

D'var Torah for Nitzavim

This is the last parasha before Rosh Hashanah – which has us all of thinking about our life choices

Moses is just about to lead the Children of Israel into the land of Israel after 40 years of wandering effectively as “refugees” from their harsh life in Egypt. God is about to give the Children of Israel a covenant for life – but the terms of it are to choose to live within the Jewish community, to keep the commandments and statutes, and for future generations to come as well.

God states that every last person is to come into the Land of Israel from where ever they are dispersed. They will be gathered together - BUT on the other side, it is not to be left to some outside agency to make the covenant work. Nobody is going to be ‘brought from heaven or from beyond the sea’ by some heavenly Easyjet service, it will have to be an active choice for each person, a conscious decision made deliberately.

This is because the ability to participate in the Jewish Community is actually within each of us, as verse 14 says, “In our mouth and in our heart’, just waiting to be activated –

In the strongest, clearest of terms, we are told

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil ... I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you and your children may live. (Deut. 30: 15, 19)

Today we need to look beyond our own lives – which are safe and comfortable for the most part. Looking back in our own community, so many of us have come from a long line of wanderers and migrants who have chosen life, so that they and their children – us – could live in safety.

Last night I was at a meeting at the Sternberg Centre, with Rabbis Mark and Josh and around 70 other members of Reform and Progressive synagogues, there to consider what our community could do to help the latest in a long history of refugees and migrants to this country.

The speakers included experts in the field of refugee support – from WJR and JCORE. Others talked about the volunteer-led projects that their communities have set up, here and at West London. Most movingly, Debbie Rose and Cheryl Brodie spoke about the trust that has been built up between the guests and the volunteers in our Alyth Monthly Drop In for recent refugees. Most months we have had around 50 refugees coming here to enjoy the opportunity to meet and mix with people with similar backgrounds and experiences. They relish their lunch and the chance to just be in a safe, supportive space. They are offered the opportunity to practice their English, to have help writing a CV and on the computers looking up courses, job opportunities or even housing options.

As Debbie said, we can do still more – she told us of the many guests who are looking for work. They desperately need jobs to move forward. Some have completed training courses and are looking for work as bookkeepers or decorators. As a Community, we should examine our own resources – what can we offer to people trying work in their new home, their place of safety?

Elliot Karstadt, a student rabbi at Leo Baeck college, told us about a scheme to find housing for 50 Syrian refugees and families in Barnet. They need to find privately owned flats or houses – properties with their own front doors – to persuade Barnet to allow them in. Rents will be paid directly to the landlord by the European Union for 2 years. As a Community, we should examine our own resources – what can we offer to people trying to find a place to live in their new country, their place of hope?

Ben Wright at JCORE talked about the extent of damage that the Syrian refugees will have experienced, the depth of psychological scars that they will bear. He told us about their befriending scheme, not mentoring or counseling, just befriending. As a Community, we should examine our own resources – what friendship can we extend to people trying to settle into their new society?

We have a choice – to choose between life and death but we are directed to choose life.

Let us make the choice of life for those who need our help to make that happen.