

“It’s Time to End Our Silence on Syria”

Adapted from a sermon delivered shortly before Pesach, on 4 April 2014, by
Rabbi Nicole K. Roberts, North Shore Temple Emanuel, Sydney, Australia

One of my favorite ways to relax is to sit on my balcony on a sunny, breezy summer day and read a good book. This, to me, is paradise. One Shabbat, while my husband, David, was away, there was trouble in paradise. I had come out, book-in-hand, ready to settle down, when right next to my chair I spotted a giant bumble bee in agony. It must have knocked into our glass door and jarred itself, because it was on its back, fluttering around desperately, confused and buzzing. The noise and the sudden sight of the bee startled me, activating a very primal fear. I froze. I realized that the bee simply needed to be flipped over, right-side-up, so that it could regain its senses and resume its normal affairs, but what would its trajectory be upon taking flight? Bees don’t have a good track record with humans. *They sting people*. I did not want to get stung, and if I risked saving this bee, then not only might *I* get stung, but so might others. It was just too dangerous, I concluded. So, I am ashamed to admit, I took my book, went back inside, and shut the door. I missed out on paradise that day, and callously passed up the sacred act of saving a life.

This sermon is a confession. It is a confession not only about the bee, but about a much more grievous failure of which I am also ashamed. It is a confession about my failure to act fast and furiously to try and make a difference in the lives of a suffering *people*—the victims of one of the most horrifying, heart-wrenching, humanitarian catastrophes of my lifetime: the anguish of the civilians and desperate refugees of the Syrian civil war. I am ashamed that—largely because Syria is formally Israel’s enemy, a bee that has fatally stung Jews in the past and might do so again in the future—I did not cry out when it first came to my attention in 2012 that *11,000 refugees a day* were fleeing the country.¹ Refugees now number more than 2.5 million, with another 6.5 million internally displaced.² I am ashamed that I *still* had not cried out when it was reported earlier this year that *children* had been taken in large-scale arrest campaigns, beaten, shocked, raped, burned, and tortured in order to pressure a relative to surrender, or exposed to the torture of relatives in order to force confessions.³ I did not cry out when I learned that explosive-filled barrels were intentionally dropped on densely populated *residential* districts,⁴ and starvation of civilians being used as a weapon,⁵ or when I read that those captive in besieged cities were surviving on a diet of grasses and shrubs.⁶ *Grasses and shrubs*. I did not cry out when I learned that “up to a million children” are living in areas that aid convoys either cannot reach *or are not allowed through*, and that “very young girls have been forced to marry for financial reasons.”⁷ It is chilling to imagine the horror through which these girls are now living.

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/09/syria-refugee-high-11000-flee>

² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10692931/Syria-conflict-anniversary-the-worst-refugee-crisis-in-recent-history.html>

³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26046804>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26626363>

⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26481422>

⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25916804>

⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26526707>

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Over time, it has become harder to read these stories in the morning and compartmentalize them for the rest of the day. As I munch on my green salad appetizer, pre-dinner, I think about trapped Syrian parents foraging among the local, dusty shrubbery in order to feed their children. The news stories pierce through my heart, and I have always said that while there are thousands of worthy causes in the world needing our attention, the one that pierces your heart is the one to which you must give *your* attention. So this was a call, of sorts, but I did not answer the call. I kept silent because I was busy; silent because I didn’t know how to help, what to suggest people do; silent because I did not want to ask my congregants to donate to yet another cause; silent because I did not want to be misunderstood as having *political* views on the crisis, rather than just humanitarian concerns; and silent because I did not trust that I was understanding the full picture—that is, the consequences for Israel of my taking a stand on behalf of this bee that might sting her.

So I started to investigate whether my silence was justified. I asked countless rabbinic colleagues and mentors: “What are you preaching to your congregations about Syria?” It turned out, *nobody* was preaching about Syria. *Not one*. “Is there a reason you are not? What are the potential pitfalls? Would my statement of ‘We have to do something as a Jewish community about this tragedy’ be met with hostility by the Jewish world?” Nobody knew. Nobody had tried. Everyone agreed that it was a terrible crisis, but they refrained from speaking out about it for many of the same reasons I did. While disconcerting, this survey did prove to be of some value, because finally, with this mirror held up to my own hesitations, I lost my patience... with all of us.

I am through being silent about Syria. My religion demands more of me. It demands more of the community I lead, more of the people of which I am a part, and more of the human being that God made me. So I am going to address some of the mental obstacles that I think lie behind our hesitations about aiding Syrian victims and refugees. I am going to counter these obstacles with the teachings of Jewish tradition, then share how you can take action.

