



WE ARE ALL REFUGEES:

*A guide for “welcoming
the stranger”
to your seder table*



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We Jews are all refugees. Each and every one of us was there at Sinai, and each and every one of us sojourned for 40 years in the desert after leaving Egypt, the land of our bondage, to reach Canaan, the land of our birth-right and destiny. Each year at Passover, we are commanded to relive that experience by retelling the story of the Exodus. We are commanded to time travel back, to remove all our modern trappings, and to feel as one of a ragged rabble, wandering through an unfamiliar and dangerous desert—vulnerable, disoriented, and frightened. Passover is the central rite of Judaism for so many reasons. By reliving the Exodus, we are compelled to find in ourselves a place of compassion for others who are forced to flee their country of birth.

The Torah tells us no less than 36 times to welcome the stranger. It is core to our religion and who we are as a people—and it is repeated more than any other commandment. In every age there are “strangers,” those who have been forced by conflict, persecution, and other reasons to leave all that is familiar to find safety among us. In the Jewish community, we are most familiar with our own heritage—with our grandparents and great grandparents who arrived on these shores during the great waves of migration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently, our families embraced relatives seeking refuge from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Empire. But, the commandment so often repeated in the Torah is about welcoming those whom we do *not* know. We must take them in, protect them, and make them welcome—not because they are our relatives, but precisely because they are not! As strangers ourselves once in the land of Egypt, we well know what it feels like to be “the other.”

By reliving the Exodus, we are compelled to find in ourselves a place of compassion for others who are forced to flee their country of birth.

In 2013, there are more than 43 million refugees and other displaced people in our world—victims, of political, religious and ethnic oppression; gender violence; and war. HIAS, the global migration agency of the American Jewish community, brings more than a century’s experience working with mostly Jewish refugees to provide a lifeline to today’s most vulnerable refugees worldwide. In 15 countries on five continents, we help them take control and rebuild their lives in safety.

Today, as you relive our bondage in Egypt and exodus to the promised land, we give you the opportunity to invite a virtual refugee to your seder table. On the following pages we offer you the tools to do so. We hope this will enrich your Passover experience with an additional layer of information and immediacy. Please join us today and every day as we at HIAS welcome the stranger and protect the refugee: www.hias.org.

Four Cups, Four Languages of Redemption—and a Fifth

Traditionally we have four cups of wine at the *seder*, and we leave a fifth for Elijah the prophet. These cups correspond to the four phrases below reflecting the language of redemption—and a fifth is added for our future redemption:

והוצאתי (*V'hotzaiti*)—And I will take you out (of slavery),

והצלתני (*V'hitzalti*)—And I will save you,

וגאלתי (*V'ga'alti*)—And I will redeem you,

ולקחתי (*V'lakachti*)—And I will take you (as a nation),

והבאתי (*V'heveiti*)—And I will bring you (to the promised land).

The fifth cup, which we leave for Elijah the prophet, represents our final redemption back to Israel that is yet to come. We leave it for Elijah to symbolize that we have not yet reached the point that we can merit arriving in our homeland. Let this fifth cup also represent the plight of refugees around the world who are still waiting for a durable solution that enables them to build a new home in safety. We pour the fifth cup in solidarity with these refugees because as Jews we recognize what it means to be wandering without a home, facing persecution, uncertain of our fate.

Facts for reflection:

- Refugees are people who—out of a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, and other reasons—cannot safely live in their home countries.
- Many refugees are unable to return to their homes and need to be able to start new lives in safety and freedom.
- Even when they think they have found refuge, many refugees continue to be in danger and need to find safety and protection.

True story for contemplation:

W and her family fled the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) because they were of a certain ethnicity facing persecution from other ethnic groups. In October 2008, rebels attacked W's village, killing anyone they found, burning their houses and looting their property. Fearing for their lives, W and her family fled to a nearby forest where they hid for two weeks. After discovering that their house had been burnt to the ground and all their cattle looted, fearing further persecution, W and her family fled their hometown for Kenya, where they were registered and recognized as refugees. Although they continue to face threats, W and her family feel safer in Kenya, where they have access to the UN Refugee Agency and other international refugee protection agencies, such as the HIAS Refugee Trust of Kenya, which provides legal assistance/protection, trauma counseling, and other assistance.

Karpas

Eating the green vegetables dipped in salt water has a dual message—the green vegetables represent spring and renewal, and the salt water represents bitter tears. While we celebrate the renewal we experienced as a nation when we left Egypt, we must remember that there are millions of refugees around the world today struggling with extremely difficult situations and unable to find their renewal. Moreover, many of the refugees able to escape their dangerous situations often suffer a triple trauma: the trauma of their persecution, the trauma of leaving everything behind and the physical journey to a new place, and the trauma of starting life anew in a completely different and foreign society.

Facts for reflection:

- Many refugees suffer from trauma in the aftermath of horrific violence and abuse and need care and attention.
- Refugees are often hungry and in need of serious medical attention.
- Many refugees have been separated from their families and need to find them again.
- The majority of refugees are women and children and need protection from oppression and violence.

True story for contemplation:

X is a 14-year-old boy who lived with his stepmother in a refugee camp in Chad. His father is alive but divorced from his mother and remarried. X's stepmother advised his father to let X stay with his grandmother, although X was very unhappy about this arrangement and wanted to live with his father and other siblings. X was mocked by his peers because of a physical deformity, which caused him to feel depressed and suffer various social and emotional problems. HIAS provided him with individual, family, and group therapy, which helped create a more emotionally and socially supported environment for him. After his father reported that X was contemplating suicide, he was referred by HIAS to the UN Refugee Agency's health center to find temporary measures to reduce the stress in his life. Finally X was evacuated to Ndjamena, the capital city of Chad, for better treatment, and X was recommended to the UN Refugee Agency for consideration resettlement on medical grounds.

