

You and I Can Change the World
 Rosh HaShanah Day 1 5766
 Rabbi Hal Rudin-Luria
 B'nai Jeshurun Congregation

Ani V'Atah Nishaneh Et Ha'Olam-
 You and I can change the world.
 Arik Einstein's Israeli folk song repeats-
 You and I can change the world,
 First, you and I, and then all will follow us-

As an eight year-old, Bernd Koschland boarded a ship in Hamburg, Germany bound for Southampton, England. He was alone. It was March 1939 when his mother waved goodbye. He sailed away to a new life in England, away from the horrors of Nazi Germany. He was one of the lucky ones, he joined the kindertransport.

Like many others, Bernd's parents had grown fearful of the Nazis. It must have been a momentous decision to part with such a young child. Bernd's parents both died in concentration camps.

He said: 'I remember my parents asking me if I wanted to escape to safety in England, and they promised me two things: that when I was 13, they would buy me a suit with long trousers, and that they would soon come to join me. But of course, neither of these things could happen, and I never saw them again.'

When Bernd arrived in England, he was taken to Margate and lived in a Jewish boys' home. He knew only one phrase in English when he arrived. His parents had taught him to say: 'I am hungry. May I have a piece of bread?' Thankfully, it was a phrase he never had to use.

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In the spa town of Evian, France, in 1938, representatives of 32 countries gathered to discuss the humanitarian disaster they knew would overtake the Jews of Europe. They knew Jewish lives were at risk and they were ready to flee the Nazis to become refugees. Yet, no one took them in, one by one each country closed their doors to the Jews saying it wasn't their problem.

Thank G-d for the kindness and immense bravery of those Righteous Gentiles in Europe who risked it all to help, hide and protect Jews and the British Jewish and non-Jewish communities that began a grass-roots effort to create the kindertransport saving 10,000 children from the horrors of the Nazis.

More than 75 years later, once again we see our world in torment and children in peril. One picture is etched in my mind from this summer, that of the 3 year old boy Aylan Kurdi wearing his blue shorts and a red shirt washed up dead on the beach in Turkey, a three year old dead for no reason than trying to survive, seeking a better life, a life without war and hatred. That Syrian infant died along with his mother and brother while attempting to make safe passage to Greece and Europe. Each day, hundreds of Syrian refugees and African and Arab migrants die on the dangerous Mediterranean crossing to be smuggled into Europe, 2,800 already this year killed. In Austria last month, they found 71 refugees suffocated in a locked truck. It is impossible not to be moved by the images of the refugee crisis threatening to overwhelm Europe. These descriptions are too close for comfort from the centuries of persecution, massacres and horrors in our own history.

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Why should we worry about Syrian refugees on the Jewish New Year? As a light unto the nations, G-d demands us to be constantly vigilant, compassionate and courageous to protect every human being, Jew and non-Jew alike- for G-d created us all in G-d's image. We are commanded to love the stranger because we were strangers, too. Why should we care for about the welfare of these refugees, because we were once refugees, too.

Historically, Today marks the 6th day of Creation, when Adam and Eve, the first human beings, were created, not the first Jews. The Torah reading this morning tells the story of the boy Ishmael and his mother Hagar seeking asylum, a home to care for them. Dying of thirst in the desert. G-d answers their cries and saves them from death. This story of a non-Jewish child refugee is what we read this Jewish New Year emphasizing G-d's love for all humanity and our Jewish requirement to aid Jew and non-Jew alike.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are prompted by the power of sound. The shofar note is considered a heart-breaking cry, the three different notes distinctive types of wails reminding us that when we do teshuvah, repentance, and seek to better ourselves that we must also listen to the cries in our world- the silent cries of those in need. The shofar moves us to action, a battle cry to rise up to protect those in danger in our

community, our cities and our world.

Since the Syrian civil war erupted following the Arab spring revolution in 2011, four years of fighting has led to religious persecution, destroyed homes, loss of human rights and lives filled solely with fear. ISIS has joined the violence in Syria and brought more terror. More than half of Syria's population has been displaced. 4.1 million Syrians have fled the country and more than 7 million remain but have left their homes, lacking the most essential needs, health care and food.

Neighboring Arab countries Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey have taken in the largest numbers in growing refugee camps. Europe with its job opportunities and better economy has been the destination for 400,000 Syrian refugees, this year alone. They are joined by migrants and refugees from Iraq and Africa fleeing poverty and lawless lands, seeking a better chance to succeed and raise their families. This could be the greatest humanitarian challenge we will face this generation.

What can be done to help this crisis? Last week, elderly members of the Alyth Synagogue of London, who as children years ago were saved in the kindertransport, met with Syrian refugees and members of British Parliament to discuss this question. Rabbi Mark Goldsmith of the Alyth synagogue writes, "If the government in the 1930s had listened to the critics who said England didn't have room, and we had enough problems caring for our own, then the entire group that stood before the Houses of Parliament with me would not have survived.

But instead the Kindertransport is part of a proud tradition of helping those in most need. It's in that spirit that we call on our (leaders) to offer sanctuary to some of the most vulnerable refugees. We must act now."

