

Right, Wrong and Asylum Seekers

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At the heart of our observance of Yom Kippur is the idea that God forgives our sins if we repent with true sincerity. It is a powerful, uplifting message, and the reason why the rabbis considered Yom Kippur to be the most joyous day of the year—despite the notable absence of food! The term “sin” is seen by many to carry a judgmental quality which people in our day find troubling. Really—is there such a thing as sin? Aren't there always mitigating factors to take into consideration? For quite a few years now, we have been hearing about the idea of moral relativism—that what is bad is only bad because of our particularly cultural understandings. I am a great believer in diversity, but not when it comes to what we understand to be bad and good.

In mid September, conservative American columnist David Brooks published an article entitled “If It Feels Right.” He shared some interviews conducted with young people in a study who were asked to discuss moral issues. “Not many of them have previously given much or any thought to many of the kinds of questions about morality that we asked,” the co-authors write. When asked about wrong or evil, they could generally agree that rape and murder are wrong. But, aside from these extreme cases, moral thinking didn't enter the picture, even when considering things like drunken driving, cheating in school or cheating on a partner. “I don't really deal with right and wrong that often,” is how one interviewee put it. The default position, which most of them came back to again and again, is that moral choices are just a matter of individual taste. “It's personal,” the respondents typically said. “It's up to the individual. Who am I to say?” Perhaps it is more challenging for young people to have a clear sense of right and wrong when when they see their parents and other authority figures using pirated software, downloading movies and otherwise fiddling around the edges of the law. We ourselves need to be aware

of the unintended messages we may be sending younger people about when it's okay to go around the law.

Then, there is a contemporary approach to morality which insists that just about all behaviour can be explained away either because of a mental health diagnosis or because of a troubled childhood. In a rather absurd moment, I recently found myself engaged in a discussion with an acquaintance as to whether the September 11 bombers were actually evil. She was adamant that the answer was no. Misunderstood perhaps, in need of qualified counseling definitely. But not evil. I disagreed with her, and I disagree that "sin" is a term which should be discarded in our time. I believe there is such a thing as wrong and right, separate from our own cultural backgrounds and understanding. A righteous action is right regardless of where and when it takes place. Likewise, something that is wrong is just plain wrong, regardless of any arguments that may be put forward in its defense. I may be unfashionable, or regressive, but I am unapologetic.

I believe that Australia's policy on asylum seekers is wrong. It may be politically expedient, it may even be what the Australian people have come to expect. But that does not make it right.

Last night, I spoke about what I've observed and learned after five years in Australia. For most of those five years, I've been chronically confused about the issue of asylum seekers. There is such consensus between the Labor and Liberal parties that asylum seekers are a problem to be dealt with and, preferably, prevented, that I was convinced for quite a long time that this was so. After all, there are good-hearted people in both parties, and they seem generally to have everyone's best interest in mind. If I couldn't reconcile the compassion they showed for those already living in Australia with the hostility they preached towards asylum seekers, the problem must be mine--not their's. I no longer think this: Whether we are debating Julia Gillard's Malaysia solution

or Tony Abbott's Nauru solution, I believe Australia's policy is entirely unjust. What's more, I believe Australia's antipathy towards asylum seekers has a negative impact far beyond this one issue.

I'm sure you are familiar with how asylum seekers are portrayed by our politicians: they are a menace threatening to overwhelm our shores if they are given the chance. This is just not true. Asylum seekers are, in fact, the most miserable people in the world. They have been driven out of their homelands, usually under terrifying circumstances. They have lost everything. They have spent months or often years in horrendous refugee situations. They are in the company of hundreds of thousands of others in a similar situation, with no realistic hope of being permitted to move on to a new life. The patina of normalcy—school, work, hobbies—are denied them. Instead, they stare at the prospect of years or even decades more of the same, which is no future at all.