The first obstacle to helping: “The task is too great, I don’t even know where to begin.” To this, our tradition has for centuries responded: *lo aleicha kol ha-m’lachah ligmor*—“You need not complete *all* the work”—*v’lo atah ben chorin libatel mimenah*⁸--“but neither are you free to desist from it.” True, the political complexities are immense. Nothing we do is going to *resolve* the conflict when, tragically, the ruling and opposition parties cannot even sit at the same table for more than a week without concluding that war is the only way forward—that there is no common ground at all. However, the humanitarian need is immense too, and here we are *not* helpless. This is an area where we can make a difference. That difference might be small in the face of the thousands suffering, but we are not free to desist.

Obstacle #2: “There are other big crises in the world—why should I focus on this one rather than those?” To this, our tradition responds, *lo ta’amod al dam re’echa*—you

⁸ M. Avot 2:21

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shall not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds.⁹ Yes, there are other world crises, and yes, they are probably less thorny and more clear-cut politically. But the world is proving largely indifferent to the suffering of Syrian captives and refugees, and if indeed we Jews consider the state of Israel to be our homeland, then the Syrian crisis is going on in our own backyard, afflicting our neighbors. The Torah tells us, *lo t’ametz et l’vavcha v’lo tik’potz et yad’cha me-achicha ha-evyon*¹⁰—“Do not harden your heart,” do not be like Pharaoh in Egypt, “shutting your hand against your brother in need.” Rabbi Bradley Artson understands this to mean that “any Jew who can look at a human being in need and not hear God’s call to ‘let my people go,’ to do something, becomes a Pharaoh. You don’t have to be evil to be on the side of evil. You simply have to remain indifferent... Refusing to lend a hand, we become the Pharaohs of our age.”¹¹

Obstacle #3 to lending aid: “If we help by donating money, how do we know our funds will get to those who need it? What if our money falls into the hands of those who are perpetrating the atrocities, or of Israel’s enemies?” I share this concern. But there are Israeli and other efforts to help the wounded and the displaced—efforts that I believe we *can* feel comfortable supporting and coalitions that major Jewish organizations have sanctioned and joined. True, we may never be entirely sure where our well-intentioned donations will ultimately land, but our tradition cautions against spending too much time deliberating. We may take time to investigate one’s need for *tzedaka*, say our Codes, but when it is a matter of life and death, we are not to hesitate. If someone is hungry, we feed him immediately, no questions asked.¹²

Finally, obstacle #4—often unspoken: “The Syrians have been enemies of the Jews in the past, they’ll be our enemies in the future. Better we should let them all destroy each other.” This obstacle is among the more sinister. But those who think that it is not a factor at play in our hesitation to help Syrians should reflect back on how gung-ho we were as a Jewish community about helping in Darfur. Practically every single *shul*, it seemed, had its giant, green “Save Darfur” banner hanging outside, visible from a block away. “Never Again!” read the signs, alluding to our own genocide and the world’s blind eye. So why *that* crisis but not *this* one? Is it different when it is your enemy who is suffering? When saving the bee that is crippled today might get you stung tomorrow? Our tradition says no, it is no different, we are to help anyway. The Torah teaches, for instance, that when you see the donkey of your enemy collapsed under its burden, and you are inclined not to help out, *azov ta’azov imo*¹³—“you had better help anyway.” Furthermore, we are not to judge a person by the harm he or she *might* do us in the future. When Abraham’s son, Ishmael, is cast into the wilderness as a helpless child, the Torah tells us that God heard his cries “from where he was”¹⁴ and rescued

⁹ Lev. 19:16

¹⁰ Deut. 15:7

¹¹ <http://www.on1foot.org/text/rabbi-bradley-shavit-artson-tikkun-144-%E2%80%9Cmitzvah-tzedakah%E2%80%9D-p-58>

¹² Shulchan Aruch YD 251:10

¹³ Ex. 23:5

¹⁴ Gen. 21:17

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him. The Talmud, and later Rashi, interprets this phrase, “from where he was,” as meaning that God judged Ishmael on who he was *at the time*—a helpless soul crying out in agony—not on who he would one day become: an enemy of the Jews. Ishmael, said to be the progenitor of the Muslim people, is judged by God *l’fi ma’asav shel otah sha’ah*—“according to his deeds of *that* hour,”¹⁵ not an uncertain future hour.

