

NOVEMBER 20-22, 2015

RESPONSIBILITY TO WELCOME: YOURS. MINE. OURS.

— Mark Hetfield

Over 2,000 years ago, someone challenged the Jewish sage Hillel to recite the entire Torah standing on one foot. Hillel did so, saying: “What is hateful to you, do not do to any other person. That is the entire Torah. All the rest is commentary.”

Were Hillel’s lesson universally applied today, there would be no refugees, as refugees are people who flee to escape hatred on account of who they are or what they believe. Instead, there are now 60 million refugees and displaced persons, more than at any other time since the Second World War.

There is a global responsibility to welcome refugees. This responsibility is yours, mine, and ours. In the Torah, God had to explain to the Hebrews 36 times why they had to welcome the stranger (“because you were once strangers too, and because I am the Lord your God (and what I say goes!)”).

Likewise, the international community had to draft a Refugee Convention in 1951 to prevent repetition of one of the tragedies of World War II, when persecuted peoples were trapped behind the “paper walls” of visa requirements. The Refugee Convention articulates this global responsibility to welcome.

What does it say? Standing on one foot, I can tell you:

A refugee is a person who fled his or her country due to a well-founded fear of persecution on account of who they are or what they believe;

A refugee shall not be returned to his or her persecutor;

Anyone claiming to be a refugee shall be regarded as a refugee until found to be otherwise; and

Refugees are entitled to the same human rights as you and me.

That is the entire Refugee Convention. All the rest is commentary.

Welcoming refugees is a global responsibility. Why? Because each state has a responsibility to protect each refugee who seeks protection. While the obligation to protect refugees at a country’s frontier is absolute, and while refugees are more contributor than cost to an economy, the economic and social capacity of host countries to welcome and integrate refugees does have practical limits.

At some point, host countries need international assistance. Syria’s neighbors are well beyond that point. Lebanon, for example, hosted only 10,000 refugees and asylum seekers in 2011.

Today, they host upwards of 1.8 million in a country of under five million people. They need help, as do Turkey and Jordan. The international community needs to offer much more assistance to help both refugees and their host communities, and needs to offer many more opportunities for refugees from those host countries to get to safe third countries.

If countries like Lebanon and Jordan and Turkey are to live up to their responsibility toward refugees, which falls on them only as an accident of geography, you and I need to live up to ours.

The photograph of the body of Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach humanized the reality that the refugees themselves have determined that host countries are beyond their saturation points. Refugees like Aylan’s family are risking and losing their lives in order to flee for a second or a third time.

We were all haunted by the image of Aylan Kurdi's little body lying on that beach. But were we haunted enough to fulfill our responsibility and address the "push" factors that are causing repeated displacement?

If we are, then why is the World Food Program so underfunded that it recently cut off food assistance for nearly 300,000 refugees in Jordan who are not even permitted to work to support themselves? Why are countries which have massive resettlement capacity only taking in a few thousand, while several of Syria's neighbors and Germany are taking in hundreds of thousands? Why is the United Nations appeal for humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees funded at less than fifty percent?

With the average refugee experiencing displacement for 17 years before a solution is found, why do we continue to treat refugee crises with humanitarian assistance rather than with development efforts to benefit both refugees and their host communities?

Then there is the issue of security. Some countries claim they cannot resettle significant numbers of Syrian refugees due to "security concerns." Such concerns about refugees have existed for centuries. Every country has the need and the right to screen refugees to identify those who pose a threat to national security.

But what is a "security concern"? What is the impact on refugees who are turned away as a "security concern"? What is the impact on host countries who then must continue to host such "security concerns"? Should "screening states" or the international community compensate the host country and the refugees themselves when this happens? At what point do security screenings become so broad and time-consuming that they not only eclipse our duty to welcome, but threaten more lives than they could possibly save?

I thought these lessons were learned during World War II, when the world confused people fleeing terror with the terror they were fleeing. Today, those lessons seem to have been forgotten.

The duty to welcome refugees is a personal responsibility, a national responsibility, and an international responsibility. And if we do not fulfill all three of these, we have not learned anything from history.

Mark Hetfield is the President and CEO of HIAS, a 134 year old global Jewish nongovernmental organization dedicated to refugee protection.