I commend SBS for its frank portrayal of refugee life in its series “Go back to where you came from.” In one episode, a group of Australians spent a week living with Chin refugees in Kuala Lumpur. The Chin, we learned, are a minority group terribly persecuted in their native Myanmar. Having fled their country, they now live in Malaysia under very restricted circumstances: the people to whom we were introduced were crammed 50 into a small apartment, not permitted to go outside lest they be arrested by the police and sent to prison. Even the children spend their entire lives in these cramped living conditions, allowed to go outside only for as long as it takes them to walk to the equally over-crowded school they attend. What future do they foresee for themselves? What possibilities can they possibly imagine for themselves and their children when just taking a single step out of doors is an illegal act?

Of course, the Chin are only an example of those who have been forced to flee their homes. As you probably well know, many asylum seekers who have reached Australian waters in recent years have come escaping wars that

Australia itself has fought in--in Iraq and in Afghanistan. When our own soldiers have experienced the terrible dangers of these conflicts, how can we not sympathise with those who now seek shelter?

But we don't. Australia's official policy is to do everything in its power to discourage asylum seekers from viewing Australia as a desirable place to go, and the language employed by our mainstream politicians marginalises and dehumanises the asylum seekers in disturbing ways.

Many are of the opinion that Australia's attitude towards asylum seekers has become increasingly negative since the events of 9/11. But I've learned that that is inaccurate. I've been reading Michael Grewcock's scholarly tome *Border Crimes: Australia's war on illicit migrants*. In the book Grewcock points out that Australia has always had at best an ambivalent attitude towards welcoming migrants who were not from the British Isles. The Jewish community is certainly familiar with the challenges it faced in persuading this country to accept Jewish refugees not only before the Second World War, but after it as well. I was personally surprised to learn that the idea of mandatory detention for asylum seekers was introduced not by John Howard but by Paul Keating.

However, it is really since John Howard's introduction of the Pacific Solution that the Australian attitude towards asylum seekers has well and truly hardened. Out of sight, out of mind. It is too easy to ignore those who self-harm, who attempt suicide, who suffer mental breakdowns, who even sew their lips together, when they are far away from us or locked up in detention centres that are prisons in all but name. It took me many more hours to write this sermon that is usual for me, in part because it pains me so much to see my chosen country behaving so cruelly towards such a vulnerable population. How can a country which requires my signature before my children can be photographed at public events enforce policies which allow thousands of people, including young children, to be kept imprisoned?

As I mentioned earlier, I believe Australia's policies towards asylum seekers have broad ramifications for the society as a whole. For starters, we must reflect on the hidden cost that we pay for silently endorsing forced detention and offshore processing. What are our children learning about what is and is not okay? What impact is Australia's asylum seeker policy having on each of us? Can I still look at myself in the mirror, understanding that I am in a small way responsible for the ongoing misery of thousands? Remember my point about right and wrong? Can we honestly say that we are doing right when we are giving our silent approval to a policy which is wrong?

As well, we should reflect on how Australia's attitudes towards asylum seekers colours its opinions on migrants as a whole. Several months ago, I spent a fascinating hour meeting with Salman Sayyid, director of the Center for Muslim-Non-Muslim Understanding at UniSA. Salman relocated from the UK to take up his post and so is able to reflect with penetrating insight how Australians do things. "What is it about asylum seekers," he asked, "that makes them so horrid that they can't even be permitted to touch Australian soil?" It was a good question. While providing his weekly rant on 891 earlier this year, Flinders Uni political scientist Dean Jaensch observed that the cost of processing asylum seekers offshore is hugely more than to process them here. Are we so afraid of even letting them into the country that we are prepared to pay millions of dollars more for them to remain in the relative safety of Christmas Island? What is the government not spending money on so that it can continue to pay to house asylum seekers away from the Australian mainland?

Salman went on to make the observation that Australia could be a truly great country if it could ever make its peace with the idea of migration. I think he's on to something. Many of the greatest scientific discoveries in the United States have been made by foreign-born scientists who came to America as students and then stayed. Australia relies heavily on tuition paid by foreign

students to underwrite its university system, but it has made it clear that it wants most of those students to go home when their studies are completed. Of course, a country relies not only on its academics but also on the presence of those who are prepared to do the tough jobs. First generation migrants traditionally will do whatever it takes to build a better life for their children. In making it hard not only for asylum seekers to start new lives here but for unskilled migrants in general, Australia denies itself access to a tremendous source of workers.