Thankfully, there are Jewish organizations—both within and outside of Israel—that are guided by the teachings and principles of our tradition, when it comes to the Syrian crisis. This sermon is posted on our North Shore Temple Emanuel website, nste.org.au,¹⁶ so that you can click to learn more about these efforts and how to support them. They include Israeli hospitals treating Syrian civilians and children who miraculously make it to the Israeli border, having lost limbs, all their belongings, and family members in the violence. Ziv Medical Centre in Tzfat reports that these patients need trauma care, emergency surgery, and complex follow up surgeries, leaving the hospital in urgent need of financial assistance, with “the estimated average cost of a Syrian casualty \$15,000 (US).”¹⁷ Like Ziv, the Western Galilee Hospital in Nahariya also has a “designated fund to support Syrian patients, often arriving at our hospital with only their clothes.” The Israeli government covers “life-saving” costs, but the hospital is left to provide clothing and hygiene kits, prosthetics, wheelchairs, and other orthopedic devices, as well as any special needs that would normally be filled by family or friends. In the case of a 15 year-old girl who had lost her legs, and over 15% of her body weight, the hospital arranged for a “special diet, consisting of food that she loved and knew back home in Syria.” One teenager was confined to isolation to protect against infection, and “having no family or friends around, the staff, [concerned for his mental well-being, arranged for] a media device to play Arabic music to him.”¹⁸

It has been heartening to learn that major Jewish organizations have rallied to support these and a few other critical relief efforts. AIPAC recently hosted the Director of the Western Galilee Medical Center at its Washington conference.¹⁹ Jewish Federation, AJC, and UJA have partnered with IsraAid,²⁰ an Israeli organization providing emergency food and supplies to refugees in Jordan, where the need is overwhelming. The Jewish Coalition for Syrian Refugees in Jordan²¹ brings together the Joint Distribution Committee, Anti-Defamation League, Mazon, the Rabbinical Assembly, Federation, Union for Reform Judaism, and others, to provide aid and staff for refugee

¹⁵ B. *RH* 16b and Rashi to Gen. 21:17.

¹⁶ More precisely, <http://nste.org.au/?q=content/end-silence-syria>

¹⁷ For details on how to donate to The Ziv’s fund for treating Syrian casualties, visit <http://www.ziv.org.il/?CategoryID=2583&dbAuthToken={74C2F729-8DF1-4B87-8C82-87226E9EA5D9}&rnd=283908>

¹⁸ Per email dated 25 March 2014, in response to my inquiry. Also see The New York Times: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/30/world/middleeast/despite-decades-of-enmity-israel-quietly-aids-syrian-civilians.html?_r=1 And for details on how to donate to the hospital’s fund for treating Syrian casualties, please email nicole@nste.org.au

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0360iftRf4>

²⁰ <http://israaid.co.il/projects/jordan>

²¹ <http://www.jdc.org/jcdr/where-we-work/syrian-refugees-in-jordan.html> and <http://www.jdc.org/news/press-releases/2013/jewish-coalition-for-syrian.html>

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camps and hospitals, building child-friendly spaces and training people to work with female refugees.

It took a lot of investigating to find these glimmers of hope—these Jewishly-sanctioned ways to take part in a desperate and vital relief effort. Having found them, silence on Syria is a thing of my past, as are, I hope, sad stories about bumble bees. So let me close with a more inspiring bee story. About 10 years ago, a bee flew into our apartment in Nashville. It was buzzing around, growing frantic because it could not find its way back outside; it kept flying into the part of the window that does not open. I froze, of course. But David did not. Playing God in the buzzing creature’s exodus story, David rolled up an old newspaper, stood back, and extended his arm, touching the bee gently with the paper, until it crawled on board. David slowly moved the paper toward the open window. And then, *b’yad chazakah uvi’zroa n’tuyah*²²--“with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,” he held the paper out the window, leading the bee to freedom. It took the bee a minute to overcome its trauma, get its bearings, and fly away, but when it did, it made the most joyful arc, sailing off so gracefully and beautifully that my heart soared with it. To the bee, I have always thought, this deliverance must have seemed a total miracle.

This bee memory feels much better than the first. It is more of a joy to tell, because it does not end in shame. I do not want to be a Pharaoh. I want to be a leader, who, like Moses, may have hesitated to speak at first but knew that his people must become a *mamlechet kohanim*, a nation of priests striving to be more like God, *b’yad chazakah uvi’zroa n’tuyah*—with a mighty hand, and an outstretched arm.

²² Deut. 26:8