

Content Resources for Local Vigils Commemorating the S.S. St. Louis June 6, 2017



This is a content resource to be used in conjunction with this [planning guide](#).

In commemoration of the anniversary of the S.S. St. Louis being turned away from the shores of the United States, and against the backdrop of continued attacks on the U.S. refugee program, HIAS invites you to host a vigil on June 6th.¹ As you develop your program, we encourage you to use the ritual below, which will be conducted in Jewish communities across the country. Below are a variety of other suggested program elements, and we encourage you to build a program to meet your community's needs. The ritual itself is about 10 minutes long, and, with the other suggested program elements, we imagine that the entire vigil will be approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

On June 6th, together, we will bring meaning to a tragic moment in history that is currently at risk of repeating itself.

Suggested Program

In addition to the ritual, we encourage you to invite to speak: one of your Members of Congress, local politicians, rabbis, representatives from local Jewish organizations, Holocaust survivors, people who were refugees or whose families were refugees, and/or leaders in local refugee resettlement (such as staff from your local resettlement agencies).

Recommended outline:

- Welcome and Introduction (with context about S.S. St. Louis)
 - This is a good role for a local rabbi, who can personalize the talking points below.
- Song or Reading
- Speaker(s): Holocaust survivor, refugee, family members of refugees, and/or leaders in local refugee resettlement
- Yahrzeit Candle Ritual
- Song or Reading
- Speaker(s): Member of Congress, local politician, representatives from local Jewish organizations, and/or other rabbis
- Advocacy Charge
 - This is a good role for a rabbi or representative of a local Jewish organization.
- Song or Reading

¹ Ideally, your vigil will take place on Tuesday, June 6th (which is the anniversary of the day that the United States turned away the S.S. St. Louis). If this date is not possible for your community, feel free to plan for a different evening.

Welcome and Introduction Talking Points

- On June 6th, 1939, the S.S. St Louis was turned away from the United States with 937 Jewish refugees on board. 254 of them – over a quarter – died in concentration camps. Tonight, we honor the memory of those individuals.
- As we recognize the anniversary of the S.S. St Louis, we also bear witness as the United States risks repeating this dark moment in history.
- The Jewish community knows the tragic consequences of shutting down pathways to safety for refugees. We must prevent this from happening again.
- This year, there have been unprecedented attacks on the refugee program. Two executive orders seeking to halt refugee admissions were released, Congress launched various legislative attacks against refugees, and, across the country, governors and state and local legislators took measures to try to limit refugee resettlement in their states, towns, and cities.
- It is particularly tragic because these attacks come at a time when, globally, the number of refugees has reached its highest point in all of recorded human history. The policies targeting refugees will come at a real human cost and destroy a proud U.S. legacy of welcoming refugees.
- Tonight, across the country, communities are gathering to give meaning to the words “Never Again” and to stand together in loving support of all of those who have sought refuge in the United States, past and present.
- We are calling on our elected officials to do everything they can to ensure that the U.S. continues to welcome refugees and to oppose actions to restrict, defund, or halt the refugee program.

Yahrzeit Ritual

Invite 11 people to participate in this ritual: 10 people to hold yahrzeit candles and read testimonies and 1 person to read the introduction and closing. All readers should wear black.

Each of the 10 main readers hold yahrzeit candles – 5 are lit and 5 are unlit. The lit candles should alternate with the unlit candles.

The person introducing the ritual reads aloud:

78 years ago, 937 Jews fleeing violence and persecution set sail with dreams of freedom and safety. When they arrived at the shores of the United States, they were turned away, suspected of being spies for the German government. Today, we honor the memories of those who died after being denied refuge. We also lament continued efforts to once again close the doors of our country to refugees seeking freedom and safety.

