



5th Annual
**REFUGEE
SHABBAT**
a project of **HIAS**

Refugee Shabbat 2023 Sermon Talking Points

Introduction

This year, HIAS and our partners around the world have worked to provide safety and support to those fleeing from war, persecution, and climate catastrophe. Advocates and lawmakers in many countries are pushing for asylum laws that ensure people arriving at their borders can access their basic human right to seek protection. In the weeks, months, and years to come, HIAS will work together with other refugee agencies, our local resettlement partners, and supporters and activists – like you and your community –to help those who have been forcibly displaced from their homes access their right to pursue safety and rebuild their lives with dignity.

While we celebrate these gains and this hope, there is no rest for the weary! Now is the time for us to raise our voices even louder as a Jewish community to say that we will not allow what so often happened to us to happen to today's refugees. We are, all of us, here to say that we will welcome and protect those seeking safety from violence and persecution. We hope that you will find these sermon talking points useful as you craft your message to your community for this year's Refugee Shabbat.

The Facts

Definitions

Depending on your congregation's level of knowledge about immigration terminology, you may want to reference the technical definitions of refugee, asylum seeker, internally displaced person (IDP), parolee, and migrant. This helps put everyone on the same page. Here are those definitions:

Refugee: A refugee is a person who has been forced to flee their home country due to persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group (e.g., members of the LGBTQ community). The persecution a refugee experiences may include harassment, threats, abduction or torture. A refugee is often afforded some sort of legal protection, either by their host country's government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or both. In the United States, refugees are hand-selected by the U.S. government and are screened in advance. They are subject to background checks and security screenings by multiple U.S. agencies. Only after everything is approved are they brought to the U.S. to reside permanently.

Asylum seeker: An asylum seeker is a person who has fled persecution in their home country and is seeking safe haven in a different country but has not yet received any legal recognition or status.¹ In several countries, including the U.S., asylum seekers are sometimes detained while waiting for their case to be heard.

Humanitarian Parole: Humanitarian parole allows an individual who may be inadmissible or otherwise ineligible for admission into the United States to be in the United States for a temporary period for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit. Unlike the regular refugee admissions process, humanitarian parole provides no immigration status, benefits, or path to permanent residency. **Most Afghans and all Ukrainians admitted to the US in 2022 are here under humanitarian parole.**

Parolee: A parolee is permitted to enter the United States, usually for urgent humanitarian reasons, for a temporary period. While parole allows for lawful presence in the United States, the parolee technically remains an applicant for admission. Parole does not confer immigration status and does not provide a path to permanent residency.

Internally displaced person: An internally displaced person, or IDP, is a person who fled their home but has not crossed an international border to find sanctuary. Even if they fled for reasons similar to those driving refugees (armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations), IDPs legally remain under the protection of their own government – even though that government might be the cause of their flight.²

Migrant: A migrant is a person who chooses to move from their home for any variety of reasons, but not necessarily because of a direct threat of persecution or death. Migrant is an umbrella category that can include refugees but can also include people moving to improve their lives by finding work or education, those seeking family reunion and others.³

More about Refugees

Here is some basic information⁴ that may be helpful as you try to put the global refugee crisis in context:

- There are now estimated to be more than 100 million who have been forcibly displaced due to persecution and violence. 32.5 million of these people are refugees. Most of the remainder are internally displaced within the borders of their own countries (i.e., they have fled their homes

¹ Based on “What is the difference between an asylum seeker, a refugee and an asylee?” from <http://www.hias.org/FAQ/HIAS>.

² <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c146.html>.

³ Based on “‘Refugee’ or ‘migrant’ - Which is right?” from <http://www.unhcr.org/55df0e556.html>

⁴ ⁵ This information is based on an [updated mid-year report](#) from UNHCR released in November 2022. In June each year, UNHCR releases official numbers for the previous year, as it takes a long time for these numbers to be calculated. When UNHCR released the 2021 numbers in June 2022 in their annual [Global Trends Report](#), they noted that there were 89.3 displaced people worldwide as of December 2021. An official count for 2022 will not be released until June 2023.

but have not crossed an international border).

