

# Why I Help Syrian Refugees

By Monica Steiner

*"It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either." –Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 2:16.*



As a member of the Refugee Aid Committee (RAC) at CBB I'm often asked, "why refugees?" And although the world's 60 million displaced people and refugees represent numerous religious faiths, I am also asked, "why Muslims?"

But those questions weren't on my mind late last year when I asked Rabbi Cohen what we could do to help. And they weren't on my mind when four CBB members got together to start the Refugee Aid Committee. Those weren't my questions because it seems obvious to me that no justification is needed to extend our hands towards anyone struggling to escape evil. Refugee aid affirms our common humanity, while getting mired in our cultural or religious differences is often a justification for inaction. My question is, "how can we help?"

Yet, despite the fact our Jewish tradition reminds us over and over that we're not free until everyone is free, that we must welcome the stranger, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, I'm still asked, "why Muslims? Why refugees?" So while these aren't my questions, I think it's worth exploring them a bit.

The Jewish tradition is about action, but sometimes sacred notions like "freedom," or "the stranger," or "loving thy neighbor" feel too abstract to apply to our everyday, all-consuming routines and obligations.

But this past year, when I attended the Yom HaShoah service at CBB, I was reminded about the price of inaction—and also the powerful courage shown by those who upended their everyday

routines and risked their lives to help others. As the survivors lit candles and told their stories, I heard once again about Righteous Gentiles who took action even as the rest of the world asked "why Jews?"

I wept to think that during the Holocaust, today's survivors were children, just like my own little boys are now. Unlike their mothers, I don't need to seek a hiding place, a smuggler, or a Righteous Gentile to make certain my children survive. But there is a disconnect if I weep about the Holocaust from a place of safety without acting to stop the travesty occurring right now, this minute, to over 60 million people displaced by evil human actions in our own generation. In that context, now "why Muslims?" or "why refugees?" becomes "why my own children?" And there's nothing abstract about that.



Photos by Robin Jones

Until today's refugee mothers have the same freedom I do, to know their children can survive to adulthood; and until refugee children are not viewed suspiciously, as strangers; and until we can stop our need to justify the reasons for helping another human being struggling to escape evil, our tradition requires me to take action.

But answering those philosophical questions is the easy part. What's harder is figuring out exactly what we can do in the very complicated political and cultural context of this crisis. After all, the crisis is global, affecting, among others, people from the Middle East, South America, Africa, and Asia. The crisis is so large it's not possibly something you or I can fix. But there's also this: anything above complacency is a victory. We can do something, which is exactly what our tradition demands.

So what are we doing?

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### Why I Help Syrian Refugees, *continued from pg. 14*

As of now, the Refugee Aid Committee is working to connect with a synagogue in Canada where laws allow individuals and groups to sponsor refugee families, unlike current laws here in the U.S. We are seeking donations of any size towards that purpose, and are also raising money for IsraAid, an interfaith Israeli humanitarian aid organization that provides medical and psycho-social care directly to refugees in the E.U.

RAC accepts new members to help with fundraising, education, and to join our email list to pitch in as need arises for our future programming efforts. We have so many valuable perspectives: refugees and children of refugees; medical professionals, and people who have volunteered in refugee camps; academics and students; and clergy of several faiths. We also have people like me: a mom who does whatever I can with a baby on my hip. We're making progress, so much more progress than if we were working separately. And I still feel antsy; there's always so much more to do, but as long as we all keep doing something, we're on the right path.

*Monica Steiner is an attorney, writer, and social activist who grew up in Northern California and has lived in Santa Barbara for the past ten years. She and her husband Michael, himself a refugee from Poland in the 1980s, live in Goleta with their two sons.*

**Editor's Note:** CBB will present a special Sunday Morning Live on November 20th featuring a panel of those who have worked directly with refugees in Europe.

### Stone Soup, *continued from pg. 15*

Many of my friends from CBB also checked up on me and visited. Being somewhat of a loner I was introduced to how a community sincerely helps at difficult times.

I finished chemo a few months ago. During my last visit to Sansum Dr. Newman presented me with a clean bill of health. As my paltry way of giving back, I recently joined the angels that make "Stone Soup" at CBB in their latest group cook-in. It was fun. I washed a lot of dishes, pulled hot chicken off the bone, and cut carrots.

When I looked up "Stone Soup Folklore" I was presented with several entries of folk tales from around the world—stories of hunger, healing, curing, friendship, and family. Which is my story too. I want to thank everyone who showed me so much love and caring. This "blip" on life's journey has taught me what caring really means. And, how Stone Soup pulled me through.

*The Stone Soup crew meets three times a year. We seek volunteers to cook and deliver. Please contact [audrey@cbbsb.org](mailto:audrey@cbbsb.org) to sign up.*

### Reducing Mental Health Stigma, *continued from pg. 21*

nation were to truly open their hearts and minds to people with mental illnesses."

I agree wholeheartedly, which is why I'm so proud of the work that CBB's Mental Health Initiative is doing to encourage education and to help reduce stigma. We invite you to help us in ending silences and secrets, and to speak up for mental wellness.

### How the Five Wishes Directive Helped My Family—and Me, *continued from pg. 22*

about this process. They applauded my planning, and yet they warned me of patients of theirs who, at the end of life, wanted to nullify their Five Wishes. I wasn't distressed. It just confirmed for me this process is as flexible as I could possibly want. I know I have no idea how heroic I will be when I come to the end of the road. I don't want my children to feel pressured or fear decision-making if I can't make that choice for myself.

*Dan Rothschild has been married to Susan Klein-Rothschild for 37 years. They have two children, a 34-year-old daughter, and a 33-year-old son. Dan works as an architect.*

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