Next, the readers take turns reading the following aloud:

Reader 1 (lit yahrzeit candle):

*I am holding this candle in memory of Fritz Zweigenthal. At age 30, Fritz set sail for Cuba on the S.S. St. Louis. Fritz disembarked in Belgium, after the ship was forced to return to Europe. He joined the French Foreign Legion to fight in the war. The postcard his family received from him from Syria in 1940 was the last time they ever heard from him. **May his memory call us to action for today's refugees.***

Reader 2 (unlit yearzeit candle):

*I am holding this candle in honor of Yacoub, a 32-year old Rohingya refugee who fled violence in his native Myanmar in 2012. Yacoub and the Rohingya community experienced extreme persecution as members of an oppressed Muslim religious minority in a majority Buddhist country. After leaving Myanmar for Bangladesh, Yacoub began working in a local mosque and teaches the Koran to children, but he cannot make enough money to feed his family of six. He has decided to make a second treacherous journey to Malaysia to find work. If he survives, he remains uncertain about what will come next for him and for his family. **Let us take action for today's refugees so that this candle need not be lit.***

Reader 3 (lit yearzeit candle):

*I am holding this candle in memory of Helge Skotzki, Inge Skotzki, Lore Doblön, and Eva Doblön. After being denied entry to the United States, Helge, age 15; Inge, age 13; Lore, age 16; and Eva, age 10, were all killed in Auschwitz, along with their parents. **May these children's memories call us to action for today's refugees.***

Reader 4 (unlit yearzeit candle):

*I am holding this candle in honor of Marwan, a 26-year old refugee from Syria. While performing his military service in Damascus, Marwan was sent to Hama, where he refused to participate in orders to shell areas where anti-government demonstrations were gathered. He went into hiding in a friend's house in a neighboring village and made plans to flee. As he was leaving, the army began bombing and he felt his arm being torn away from his body. His friends stopped the hemorrhaging by tying off his wound with wire, and he took his severed arm on an hour and half-long bus ride to a makeshift hospital. Though doctors told him there was nothing more they could do for him, he refused to give up hope and made it to a hospital in Antakya, Turkey. His wounds healed, but his life remained in danger. So, he swam to the Greek island of Kastellorizo. Ultimately, Marwan left Greece for another European country in hopes of receiving a prosthetic limb and the bare necessities for a normal life. He dreams of working, getting married, and simply living in safety. **Let us take action for today's refugees so that this candle need not be lit.***

Reader 5 (lit yearzeit candle):

*I am holding this candle in memory of Heinrich Gabel. He boarded the S.S. St. Louis with his wife, Beate, and their 20-month-old son, Gerhard. When they were denied entrance to the United States they were sent to the Westerbork transit camp. They were then deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto and ultimately to Auschwitz in October 1944. Heinrich was murdered on February 28th, 1945. There is no record that shows that Beate and Gerhard survived. **May their memories call us to action for today's refugees.***

Reader 6 (unlit yearzeit candle):

I am holding this candle in honor of Aziz, who, at the age of 10, witnessed his father being killed in Afghanistan and had to flee for his life with his mother, older brother, and sister. Aziz lived in Iran for three years – without papers or money – and experienced intense racism. His brother sent him to Europe for a better life. He is now 26 and has been living in Greece for nearly a decade. He applied for asylum in

2008 but has never received notification. He says that his life is getting worse by the day and wonders aloud how many years a person can live without a future. **Let us take action for today's refugees so that this candle need not be lit.**

Reader 7 (lit yearzeit candle):

*I am holding this candle in memory of Meta Schlesinger. Meta was born on July 22nd, 1887 in Stargard Germany. On May 13th, 1939, Meta and her husband, Richard, set sail on the S.S. St. Louis hoping to begin life anew in a safe land. Those dreams were shattered after their ship was turned away from the shores of the United States. Meta and Richard disembarked in the Netherlands and were then deported to the Sobibor death camp in Poland where they were both killed. **May their memories call us to action for today's refugees.***

Reader 8 (unlit yearzeit candle):

*I am holding this candle in honor of Carlos, a refugee from Túquerres, Colombia. Carlos worked as a farmer in Túquerres, where it was common to see guerrilla fighters. One day, there was a massacre on the farm where Carlos worked. The paramilitary self-defense group of the farmers killed the workers after accusing them of being part of the guerilla fighting group. Carlos was saved only because he was hidden by the cattle he was tending, but, because he witnessed the attack, he knew he must to flee in order to stay alive. Carlos says that, in Ecuador, Colombians are all assumed to be drug dealers, so, even though he owns his own Chinese food business, it took him 7 years to gain the trust of the community. Still, the landlord who rents space to him overcharges him for the space because he is Colombian. He hopes that one day he will find a place to live free from discrimination and oppression. **Let us take action for today's refugees so that this candle need not be lit.***

