are taking a role in resettlement efforts. I’m proud that Syrian refugees in Germany turn to the Jewish welfare board for help.

Second, let your voice be heard to urge this country to support President Obama’s proposal to take in additional refugees, but let him know that admitting 10,000, when the number of displaced people exceeds 4 million, simply doesn’t address the problem. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon have resettled half a million to a million each, and Iraq has taken in at least a quarter of a million. Germany is committed to taking 800,000. The scale of the refugee problem is beyond immense. It’s time for the United States to do its share along with the countries of the European Union.

I’ll conclude with a prayer by my colleague Rabbi David Greenspoon:

Almighty God, Today during this holiest of times, we pray as a Jewish community for the refugees of Syria, people who do not love us, for they have been taught to fear and despise us. Yet today, we have no choice but to hold them in our hearts, for they have been betrayed by their own government, and all but abandoned by the governments of the world. The images of bodies ravaged by chemical weapons, of lifeless toddlers whose parents’ desperate gamble did not succeed, of men and women and children who look too normal to be refugees, are inescapable. We look at them and know that we cannot hate them, for they are not monsters. They are the victims of monsters and we know all too well what that means.

Source of Compassion, we have not forgotten that you heard the cries of Hagar as she watched our cousin Ishmael suffer near to death; you visited her with the promise of life. Today we pray that you hear the prayers of innumerable Mothers Hagar as they lift their hearts to you on behalf of their children and loved ones. Guide them to safety and shelter. We pray you protect your holy messengers from among all the worlds’ righteous who seek to make your presence felt as a source of comfort for those seeking relief from war, violence, and death. We ask that you send consolation to those bereft of home and hearth and those who have suffered the loss of loved ones; may those suffering trauma and those in bereavement find wholeness and healing. Most of all dear God, cause your spirit to dwell within all of your human children so that the words of your prophet come to fruition: that nation shall not lift up sword against nation—even its own people—and that war will be unlearned from the earth.

Amen.