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The Torah contains three commandments to love. The first is to love G-d in the v'ahavta, with all your heart, soul and might. The second is to love your neighbor- v'ahavta l're'echa kamockha- the golden rule to love your neighbor as you love yourself. This is fairly easy because our neighbor is usually similar to us. The third and last obligation is to love the stranger because you were once strangers. It is harder to love someone seemingly different than us. That may be why the Torah reminds us more than 36 times to love, protect and care for the stranger, for we were strangers in Egypt.

We are required to love the stranger because they are the same as us, a human being, created in the Divine Image. Nothing is more important, no command more central than

responding to the cry of a fellow human being in distress for all lives matter.

Deborah Lipstadt, leading Holocaust historian, recently wrote a piece for the Forward raising important questions and challenges on the Jewish and world response to the Syrian refugee and migrant crisis. Is it our place to help people that may not be fleeing religious persecution but rather only seeking a better economic and social life? What are the long-term effects of welcoming refugees and migrants in Europe? While some of Syria's neighbors have welcomed large numbers of refugees, why have none of the oil-rich Arab gulf states accepted any? As ISIS and other terror groups have joined the deadly Syrian civil war, how many of the refugees have ties to terrorists and could pose security threats? Lastly, what should Israel, Syria's neighbor do? Many of these questions we cannot answer but must remain in the discussion.

How are Jews helping the refugees? In the United Kingdom, World Jewish Relief – founded 70 years ago to carry out the Kindertransport – is raising funds for Syrian refugees. The New North London Synagogue – Masorti – is operating a refugee drop in center that provides legal advice, medical treatment, counseling, a cooked meal, a basic food parcel and nearly new clothes and shoes. In Italy, Jewish communities in Milan, Florence, Genoa and Rome among others are reaching out. The Holocaust Memorial in Florence has become a shelter for refugees and the Jewish community of Rome is providing language and vocational classes.

In Berlin, our partner Masorti synagogue is welcoming Syrian refugees by offering German language classes, hosting Syrian refugees at the Chanukah party and other holiday meals. Rabbi Gesa Ederberg reflected that at the last joint gathering with the Berlin Muslim community and her synagogue welcoming Syrian refugees, one of the Syrians asked her: “Is such a relationship as we see here normal between Muslims and Jews in Germany?” and she answered, “Yes, that’s normal.”

Jewish organizations have taken a lead in providing care and resources to the refugee camps in Jordan and working with refugees in Europe. The lead groups are HIAS which helped to welcome and settle our grandparents in America- Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society- and the Joint- JDC, both organizations working under the umbrella of Jewish Federation.

What about Israel? It's complicated. Israel is Syria's neighbor and Syria's sworn enemy. Yet, Israel has been providing amazing medical treatment to a staggering 2,000 critically wounded Syrians for the last 2 ½ years. Even though there is no relationship with the regime or terrorist groups within Syria, Israel's field hospital just across the Syrian border

is a safehaven where many arrive unconscious and barely alive- often times unaware they are being treated in Israel. Israel's leading hospital in the North in Tzfat receives Syrian patients that can endure longer ambulance trips. Once healed, Israel returns the Syrian citizens to the border with no traces of Israeli help for fear that this might lead to their immediate death from Syrians at the other side. In fact, children are led to believe they never leave Syria and are treated by Syrian doctors. Israel regularly ships supplies Syrians in need. ISRA-AID- Israel's equivalent of the Peace Corp and the Israel Trauma Coalition are both on the ground working at the Jordanian refugee camps. There is internal debate whether Israel should open its doors to welcome Syrian refugees and that is not a question we can answer today.

So what can we do?

First, let your voice be heard to urge our government to make a formal plan to take in more Middle Eastern and African refugees. Let it be a priority to love the stranger.

Second, you can donate to the synagogue just write in the memo Syrian refugee and we will pass that money along to the European Jewish communities working on the ground with the refugees. Donate to HIAS and the JDC to support their work overseas with the refugees.

In Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, we learn that there are four types of people- the first is a person who says, "What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours." A second type of person says, "What is mine is yours and what is yours is mine," that person is just not smart. A third person says, "Mine is yours and yours is yours," that person is very pious, and finally, a fourth says, "What is yours is mine and mine is mine," that person is wicked.

What is most interesting is the first type of person who says, "What is mine is mine and yours is yours, Ha'Omer Sheli Sheli, v'shelkha, Shelkha." The rabbis say that this is the average way of people. But others say this was the way of the evil people of Sodom. Do we strive to be average, especially on Rosh HaShanah when our goal is self-improvement?

Rabbi Abraham Twerski argues: "the average person has an essentially isolationist attitude... not willing to share. This failure to be considerate of others can be self-destructive and can result in the collapse of society, just as Sodom was destroyed. The Mishnah states the regrettable fact that most people fail to recognize the reality of interdependence and think they are secure within their own boundaries."

Whether we are looking at our own family, our synagogue community, Cleveland, Israel

or the world refugee crisis, we are required to open our hearts to the cry of those in need, step up and join together to make our world better for all lives matter. Our world can only be truly sweet when the cries of the shofar are the only cries voiced on this holiday.

So join me in helping to change our world.

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L'Shana Tova u'Metukah- in helping others, we truly help ourselves. May we all be inscribed for a happy, healthy, meaningful and sweet New Year.