Reader 9 (lit yearzeit candle):

*I am holding this candle in memory of Walter Viktor. After being detained in Dachau, Walter was released in November 1938, received a visa to Cuba, and boarded the S.S. St. Louis with his wife, Else, to sail to safety. When the ship was turned away, Walter was sent to Belgium, where he was detained on false charges of spying. Walter fled to France but was detained there and deported to an unknown location. Else received her last letter from Walter in May of 1943. In 1947, she received word from the Red Cross that Walter had been transferred from Drancy camp to Lublin camp but that he was not amongst the survivors when the camp was liberated. **May his memory call us to action for today's refugees.***

Reader 10 (unlit yearzeit candle):

I am holding this candle in honor of Isaias², a 65-year old born again Christian refugee from Eritrea. In his homeland, Isaias worked as an excavator and lived a comfortable middle-class life with a nice home and car. In 2002, the government began closing Isaias's community's churches, accusing practitioners of being spies for the American government. With nowhere to worship, Isaias and his 10 friends started coming together to pray in secret. Most of the other people in their church had been arrested, whipped, beaten, and tortured – including the pastors. The government said that, if church members signed a document denouncing their religion, they would be left alone, but, if they did not sign, they would be

² Name has been changed to protect safety.

*imprisoned. Isaias refused to sign and continued praying secretly with the small group. Eventually, their names were passed to the government. When the government began arresting his friends, Isaias and his wife quickly gathered their passports and used what money they had in hand to buy plane tickets to Kenya. They left Eritrea with very little money, as he was not allowed to access his bank account. In Kenya, Isaias is not allowed to work, and he and his wife share a small room with several other tenants. They all take turns paying rent whenever anyone has money, and they share food whenever anyone has some. He wishes he could return to Eritrea, but it would not be safe. He says that, though he did not choose to be a refugee, he believes that God will help him and prays to be resettled in a place where he can work and support his wife. **Let us take action for today's refugees so that this candle need not be lit.***

The person who introduced the ritual says aloud:

The memories of Fritz, Helge, Inge, Lore, Eva, Heinrich, Beate, Gerhard, Meta, Richard, Walter, and the 243 others who perished when the S.S. St. Louis was denied entry to the United States call us to action for today's refugees. The stories of Yacoub, Marwan, Aziz, Carlos and Isaias remind us how urgently we must take action. We pray that our country will not repeat one of the darkest moments in our history by denying refuge to those whose lives are in danger.

May it be God's will that they soon know safety and freedom on our shores, but may it first be our own.

Join me in saying: ken yehi ratzon.

Advocacy Charge

The person giving the charge reads aloud:

Tonight, our eyes are drawn to the lights of the yahrzeit candles that illuminate our communal memory of the S.S. St. Louis. The tiny flickering lights honor those denied safety here in the United States so many years ago. And tonight, our hearts are drawn to the unlit candles. The 65 million people who are currently displaced around the world who experienced extreme violence and persecution in places they once called home. The 40,000 people who each day are forced to flee for their lives. These people have different stories, identities, sorrows, nationalities, and families and yet they share a common label: refugee.

We hold this vigil tonight to send a message to our elected officials that we will not stand idly by as one of the darkest moments in United States history threatens to repeat itself. When our government threatens to slam the doors shut on today's refugees, we have just two words: Never Again.

The story of the St. Louis is a testimony to the danger and injustice of denying refugees a chance at safety. The political attacks on refugees this year, including President Trump's refugee ban, deprive refugees of safe haven, scapegoat vulnerable human beings, and do nothing to make us safer. We call on our elected officials tonight to take a stand for refugees. To stand with us – their constituents – as we fight to make sure that these unlit candles never have to be lit.

