

Refugee Shabbat Sermon Talking Points – 5785/2025



The Jewish community has experienced tremendous disorientation in the past 18 months globally and domestically – with the devastation of October 7th and its aftermath, the rise in anti-Semitism, and the erosion of a global commitment to security for the millions of people who have been forcibly displaced. The world can seem unstable and unrecognizable. But this is not our first time the Jewish people have navigated a global paradigm shift. As Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav reminds us – “All of the world is a narrow bridge. The most important thing is not to fear.”

Our resilience and our hope have carried our people throughout the generations. And even in moments of seeming despair – our people have reached for a sense of purpose and joy to sustain us. We hope that this year’s Refugee Shabbat will help affirm who we want to be as Jews in the world – continuing the important work we do on behalf of and in solidarity with the more than 120 million forcibly displaced people across the globe. This year’s Refugee Shabbat is a moment for congregations, organizations, and individuals to rest and reflect, to celebrate the impact of our work, and recommit ourselves to the creation of a more just, welcoming, and compassionate world.

In the past year, HIAS and our global partners have worked to provide safety and support to those fleeing war, persecution, and climate catastrophe. Even as recent policies aim to dismantle an international commitment to human rights established in the aftermath of World War II, advocates, activists and lawmakers continue support those impacted most gravely. We continue to push for just asylum laws that ensure people arriving at their borders can access their basic human right to seek protection. The recent cuts to funding that ended the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program and other international humanitarian efforts have been devastating, dramatic, and targeted — designed to overwhelm us. But they haven’t succeeded. If anything, they’ve shown just how strong our community is.

In the weeks, months, and years to come, HIAS will continue to work together with our local, national, and international partners, as well as our advocates and supporters — 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.

On Refugee Shabbat, we pause to acknowledge and honor the hard work of pursuing justice, and to center and strengthen this work moving forward. In a world increasingly marked by narrowing pathways for those fleeing danger, we raise our voices together as a Jewish community 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.

Connecting Refugee Shabbat to the Torah Portion and Jewish Values

Jewish tradition is saturated with our obligation toward refugees and those who have been forcibly displaced. HIAS has compiled this [Refugee Torah](#) document that you may find useful in grounding your commemoration of Refugee Shabbat.

If you are holding your Refugee Shabbat on the HIAS designated weekend of February 28 - March 1, it falls on *Rosh Hodesh Adar* and *Shabbat Shekalim*. The weekly Torah portion is *Parshat Terumah*. This segment of Torah covers the donations needed from the people for the building of the tabernacle. Please note that on *Shabbat Shekalim*, there is a tradition of reading from three torah scrolls. One scroll for the weekly *parshah* (Exodus 25:1-27:19), one for the Rosh Chodesh reading (Numbers 28:9-15) and a third for the *Shekalim* reading: (Exodus 30:11-16). The resources below focus on the weekly portion, *Parshat Terumah*.

While there is no explicit mention of welcoming refugees in this Torah portion, you may find the following ideas useful:

- The theme of the *parashah* lends itself to the collective efforts required of a society to build a project that is truly great. The work of this Refugee Shabbat is to help reclaim our national project as a proud nation of immigrants by lifting up a narrative of welcome, safety, and security.
- The *parasha's* focus on the materials and blueprints to execute the project correctly can come across as technical and tedious in detail. While we rarely look to such lists and bureaucracy for spiritual inspiration, they are often what enable a society to live out its values or fail in their implementation. The focus on the technical does matter. The ability to save lives is not about how much power you have, but rather about a willingness to make a commitment and bring your gift. Ken Burns' documentary "The U.S. and the Holocaust" makes this point:
"Almost all of the major rescuers were...people who seemed most of the time to just be pushing one piece of paper from here to there. But it turns out that one piece of paper pushed from the right here to the right there can save a life."
- The tabernacle is built with gifts from us all.
Copper from the blacksmith, yarn from the weaver, acacia wood from the carpenter.
So is it true today – our society is built from what each has to offer:
 - The dishwasher and the strawberry picker who crossed our border fleeing gang violence
 - The day laborer and his children eager to learn and earn their shot at the American dream
 - The coder and interpreter fleeing war with their families.

The people and their gifts brought forth may come from brokenness – carried through long journeys of heartbreak and pain. But their worth, their dignity, and their beauty cannot be denied. When welcomed and embraced –a beautiful mishkan takes shape: a place of unrivaled splendor not only for us, but where the sacred chooses to dwell in our midst.

Tonight, on refugee shabbat, our work is to build a society that welcomes these gifts.

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, Temporary Protected Status, 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. 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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Temporary Protected Status (TPS):** TPS is a temporary benefit that does not lead to lawful permanent resident status or give any other immigration status. The Secretary of Homeland Security may designate a foreign country for TPS due to conditions in the country that temporarily prevent the country's nationals from returning safely, or in certain circumstances, where the country is unable to handle the return of its nationals adequately. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services may grant TPS to eligible nationals of certain countries (or parts of countries), who are already in the United States. Eligible individuals without nationality who last resided in the designated country may also be granted TPS.

