

“WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE PEOPLE OF GANDER?”
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“On the northeast tip of North America, on an island called Newfoundland, there's an airport. It used to be one of the biggest airports in the world, and next to it is a town called Gander.”

With these opening words, the Broadway musical [*Come From Away*](#) tells the powerful story of a small town with a big heart, whose population nearly doubled during the week that followed September 11, 2001. This airport in the remote town of [Gander, Newfoundland](#) once was among the largest in the world, because it served as a refueling station for cross-atlantic flights before jet airplanes came along and eliminated the need to stop. On that terrible September 11 day, when the US airspace was closed, 38 jumbo jets carrying 7,000 people were diverted to Gander, a town of 9,000 people. *Come From Away* is based on a series of interviews conducted at a reunion in Gander on the 10th anniversary of 9/11, telling the true stories of the people of Gander and the “plane people” who they took-in to their homes and their hearts.

I have been to many Broadway musicals and I have never been as emotionally impacted as I was by this show. I could not stop crying the entire show – and while tears come easily to me in times of joy or sentimentality or empathetically, these tears were different. They were tears of sadness and pain, of anger and fear - emotions that I tend to disregard or suppress. But they were also tears of admiration for the strength of the human spirit demonstrated by the people of Gander.

I was in mid-town Manhattan on September 11, arriving at the New York office of the Union for Reform Judaism at 41st and 3rd just moments before the first plane struck the first tower. There are so many scenes from that day that are etched in my mind – watching a friend who was a volunteer fire fighter run out to go where he was most needed; seeing the streets of Manhattan completely deserted; looking down 3rd Avenue and seeing the plumes of smoke; getting on the first Amtrak train out of Manhattan back to DC and looking back at the New York City skyline through the train’s window, seeing a gaping hole where the twin towers stood earlier that morning; finally arriving home as Abbey was giving a nearly 1 year old Elianna her bath; breaking down completely as Abbey handed me Elianna in her towel and I held her like I have never held anyone.

For nearly 18 years, whenever I thought of 9/11, I could only think of the horrific death and destruction. I knew the stories of heroes and people who barely escaped or somehow weren’t where they normally would have been - even of babies born that day. None of those stories impacted me emotionally in the same way that this show did. Over the last few months, as I reflected on why I became so emotional, I realized that part of my reaction wasn’t related to events of 18 years ago but to pictures and stories of asylum-seeking refugees from this past year. There is such a sharp contrast between what we see in our country’s current treatment of

refugees compared to how the people of Gander reacted to a sudden influx of 7,000 strangers from places all around the world seeking refuge from the storm of 9/11.

Of course, I recognize the difference between taking in people for an unspecified but likely short time period versus granting permanent asylum. But consider what happened just a few weeks ago in the wake of Hurricane Dorian. Just 3 days before the 18th anniversary of 9/11, over 100 displaced Bahamians were forced to disembark a rescue ferry bound for Florida because they didn't possess U.S. visas – despite the fact that visas are not required for Bahamians traveling to the U.S. When asked about the incident, [the President said](#) “I don't want to allow people that weren't supposed to be [in the Bahamas],” he said, adding that among the refugees could be “very bad people and some very bad gang members and some very very bad drug dealers.” Lets assume for a moment that this is true – if we suspect people may do something wrong later, does it justify denying humanitarian aid at that moment? Hold on to that question and we will return to it shortly.

I do not hide the fact that I have strong views on US immigration policies. My opinions have been shaped by my family's history, the Jewish people's experiences, teachings from the Torah, and this nation's own core values. But I am not here to talk about immigration policy because I don't believe the Torah dictates public policy.

My concern is how we treat those refugees who are currently living in our country, regardless of their legal status. What can we learn from the way the people of Gander reacted to the plane people on September 11? Furthermore, how does our treatment of refugees influence our perception of who we are – as individuals, as a community, as a society and as a nation?

Yesterday, we read the Torah portion that includes the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's camp, who are banished to the desert where they quickly run out of water. Hagar sets Ishmael down and moves away to avert her eyes and ears from her son's pain. But we are told that God [sh'ma et kol hana-ar ba-asher hu sham](#). listened to the pain of the child at the place where he was at that moment and provided him with a well of water. Those words *ba'asher hu sham* seem superfluous – where else would God have listened to him besides the place where he was? Anytime words seem superfluous, the rabbis believe the text is calling out for us to dig deeper and learn a lesson that may not have been obvious to us from a more general reading. In this case, there is a [Midrash](#) that teaches us that when God was about to step in to save Ishmael, an argument took place between the ministering angels and God. The angels questioned God, asking “Given that you can see the future, why are you going to save this boy, whose descendants are going to refuse to give water to the Israelites later down the line.” God rebukes the angels, asking them “What is the boy at this moment, Evil or Righteous?” The angels admit that Ishmael has not yet done anything wrong. God replies - אֵינִי בִּשְׂעֵתָא דְּאַתְּ הָאֵתְּ הָאֵתְּ הָאֵתְּ הָאֵתְּ הָאֵתְּ, I can only judge a person by what he has done at that moment.

