

**The Syrian Refugees & the Torah: Beyond the Knee Jerk Reactions
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Rabbi Steven Saks

We have repeatedly seen comparisons made between the Syrian refugees and refugees from the Holocaust who were not given asylum. As Jews, we knew even well before the Holocaust, what it is like to be an outsider. Right in the *Parsha* we are told: “The Egyptians could not bear to eat food with the Hebrews, it being an abomination to the Egyptians” (Gen. 43:32). Still today Jews are made to feel as if they are outsiders as witnessed by the reemergence of anti-Semitism in Europe and the demonization of Israel. As witnessed by the reemergence of anti-Semitism in Europe and the demonization of Israel, still today Jews are made to feel as if they are outsiders. Furthermore, according to the Talmud (Baba Metsia 59b), the Torah warns us 36 times from wronging a stranger, and at times explains that the reason for the injunction is “for you were strangers in Egypt. I am the Lord.” In other words, you know what it is like to be the stranger.

So of course we sympathize with the Syrian refugees, whose plight is heartbreaking. In fact, over 1,000 rabbis recently signed a letter that was published on the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society website to urge Congress to allow the Syrian refugees to enter. But before we conclude that allowing the refugees in is the Jewish view, we must fully assess the situation to the best of our abilities. We must remember that there is a crucial distinction between the Holocaust refugees and the Syrian refugees. Unlike the Holocaust refugees, today’s refugees come from a part of the world that is dominated by anti-Western radicalism. Polling has repeatedly shown that many from this part of the world support the use of violence (in other words, terrorism) as a means to defeating the enemy, which often means the U.S., Israel, and the West. A 2014 pew Poll found that when asked if “suicide bombings can be justified against civilians in order to defend against Islam from its enemies,” only 45% of nearby Lebanese and 32% of nearby Palestinians answered “never.” Though there was

no data regarding Syria, presumably due to the war, it is clear that we are not speaking about a few bad apples, but about a culture that celebrates terror. While the vast majority of these refugees are certainly not violent, it not hard to imagine that a small number of these refugees may engage in terror activities against the U.S. if given the opportunity to enter the country.

It has been suggested that we vet the refugees before they are allowed to enter. Sounds great, but how? Unfortunately, they come from a country ruled by a sociopathic dictator struggling to keep power amidst a civil war. The information needed to do a sufficient background check may be impossible to obtain because of the circumstances on the ground. It is not as if we are going to send federal agents into a war zone to do background research on these refugees.

Many in the Jewish world are of the view that regardless of the security risks the refugees should be let in because of the biblical injunctions not to forget the stranger. That is certainly a fair and powerful argument, but we should not forget that the Torah also commands us to aggressively confront and defeat evil. As Moses taught, the teachings of the Torah are “not in heaven.” The Torah is a book meant to be applied to this world, a world that contains evil. The Torah understands that in order to defeat evil, the wicked must be confronted and that may require getting your hands dirty. After the Amalekites cowardly attacked the weakest of the Israelites, the Israelites were commanded “not to forget.” But this time they are not being commanded not to forget the plight of the stranger, but to wipe out the memory of Amalek. In other words, part of defeating evil means defeating it on the battle field. Even Lincoln who wisely emphasized a policy of reconciliation as opposed to retribution as the Civil War drew to a close, was willing to get his hands dirty because he understood that winning the war was a prerequisite to reconciliation. Lincoln suspended the right of Habeas Corpus, reasoning it was permissible to temporarily suspend a portion of the constitution in order to

save the Union, and allowed Sherman to conduct his devastating march to the sea to ensure victory.

We must think like Lincoln and balance compassion with the need to protect our own citizens and defeat evil. For if we do not defeat this radical perversion of Islam, the world for Muslims and non-Muslims alike will be a darker place. In the wake of the San Bernardino attack, let's remember that the reason there has not been another successful attack on the magnitude of 9/11 is because of the strong counter-terrorism measures that have been implemented. Laxity on our part will certainly be exploited by terrorists. On the other hand, we must safeguard our American soul and not endorse the extremism of Donald Trump who suggested that Muslims not be allowed to enter the U.S. To the best of our abilities we must make rational distinctions and distinguish between, for example, a Muslim accountant from Toronto who has a clean record and an individual from a part of the world which is a hot bed of radicalism that cannot properly be vetted.

To put it another way, we want to guard not only our souls, but our bodies. We care about doing the right thing, but we have to worry about our physical safety. The Mishna Berurah explains that the reason why we are obligated to recite Hallel (songs of praise), but not to have a Seudah (festive meal) on Chanukah, is because the Greeks did not seek our physical destruction, only our spiritual. Therefore, we celebrate with our spirituality through joyful praise, as opposed to with our bodies through eating. On Chanukah we celebrate the spiritual salvation of our souls. Yet, on Purim, we are not obligated to say Hallel, but we are obligated to take part in a Seudah because we were threatened with physical destruction. Therefore, we celebrate in a physical manner with our bodies. If not for the physical salvation of the Jews during Esther's day, there would not have been a Jewish body or soul to save during Judah's day. We should not underestimate the importance of security. Therefore, though we do not want to repeat the mistakes of the past and turn away refugees, we must examine the most recent history as well. An overly

liberal immigration policy in Europe has created an epidemic of homegrown terror. In other words, good intentions do not guarantee good result: just ask the people of Paris, London, and Madrid. The Syrian refugee question is a complex one, and intelligent people can disagree. I do not know for a certainty what the right decision regarding the admittance of the refugees is, and only time will tell. While we instinctively compare the current situation to the Holocaust, a responsible assessment requires that we make the proper contrasts as well. Only then should we speak out.