- 74% of refugees are being hosted in low and middle-income countries. This is largely due to geography; these countries are closest to the conflict zones people are fleeing. Turkey is the country that hosts the most refugees (3.7 million).
- 72% of the world's refugees come from just five countries: Syria (6.8 million), Venezuela (5.6 million), Ukraine (5.4 million), Afghanistan (2.8 million), and South Sudan (2.4 million).
- Refugee advocates often refer to three durable solutions for refugees. These durable solutions include local integration (for refugees who can safely rebuild their lives in the country to which they fled), resettlement (for the most vulnerable refugees for whom life is not safe in the country to which they fled and so require permanent resettlement in a 3rd country), and repatriation (for refugees for whom circumstances in their homeland change significantly enough that it is safe to return).
- The U.S. has been resettling refugees for decades. In the aftermath of World War II, Congress enacted the first refugee legislation, providing refuge to over 650,000 displaced Europeans. Since the U.S. resettlement program was formalized through the Refugee Act of 1980, the U.S. has resettled over 3 million refugees.
- The Refugee Act created the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to ensure access to a uniform and effective resettlement of refugees to the United States.
- The USRAP is a public-private partnership between non-profit organizations and the U.S. Department of State. It includes nine national resettlement agencies, including HIAS, and a network of hundreds of local partner organizations that resettle refugees in communities around the country.⁶
- The maximum number of refugees resettled in the U.S. in a given year, which is referred to as the ceiling for refugee admissions, is determined by the annual Presidential Determination (PD).
 - Since the USRAP's inception, the United States has set an average refugee admissions goal of 96,229 refugees and, on average, has resettled 85,000 refugees annually. Prior to 2018, the PD only dipped below 70,000 once, in 1986 when it was set at 67,000. In some years, the U.S. resettled up to 200,000 refugees.
 - For fiscal year 2023 (which began in October 2022 and will end in September 2023), the Biden administration set a refugee admissions ceiling of 125,000. However, 125,000 was also the ceiling in FY 2022, and by the end of August 2022 the US had resettled fewer than 20,000 refugees.

⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement-in-the-united-states.html#:~:text=We%20also%20work%20with%20NGOs,affiliates%20located%20throughout%20the%20U.S.>

⁶ Refugee arrivals are tracked on a bi-weekly bases on the RCUSA website: <https://rcusa.org/resettlement/>

- Refugees are the most vetted individuals entering the United States and undergo complex security checks run by the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the State Department, the Department of Defense, the National Counterterrorism Center, and other U.S. intelligence agencies. It can take between 18-24 months, and sometimes longer, from the time a refugee is referred to the USRAP to the time of arrival.
- National security experts have repeatedly said that the refugee resettlement program advances our national security interests, is an important foreign policy tool, and contributes to keeping our troops safe around the world.
- Once resettled, refugees not only contribute to their new communities economically, but also play an active role in civic engagement, participate in the labor force, maintain a strong devotion to education, purchase homes, and become U.S. citizens.
- On average, 82 percent of refugees participate in the labor force, compared to the 62 percent national average. Refugees are twice as likely as native-born individuals to hold jobs in the service industry, and many industries like hospitality and meatpacking now rely heavily on refugee workers. Across the U.S., the low number of refugee arrivals is putting an unnecessary strain on businesses, especially so in rural areas.
- In 2017, a study was released showing that over a span of 10 years, refugees contributed \$63 billion more in taxes than what the U.S. had spent on their initial resettlement.

More about Asylum Seekers

Here is some information about seeking asylum, as well as recent attacks to the asylum process in the United States:

- It is legal to seek asylum. Under both U.S. and international law, the U.S. must hear the claims of asylum seekers, regardless of where or how they entered the country (e.g., at an official point of entry, between ports of entry, etc.).
- Policies meant to deter, block, or punish individuals for seeking safety in the U.S. are illegal. Turning asylum seekers away or deliberately slowing down asylum processing at ports of entry places asylum seekers in an increasingly more precarious and dangerous situation. In 2020, the global pandemic essentially ground the U.S. asylum system to a halt, and over the last few years it has been slowly starting up again. You can read more about the pandemic's impact on the asylum system [here](#).

