Refugees in Israel: Guest Blog by Rabbi Eliezer (Louis) Finkelman

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(Rabbi Finkelman is a member of the International Rabbinic Fellowship. He earned his rabbinic ordination at Yeshiva University, and has a PhD in Comparative Literature from the City University of New York. He teaches literature at Lawrence Technological University, as well as adult education classes in his local Federation.)

The IRF (International Rabbinic Fellowship) has made an important statement on African refugees in Israel, recognizing the demographic constraints on Israel, but condemning physical and verbal abuse of innocent persons. I commend IRF for properly condemning abuse of the innocent, and for raising an Orthodox rabbinic voice on this issue. In this essay, I wish to push the IRF’s statement to a further level. We have to do a better job of caring for the African refugees in Israel.

From a certain legal point of view, it makes sense to exclude the refugees. The land does not belong to them. They belong to some other land. If ethnic rivals make it dangerous to live where they belong, well, they have a problem, but we do not have to take care of their problem. The Mishnah condemns this sensible, ordinary point of view as possibly the viewpoint of Sodom (Avot 5:10), according to which those who have, bear no responsibility for those who need.

I have heard the suggestion that we must reject refugees because they bring disease. Low status immigrants always get accused of bringing disease, unlike high status diplomats, tourists and business travelers. Ellis Island had stringent medical tests and quarantines for immigrants to the United States who came in steerage. Those who paid for first class tickets could come right in. Needless to say, quarantining low status immigrants has much more to do with nativist anxiety than with any medical knowledge.

I have heard the suggestion that we must reject refugees because they bring crime. Nativists always “know” that foreigners cause crime. Of course, as long as refugees cannot obtain legal permission to work, every effort to support themselves qualifies as illegal. Some refugees actually do commit crimes, as do some citizens. Allowing refugees to work legally might help.

I have heard it asserted with confidence that these immigrants do not deserve the status of refugees, since, in fact, they face no danger in their homelands. This assertion would seem believable if it came from experts in the ethnic conflicts of Africa. Our own ancestors in Europe, Africa and Asia typically occupied precarious situations in ongoing ethnic conflicts; periodically, our ancestors got murdered.

I have heard the assertion that Africa has millions of potential refugees, and Israel cannot accommodate them all; therefore, we should accommodate none. The hypothetical theoretical
future refugees give us an excuse for feeling virtuous as we abandon the real people in front of us.

There are practical demographic reasons for not accepting non-Jewish refugees in Israel. Unfortunately, every other country has practical reasons for not accepting refugees, too. These are human beings.

Should we treat refugees as the countries of the civilized world in general treated our own people when they tried to escape Europe during World War II? With paper walls, and genteel refusals, the nations of the world became accessories to murder. It does not take a lot of physical abuse or even verbal abuse to arrange for a refugee to fail.

Hospitality to strangers has a central position in Torah. Our father Abraham came running out to greet the three anonymous men in the wilderness, to offer them food and drink, and a place to stay. We may not allow converts from among the Moabites and Ammonites to marry into our community because they did not offer our ancestors food and help when we were strangers passing through their land (Deut. 23:4-5). As Sefer HaHinnukh points out, more than any other offense, a breach of hospitality uniquely disqualifies a people from ever joining the community of God (On that verse, prohibition #577).

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