Maror

We eat bitter herbs to represent the bitterness of slavery. Many refugees in the world are still living bitter lives in refugee camps on the outskirts of societies and harsh urban centers in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Some refugees are able to be resettled, primarily to the United States, although this too is an arduous process of integration into a foreign community.

Facts for reflection:

- Resettled refugees often have great difficulty integrating into their communities.
- Many refugees do not speak the language of their new home country, making self-reliance and meeting their basic needs even more difficult.
- In some communities in the United States, anti-refugee sentiment is on the rise due both to intensifying Islamophobia and a lack of awareness of the benefits—rather than perceived burdens—that refugees bring to their new communities.

True story for contemplation:

A single mother from Iraq with one minor child and two adult children, B arrived in Seattle in January 2012. She experienced a great deal of trauma while living in Iraq—her older son was kidnapped and tortured, the family fled to Syria to avoid further violence, and they had to leave the father behind in Syria to come to the U.S. Without her husband and with her older son suffering from chronic depression, she felt stressed upon arriving in the U.S. and had a difficult time adjusting to her new life and other new roles. She enrolled in the HIAS-administered “Preferred Communities Program” for single female-headed households, which provided her with intensive case management, counseling, and supportive services. She has become more independent over time and manages daily tasks much better. She now is financially responsible, working part-time in a salon. With her growing English skills, she now provides social support for other refugee single mothers and encourages them to become self-sufficient.

Four sons

The fourth son does not know how to ask a question, and you may not be able to answer the question: what does HIAS do? HIAS’ work around the world helps to ensure that the dignity of all refugees is preserved according to international standards, and that those whose voices are not heard are not forgotten or neglected.

Facts for reflection:

- Chad hosts more than 288,000 Sudanese refugees, most of whom cannot return to Sudan due to the ongoing insecurity in Darfur. HIAS Chad provides trauma counseling and social services in five refugee camps in Chad for refugees from Darfur and facilitates relocation for those who need additional protection.
- Conflicts in Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have forced hundreds of thousands of refugees to seek safe haven in Kenya and Uganda. The HIAS Refugee Trust of Kenya serves the most vulnerable of this population, including survivors of torture and/or sexual or gender-based violence who have sought refuge in Nairobi and Kampala.
- Over 4 million people have been displaced by Colombia’s ongoing armed conflict. HIAS’ programs in Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, and Panama seek to address the mental health needs and social conditions of Colombian refugees who have fled the country through direct therapeutic activities, working to reduce the impact of the loss, violence, and trauma refugees have experienced in their lives.
- There are currently more than 60,000 asylum seekers in Israel, most of whom have fled persecution in Eritrea and Sudan. HIAS works closely with the Israeli government to establish an Israeli asylum system and raise Israeli public awareness about asylum issues.
- Religious minorities in Iran—including Jews, Christians, and Baha’is—are victims of imprisonment, harassment, and intimidation based on their religious beliefs. HIAS runs the U.S. government’s Resettlement Support Center in Austria, which helps these religious minorities come to the U.S. as refugees.

True story for contemplation:

M is a Colombian refugee in Ecuador. For security reasons, M and her family had to move from the border area to a city further from the conflict region. HIAS social workers helped the family settle into their new location, and HIAS psychologists provided assistance to help them adapt to the many changed circumstances in their lives. M was able to find employment selling pizzas at a restaurant. Her sons participated in recreational and social activities and also resumed their education; her older son was able to finish high school and is currently working as an accounting assistant. With the help of HIAS and the UN Refugee Agency, M now has her own small business and is building a new life with her family in Ecuador.

Nirtzah

At the end of the Seder, we say “Next year in Jerusalem!” In this context, “Jerusalem” represents safety, community, integration, and home. While we celebrate Passover, we hope that refugees living in danger and without a home will be in a safe place next year as well.

What can you do to help more refugees live in safety and dignity next year and for years to come?

- Visit www.hias.org to learn more about HIAS’ work with refugees around the world and sign up to receive the HIAS/JTA Weekly Briefing, which includes advocacy updates and other news on refugee and immigrant matters and HIAS’ work.
- Learn more about the specific challenges refugees and the resettlement program face by reading the HIAS report *Resettlement at Risk: Meeting Emerging Challenges to Refugee Resettlement in Local Communities* (available at <http://www.hias.org/en/pages/policy-position-papers>).
- Help HIAS educate the Jewish community and the general public about critical issues facing refugees and immigrants in the U.S. and all over the world. In communities around the country, individuals and congregations have coordinated events and initiatives—such as speaker series, film screenings, round-table discussions, and Shabbat dinners with guest speakers—to discuss the situation facing refugees in the U.S. and abroad. Contact advocacy@hias.org to discuss your goals, create content for the event, compile materials, secure a venue, and begin outreach.
- Urge President Obama and Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform that fixes the broken system for admitting and integrating refugees and asylum seekers who have fled persecution to build new lives in this country. Contact advocacy@hias.org to set up an in-district meeting with your legislators or find other ways to have your voice heard.
- Contribute and raise money to help HIAS continue its important work providing a safe haven for refugees. In addition to making a personal contribution, you can help us raise money and spread awareness around the country by hosting events—such as parties, happy hours, benefit concerts, and barbecues. Supporters have raised thousands of dollars to help fund HIAS’ programs and advocacy efforts. Please visit www.hias.org to make a donation and contact advocacy@hias.org to coordinate a fundraising initiative in your community or congregation.