⁷ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/mid-year-trends.html#:~:text=As%20the%202021%20Mid%2DYear,million%20reported%20at%20end%2D2020>

- The US government does not provide legal counsel in immigration court, so many asylum seekers are forced to represent themselves. Numerous factors can impact asylum seekers' access to counsel, specifically whether they are subjected to prolonged detention. Individuals in detention do not have the same opportunity to obtain legal counsel as non-detained individuals because they do not have access to attorneys and/or may be unaware of their rights.
 - 14% of detained individuals acquire legal counsel compared to 66% of non-detained individuals.¹¹ This puts detained asylum seekers at a distinct disadvantage when facing government lawyers and complex immigration laws and can directly impact how long their case is pending or impact the final decision.¹²
- The asylum process can take months, and in many cases, years. During this wait, asylum seekers exist in limbo. Only after their case has been pending for months can asylum seekers apply for work authorization – a benefit that can take up to a year to obtain. Individuals who are eventually granted asylum may petition for immediate family members abroad to come to the U.S. After one year, asylees may apply for Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR) status. If LPR status is granted, the individual can apply for citizenship after four years.¹³

⁸ <https://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/mpp/>

⁹ <https://www.hias.org/title42>

¹⁰ Women's Refugee Commission (2017). *The Real Alternatives to Detention*. Washington, DC.

¹¹ TRAC Immigration (2017). *Asylum Representation Rates Have Fallen Amid Rising Denial Rates*. Syracuse, NY.

¹² <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/asylum>

Jewish Values

Welcoming the stranger is a central Jewish value – one repeated more than any other commandment in the Torah. For a list of texts to support this teaching, take a look at [HIAS' Refugee Torah](#).

You may also want to highlight the [historical Jewish experience of having been persecuted because of who we are](#). In particular, consider mentioning the times when Jews were turned away from safety (e.g., the United States turning away the MS St. Louis – a boat carrying hundreds of Holocaust refugees who were ultimately returned to Europe; most of the people on the St. Louis perished in concentration camps).

Additionally, you may want to make connections to the weekly parsha (Torah portion). This year, Refugee Shabbat coincides with Parashat Beshallah and Shabbat Shira. This is the week when we tell the story of the Israelites leaving Egypt and crossing the sea to freedom. The story of taking only what you can carry and running from persecution is one with echoes down Jewish history, and in the stories of refugees and displaced people today. After crossing the Sea, Moses and Miriam lead the Israelites in celebratory song, and for many congregations the observance of Shabbat Shira means special attention is paid to music over the course of the weekend. We invite you to explore the [Refugee Shabbat Spotify Playlist](#) of music by and about refugees, and to explore possible connections with refugee musicians and groups in your local community.

Asks

Visit www.hias.org/take-action for the most up-to-date ways that you can ask your community to take action for refugees, including ways to speak up for refugees, directions for planning an action or rally, how to volunteer locally, educational resources, and more.

While HIAS has put together several legislative priorities for the Biden administration as of the time of this writing (November 2022) it is possible that those priorities will shift before Refugee Shabbat 2023. Watch the [Take Action](#) page on the HIAS website for new actions as we get closer to Refugee Shabbat, and [email Rabbi Megan Doherty](#) for more information.

Suggested Additional Reading

- <https://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/> – Comprehensive information about refugee admissions in the U.S. including how many refugees have been resettled in your area over the last year.
- www.hias.org/latest – Stories of HIAS clients, updates on changes to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and asylum system, and more.
- <https://rcusa.org/> – State-by-state information on refugee resettlement, as well as updates on changes to U.S. refugee policy from Refugee Council USA, a coalition of 24 U.S.-based non-governmental organizations dedicated to refugee protection, welcome, and excellence in the U.S. refugee resettlement program.
- www.welcome.us – A network of national and local organizations, leaders, and businesses involved in welcoming Afghan newcomer families into our communities.