The rabbis message is clear – God, and by extension, we – can not judge a person based on what may happen in the future. The question is not whether there may have been some bad people among those Bahamians seeking refuge. It certainly is possible – but by the standard

established above, the question is not relevant. The issue was that 90% of the buildings in the Abaco Islands were destroyed and similar numbers in parts of Grand Bahama Island. There was almost no electricity and little drinking water. In addition to the 53 people whose bodies had been recovered, there are 1000 people still missing, many of them buried beneath the estimated 1.5 billion pounds of debris left from the Hurricane Dorian. There are still an additional 2000 people living in crude shelters on some of the other Bahamian islands, getting only the bare necessities.

When faced with a humanitarian crisis, our question must not be about whether these are good people or not. Our obligation is to follow the example that God sets in saving Ishamel in the desert – it is to see these refugees where they are in that moment. And in that moment, they need our help and we are obligated to respond.

The Torah teaches us the importance of welcoming guests, as well as our responsibility to take care of the stranger in our midst. When Abraham saw strangers approaching his tent, he didn't ask: "Where are they from?" or "What were they doing there?" In fact, he didn't wait at all. Like the people of Gander, [he anticipated their needs and ran to get them food and something to drink](#). He washed their feet and provided them with shelter. The Torah does not include these passages just to be "nice stories" for us to tell our children. These stories are meant to impart morals and teach values to guide the way we conduct our lives. Our rabbis teach, based on Abraham, that welcoming guests is a mitzvah to which there is no limit. We must do whatever we can to meet the needs of our guests.

And the Torah does not stop there. Consider the case of *S'dom* and *Amora* (Sodom and Gemorrah). Their great sin, according to some interpretations, was their lack of *hachnassat orchim* (welcoming guests). Rather than welcome the strangers, they would abuse them. When Lot, who had harbored two visitors into his home, tried to prevent the townspeople from attacking them by blocking the door, they yell at him "[Ha-echad ba laqur vyishpot shafot?Atah nara lcha mehem](#). – you, who are a stranger to begin with, you think you can now tell us what to do? We will treat them even worse because of you." They call Lot out for not being one of them, as if to say "who are you to tell us what to do?" In the eyes of the Torah, the townspeople attitude and abuse toward the stranger is the great evil for which their cities were destroyed.

And it doesn't end there either – later in the Torah, when we get to [Parashat Ki Tetzei](#), we are told that "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the Congregation of the Lord – not them or their descendants to the 10th generation." Why? The Torah tells us – because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt and because they hired Bilaam to curse you. What about the Egyptians who enslaved us? We are told not to abhor them. What about the Edomites, with whom we would later do battle? The Torah tells us not to hate them either. It is *only* the Ammonites and Moabites – and the Torah tells us it is explicitly the way they treated the wayfarer – the Israelite refugees. And, if you recall, who were Ammon and Moab – the original people for whom their nation is named? They were the incestuous

sons of Lot's daughters. It appears that one could take the daughters out of Sdom, but couldn't take the S'dom out of the daughters and their descendants.

Keeping all of this in mind, we have a choice to make when it comes to the way we treat today's refugees. Do we want to be like the people of Gander on September 11 or like the people of Sdom and Amora from the Torah. Do we want to be like Avraham or Ammon and Moab?

In a way, our congregation has made that decision. Well before I arrived, we had signed up as a [HIAS Welcoming Congregation](#), which says, in part, that "Throughout history, we have been refugees. Today, inspired by the biblical injunction to 'welcome the stranger,' our communities call upon the government of the United States to rise to the leadership that this crisis warrants. Individually, we, the congregations on this list, are taking action in a variety of ways including: educating others about refugees, advocating with elected officials, holding events and programs, raising money to support refugees, building partnerships and helping refugees in our local communities...Once, the Jewish community helped refugees because they were Jewish. Now we help refugees because we are Jewish."

It's easy to sit back and nod your head in agreement – but it's much harder to take action. Often, people will tell me that they don't know where to start. So let me share with you a few opportunities where you can help care for refugees here and in Israel. I will also email this information out following the holiday so don't worry if you can't remember all of it.

As many of you know, Michael and Debbi Amster, Sherman and Ellen Eisner, Judy Davis, together with so many of you, have been working for over 2 years with a family from Afghanistan who live in Landover, PA. I am told that almost half of the congregation has been involved in one way or another to support the family. We have provided furniture, helped the father get a job. Our family from Afghanistan is settling in – As Debbie Amster updated us in August – The children now speak to each other in English rather than Dari. The older three children attended day camp; Dad continues to work through the electrician's union. They recently purchased an old van that can accommodate the whole family." And, exactly one month ago, the family welcomed their sixth child, a baby girl named Yasmine and we sent them a significant gift card. They still need baby equipment, including a crib, swing, baby carrier, bouncy seat, stroller, etc. We are also seeking tutors to work with the parents on their English. If you can help in any way, please be in touch with [Debbie Amster](#) or me after the holiday.