I really hit a wall when Julia Gillard put forward her Malaysian solution. It was not long afterwards that the SBS documentary aired, showing decisively just what would await those unfortunate 800 who were threatened with a transfer to Malaysia. I couldn't fathom how an Australian government could possibly be suggesting relocating human beings to a country that mistreats refugees so cruelly. At the same time, I was finally struck by the insanity of wealthy Australia turning its back on the truly desperate and offloading its problems onto third world countries.

The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention is readily available online. It is not necessary to read very far to see how much Australia has fallen away from this treaty, of which it was one of the original signatories: one provision "recommends that Governments continue to receive refugees in their territories and that they act in concert in a true spirit of international cooperation in order that these refugees may find asylum and the possibility of resettlement." Elsewhere, the treaty reads "Each Contracting State shall accord to refugees lawfully in its territory the right to choose their place of residence to move freely within its territory, subject to any regulations applicable to aliens generally in the same circumstances." And also, "The Conference recommends Governments to take the necessary measures for the protection of the refugee's family especially with a view to:

(1) Ensuring that the unity of the refugee's family is maintained particularly in

cases where the head of the family has fulfilled the necessary conditions for admission to a particular country,

(2) The protection of refugees who are minors, in particular unaccompanied children and girls, with special reference to guardianship and adoption.

I see another side to this issue: Australia as an island that behaves as though it can remain isolated and divorced from the problems of the world. It is extraordinarily difficult and dangerous to reach Australia by boat, but desperate people are prepared to take that risk. However, it is clear to me that Australia's responsibility to alleviate suffering in the world must by necessity extend far beyond its actual borders.

As I take a step backwards, I see that the real problem is not the boats arriving at our shores, but the millions of displaced people who currently can see no light at the end of the tunnel. The problem is huge—really beyond our comprehension. A UNHCR map gives an estimate of 4 million asylum seekers just in south Asia. Clearly, Australia on its own cannot provide a solution.

But neither should it desist. As Rabbi Tarfon says in Pirkei Avot, "It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to abandon it." A relatively small number of people--fewer than half a million--were displaced by the wars in Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1970s. Australia at that time accepted over 100,000 refugees of those wars. Just as significantly, it partnered with nations around the world so that those in need of new homes could find them. Now the burden for housing refugees has fallen disproportionately on countries which are themselves quite poor and offer little in the way of a promising life. Wouldn't it be extraordinary if Australia, rather than doing all it can do to steer clear of the refugee and asylum seeker issue, became a global leader, lobbying other countries to join forces to help relieve human misery?

As I have been writing these words, I have had Isaiah's cranky prophecy

rattling in my ears: “This is the fast I desire: to loosen all the bonds that bind men unfairly, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry, take the homeless into your home. Clothe the naked when you see him, do not turn away from people in need.” Isaiah does not specifically mention our responsibility for the stranger, but the Torah certainly does. There is no mitzvah which is repeated more. The Torah has an intuitive understanding that strangers are the most vulnerable of all and in need of protection. Somehow, we now see the stranger as someone who poses the greatest threat, rather than as someone in need of our help. I believe Australia can be greater than this. I was greatly cheered to be pointed to the website welcometoaustralia.org.au which is seeking one million Australians to go on record as welcoming people. If you visit the website, you will be greeted by a large number of sunny photos of those who are public as welcomers. Many, but not all, of the faces are young. As the first generation of Australians to grow up without the White Australia policy turns forty, perhaps we can look ahead to an Australia that sees itself as big enough to welcome the truly desperate to its shores. Then, in the words of Isaiah, “your light shall shine in the darkness, and your gloom shall be as noonday. Adonai will guide you continually. God will refresh you in dry places, renewing your strength. And you shall be like a watered garden, like a never-failing spring.”

An edited quote from Harry Potter to finish: now is the time to decide whether we will do what is right or what is easy. The easy thing is to stand back and do nothing. The right thing, I firmly believe, is to work for change—to make this country truly welcoming, and most especially to those newly arrived who have already suffered terribly in their lives. Let us move see if we can make it so.