More about Refugees

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

- At the midpoint of 2024, there were **122.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide**. 37.9 million were refugees, 8 million were asylum seekers, 68.3 million were internally displaced, and 5.8 million other people in need of international protection.
- 71% 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. Iran and Turkey are host to the largest refugee populations in the world, hosting 3.8 and 3.1 million refugees, respectively.
- 65% of the world's refugees come from just four countries: Syria (6.3 million), Venezuela (6.2 million), Ukraine (6.1 million), and Afghanistan (6.1 million).
- Refugee advocates often refer to three durable solutions for refugees. These durable solutions are **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 third country), and **repatriation** (for refugees for whom circumstances in their homeland change significantly enough that it is safe to return).
- In the first half of 2024, 85,000 refugees were resettled globally, and 433,600 refugees returned to their areas or countries of origin.
- 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 3.6 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 ten national resettlement agencies, including HIAS, and a network of hundreds of local partner organizations that resettle refugees in communities around the country.
- The maximum number of refugees resettled in the U.S. each 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.
 - 125,000 was also the ceiling in FY 2023, and by the end of August 2023 the U.S. had resettled 60,014 refugees. While still less than half of the target number, this was significantly better than the 25,465 admitted in FY 2022.
 - For fiscal year 2024 (which began in October 2023 and ended in September 2024), the Biden administration set a refugee admissions ceiling of 125,000 and admitted 100,034 refugees. This marks the first time that the U.S. admitted more than 100,000 refugees since 1994.
- 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 in rural areas.
- Refugees and asylees had a positive net fiscal impact on the U.S. government and economy over a 15-year period (2005-2019), totaling nearly \$124 billion, according to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report released in 2024.

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.).
- 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.
- 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.

- The U.S. 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. 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.
- In June 2024, the Biden administration introduced an executive order which has effectively sealed the U.S.-Mexico border to people seeking safety. Like the similar policies of the previous administration, it flies in the face of U.S. and international law, which guarantees the right to seek asylum for individuals fleeing violence and danger.

HIAS and Israel

In the aftermath of the horrific attacks of October 7, 2023, the world feels different. While Refugee Shabbat is an opportunity to stand in solidarity with the more than 120 million displaced people around the world, we know that in this era, in particular, many communities will be thinking of those displaced by the Hamas attacks and asking questions about HIAS' work in Israel.

HIAS condemns the attacks in the strongest terms possible and demands the immediate and unconditional release of the hostages in Hamas captivity. We believe that both Israelis and Palestinians have the right to live in safety, dignity, and peace, and that the protection of one group should never come at the expense of another. No one should live in fear of violence or its outcomes — displacement, trauma, and families torn apart. That's why HIAS, as a global Jewish humanitarian organization, supports real political solutions that ensure the safety and dignity of all people in the region. We stand with people of faith around the world in praying for those who have lost loved ones, and we urge a swift de-escalation of this conflict, and join other humanitarians in calling for the protection of civilian lives.

The HIAS Israel office, founded in 1950 to assist immigrants looking to build a new home in the country, is providing cash assistance, mental health and trauma care, legal protections, and access to basic needs such as food and shelter to the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the events of October 7. While we are prepared to serve all populations based on need, we are proud to use our unique expertise to provide aid to some of the most vulnerable members of society — refugees from Eritrea, Sudan, Ukraine, and other countries, who may have less access to government support.

- For the most up-to-date information on HIAS' work with displaced people in Israel, please visit our [Israel Emergency Response Page](#).
- For a beautiful and thoughtful reflection about meeting humanitarian needs in the midst of this war, please read [Bearing Witness, One Year Later](#) by Sivan Carmel, the director of HIAS Israel.
- For background on HIAS' work in Israel over the past seven decades, please visit our [HIAS Israel page](#).

Take Action for Refugees

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.

Suggested Additional Resources

- [HIAS Latest](#): Stories of HIAS clients, updates on changes to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and asylum system, and more.
- Refugee Processing Center – [Admissions and Arrivals](#): Comprehensive information about refugee admissions and arrivals. Reports on refugee resettlement by state are updated monthly.
- [Refugee Council USA](#): 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 nongovernmental organizations dedicated to refugee protection, welcome, and excellence in the U.S. refugee resettlement program.
- [This article](#) and the recorded programs linked within it serve as a good primer to the effects of climate change on refugees and other displaced people.
 - [This recent publication](#) illustrates the continued and increasing risk extreme weather plays in displacement.
- [This page](#) outlines how HIAS works with asylum seekers in the U.S., and [this statement](#) shares HIAS' opposition to the asylum rule changes brought about by the Biden administration.
 - Read [Deep Dive: Immigration, Asylum, and the U.S. Election](#) for more information on recent discourse around asylum.