About 10 days ago, many of us attended *Selichot* services, where [Rabbi Charles Arian](#) spoke about his visit to the [Kino Border Initiative](#) in Nogales, AZ. The Kino initiative works with both the American and Mexican governments to provide humanitarian aid to asylum seekers on both sides of the border. As they describe themselves, they are "a faith-based organization, striv[ing] to respond to the most critical needs by respecting the God-given dignity of the human person and by fostering bi-national solidarity through humanitarian assistance, education and research/advocacy." During *Selichot*, we collected toiletries, clothing and other

household items. Sending these items, along with donating to the Kino Border Initiative is another way that we can act.

The issue of refugees seeking asylum is not limited to the United States. In fact, in Israel the issue of Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel today, which has become a major point of division in Israeli society. Some argue that as a Jewish state, Israel has an obligation to help take in or to safely resettle the refugees in other countries because the Torah commands us not to oppress the stranger. Others argue that, as the world's only Jewish state, Israel has an obligation to maintain the Jewish nature of the state and the asylum seekers should be returned to African nations who can take care of them. In the meantime, however, everyone agreed that the asylum seekers are living in squalor conditions in South Tel Aviv, one of Israel's poorer neighborhoods, and the animosity between the residents and the refugees keeps rising.

While this debate was going on last year, one man decided to do something to help. Working with the Kibbutz Movement, Avi Ofer helped move two asylum-seeking families to Kibbutz Sasa in the north of Israel. The members of the Kibbutz warmly welcomed these families and easily were able to set them up with temporary jobs, housing, food and education. Avi Ofer didn't focus on the politics – he saw a chance to make a difference for these families in the here and now, in a way that everybody wins. From these initial two families the [Kibbutz Resettlement Project](#) was created. Again, this does not focus on the public policy questions that must be debated. It is about saving lives, perhaps literally, or at the very least improving the quality of life during the time that it will take for the government to make those policy decisions.

In addition, [A.R.T.S. \(African Refugee Therapeutic Services\)](#), is a registered non-profit in Israel that undertakes projects aimed at the rehabilitation of asylum-seeking women through a range of activities. In particular, have an initiative called [Kuchinate](#) – which means crochet in Tigrinya – where female Asylum Seekers design and create crochet products for the home, such as baskets, poufs, and rugs. They also host crochet lessons, meals, and traditional Ethiopian and Eritrean coffee ceremonies. Their products are for sale on the web and they welcome visitors to their Center in Tel Aviv, where you can learn more about the initiative and shop in their store.

In the process of my research, I also discovered a website <https://www.changetheworldbyhowyoushop.com/refugees> that was established by a woman named LeeAnne McCoy, motivated out of her Christian faith, that contains a number of additional sites where you can purchase items made by refugee women. As of Sunday (following our correspondence), she now has a link to the Kuchinate on her site. I encourage you to check out this page and to support the vendors – this is a direct way to help refugees throughout the world.

These are just a few actions we can do to follow the model of the people of Gander on September 11 and to follow in God's ways by paying attention to people's current needs. There are many more such opportunities.

And while I don't want to dwell on policy, there were two articles that I read just this week that disturbed me. The first was from here in Washington, where I learned of plans to [reduce the annual refugee cap in the U.S. by half](#) in the coming fiscal year according to a statement from the State Department. In the article, it states that the administration considered dropping the cap to zero, but ultimately opted to keep the program running amid pressure from Democratic and Republican lawmakers.

Similarly, in Israel, [less than one third of the annual budget for humanitarian aid for asylum seekers was used](#) in the past two years, with sex-workers and disabled asylum seekers being denied any aid at all. This is despite the fact that these funds were put in the budget for this exact purpose.

Again, I believe there are important and legitimate arguments as to how open borders should be. But there is something particularly cruel about denying funds allocated for humanitarian aid or to threaten to eliminate asylum program.

While Mahatma Ghandi often gets the credit, I believe it was Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Pearl Buck (1892-1973), who first wrote that "[the test of a civilization is the way that it cares for its helpless members.](#)" In the Torah, these were defined as the widow, the orphan and the stranger. In Gander, they were the plane people. Today in American and in Israel, it is the asylum speakers.

As you know, there are only a limited number of High Holidays sermons. I chose to dedicate this one to our obligation to help refugees because I believe it is a defining issue for our society. Do we want to be deined like the people of Gandar or the people of S'dom and Amora? I hope this is not a difficult question to answer.

I never expected that *Come From Away*, or any other Broadway show, would impact me as this show did. In the succeeding months, when a mitzvah opportunity has come up and I start to think that I am too busy, I have tried to stop myself and think: "What would the people of Gander do?" I wish I could claim that I have found ways to be as selfless as they were and to extend myself in ways that I didn't think possible. Unfortunately, I'm not there yet. But I believe this thought process has helped motivate me to take baby steps in that direction.

And I believe that's what these High Holidays are all about – we know we won't be perfect, but I hope that each of us can take a few more steps towards making our society a more humane place, for our most vulnerable members, knowing that when we take care of their needs, our entire society benefits.