

Refugee Shabbat 2025



Thank you for taking part in Refugee Shabbat 2025!

We hope that this resource helps you mark a meaningful and rewarding Refugee Shabbat. We've designed it to be multi-purpose, adaptable for everything from sermon writing to discussion groups.

In it, you'll find information about the latest asylum and refuge statistics (both here in the UK and around the world), Jewish thought and teaching relating to the values which drive this work, and a set of conversation starters.

Please do share any feedback and let us know how you use it. Our team would love to hear how you spent Refugee Shabbat 2025, so do be in touch.

The global context

The number of displaced people worldwide is at an all time high. As of mid-2024, an estimated **122.6 million people** had been forced from their homes - **almost double** the number a decade ago.

Of the people displaced worldwide:

- **68.3 million** are internally displaced, **37.9 million** are refugees, **8 million** are asylum seekers. A further **5.8 million** need international protection.
- 65% of the global refugee population come from **just four countries**: Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Afghanistan.
- Most refugees live in neighbouring countries - and **71%** are hosted by low- and middle-income countries.
- Just **1% of refugees** are referred to the UNHCR for resettlement each year. In 2025, more than **2.9 million refugees** worldwide will require resettlement.

How about the UK?

Only a fraction of the world's refugees - **around 1%** - live in the UK. Displaced people also make up a smaller fraction of migration figures than you might think: just **11% in 2023**.

Key facts you should know:

- Our European neighbours like **Germany**, **France**, **Spain**, and **Italy** all receive substantially more asylum applicants. In fact, proportionally to our **population size**, the UK ranks just 19th highest in Europe.
- In the year ending September 2024, **99,790 people** claimed asylum here. The number of people seeking safety in the UK has increased since 2021 with increased global instability.
- People arriving on small boats made up **just 29%** of all asylum applicants from 2018 to September 2023.
- The UK's resettlement schemes are generally **narrow in scope and number**.
- Although two schemes have helped **213,000 Ukrainians** reach the UK, these are major outliers to the Government's restrictive policies for refugees and asylum seekers. These also failed to grant Ukrainians with refugee status.

What policy change do we need?

It's clear that the UK could do far more. As it stands, our asylum system fails to treat people

40%

Of displaced people worldwide are children aged under eighteen.

59k

People were resettled in the UK between 2014 and June 2024. The majority came from Syria and Afghanistan.

93%

Of people arriving in the UK by small boat subsequently sought asylum here.

with dignity and compassion - we know a far better alternative is possible.

Here's four key changes we're calling for:

- **Expanded safe routes**, key to helping people reach sanctuary safely. New safe routes would also challenge the business model of people smugglers.
- **A humanitarian (or "refugee") visa scheme**, allowing people to safely travel here to claim asylum. This could focus on countries of origin with both high channel crossings and asylum grant rates.
- **Expanded family reunion criteria** with a broader definition of family members. This must allow unaccompanied minors to sponsor their siblings and parents - helping reunite families.
- **Permanent 56 day 'move-on' period**. In December 2024, the Government announced a pilot program to double the time new refugees to get to 'move-on' from Home Office support to 56 days. Making this change permanent would have a huge impact on the lives of so many new refugees, and ensure they get a fair start.

Jewish sources for reflection

Genesis 23:4

'I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a burying-place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.'

Here Abraham asks for the rights of those who live in the land while understanding that he is a 'stranger'.

The commentator Rashi explains: I AM A STRANGER AND A SETTLER WITH YOU — A stranger having come from another land, but I have settled down amongst you.

Abraham has to work hard to gain a burial plot for his wife - what we call a basic right. This text can be used to reflect on the barriers faced by those seeking asylum and refuge here.

Leviticus 25:23

And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is Mine; for ye are strangers and settlers with Me.

Here we can reflect on how when it comes to land ownership (here specifically the Land of

Israel) – we are all strangers. We are all refugees in a sense, in the eyes of the Torah. This should make us consider the importance of treating those seeking refuge with dignity.

Ezekiel 47:21-23

So shall ye divide this land unto you according to the tribes of Israel. And it shall come to pass, that ye shall divide it by lot for an inheritance unto you and to the strangers that sojourn among you, who shall beget children among you; and they shall be unto you as the home-born among the children of Israel; they shall have inheritance with you among the tribes of Israel. And it shall come to pass, that in what tribe the stranger sojourneth, there shall ye give him his inheritance, saith the Lord GOD.

If we understand 'stranger' here as one who has come from outside the people and the land, then this is a plea in God's name, for the refugee to be given rights. One can reflect on the practice today in the UK, where someone seeking asylum here has little rights.

Exodus 22:20

You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Rashi: If you oppress him he can oppress you also by saying to you: "You also descend from strangers". Do not reproach someone for a fault which is also yours (Mekhilta). Wherever 'stranger' occurs in Scriptures it signifies a person who has not been born in that land (where he is living) but has come from another country to sojourn there.

Discussion starters

The Torah commands us to 'welcome the stranger' 36 times. But how do we feel about using the language of 'stranger' towards refugees today - does it hold any implications?

Does our community have a special responsibility to act for displaced people?

Antisemitism, Islamophobia and other hate crimes are all rising - as is anti-refugee sentiment. How do we relate these issues, and how should we respond?

What is your personal connection to displacement or migration? Do personal stories make people more compelled to act?

Can Jewish values be a tool to inspire policy change in the UK?