We urge our elected officials to stand against any and all policies that would halt, restrict, or defund the U.S. refugee resettlement program for any group of refugees of any ethnicity, religion, or nationality.

We urge you, our elected officials, to fight the executive orders that deny refugees a chance at safety. Please join us in asking that the President allows at least 75,000 refugees to be resettled in the U.S. next year. We need your commitment, now more than ever, that you will lead our country to do more—not less—to welcome and protect refugees.

Elected officials must respond to the largest refugee crisis in human history with true leadership based in protecting the humanity and dignity of every person, rather than with misinformation and fear. We call on our representatives to represent us – and to lead with the forward vision that comes from an understanding of our past.

Songs

Pitchu Li

פְּתִחוּ לִי

פְּתִחוּ לִי שְׁעֵרֵי צְדָק אֲבֹאֲבָם אוֹדֶה יְהוָה :
זֶה הַשָּׁעַר לִיהוָה צְדִיקִים יָבֹאוּ בוֹ :

*Pitchu li sha'arei tzedek avo-vam odeh Yah.
Zeh ha'sha'ar l'Adonai tzadkim yavo'u vo.*

Open the gates of righteousness for me, that I may enter them and praise God.
This is the gateway to God that the righteous will enter through.

Eli, Eli (Halichah L'Keisariah)

אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי

אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי, שְׁלֵא יִגְמַר לְעוֹלָם :
הַחוֹל וְהַיָּם, רִשְׁרוּשׁ שֶׁל הַמַּיִם,
בְּרַק הַשָּׁמַיִם, תִּפְלַת הָאָדָם.

*Eli Eli, shelo yigameir l'olam:
Hachol v'hayam, rishrush shel hamayim,
Berak hashamayim, t'filat haadam.*

O God, my God, I pray that these things never end:
the sand and the sea, the rush of the waters,
the crash of the heavens, the prayer of the heart.

אָנִי מֵאֲמִין
בְּאֵמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה בְּבִיאַת הַמָּשִׁיחַ.
וְאֵף עַל פִּי שְׂיִתְמַמְהֵהוּ,
עַם כָּל-זֶה אָנִי מֵאֲמִין.
עַם כָּל-זֶה אֲחַכֶּה לוֹ בְּכָל-יוֹם שְׂיָבֵא.

*Ani maamin b'emunah sh'leimah b'viat hamashiach. V'af al pi sheyitmamei-ah, im kol zeh ani maamin.
Im kol zeh achakeh lo b'chol yom sheyavo.*

I believe with perfect faith in the Messiah's coming, and even if the Messiah be delayed, I will wait day by day.

Readings

Me (Maryam Sathat Sobhani, Irani Asylum Seeker)

I wonder who I am?
Or where I am meant to be?
Or where I could be?
Or how to leave?
Or how to be a true person?
I wonder!
I wonder how I can fit in this world
Or how to be right?
But no one can answer my questions

First They Came (Pastor Martin Niemoller)

First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.

Makh Tsi Di Eygelekh/Close Your Eyes (Isaiah Shpigl)

Close your little eyes,
Little birds are coming,
Circling around
The head of your cradle.
Baggage in hand
Our home in ashes
We are setting out, my child
In search of luck.

God has closed off the world
And night is all around
Waiting for us,
Full of horror and fear.
The two of us stand here
In this difficult, difficult, moment
Not knowing where
The road leads.

Naked and bare
We were chased from our home
In darkness,
Driven into the fields;
And storm, hail and wind
Have accompanied us, my child
Accompanied us into
The abyss of the world.

The Butterfly (Pavel Friedman, June 4, 1942)

The last, the very last,
So richly, brightly, dazzlingly yellow.
Perhaps if the sun's tears would sing
against a white stone . . .

Such, such a yellow
Is carried lightly 'way up high.
It went away I'm sure
because it wished
to kiss the world goodbye.

For seven weeks I've lived in here,
Penned up inside this ghetto.

But I have found what I love here.
The dandelions call to me
and the white chestnut branches in the court.
Only I never saw another butterfly.

That butterfly was the last one.
Butterflies don't live in here, in the ghetto.