



jewish film institute presents

Talk Amongst Yourselves: What We Carry with Us: A Refugee StoryLab

Group Discussion & Study Guide



Talk Amongst Yourselves

What We Carry With Us: A Refugee Storylab

PRESENTED BY



jewish film institute



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The Jewish Film Institute, Citizen Film, and The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life invite us to think about what we would bring with us if we needed to flee our homes. To do so, they have teamed up with young refugee storytellers who explore the most prized possessions they have brought with them. This unique storytelling experience is being featured in multimedia installations and events from Times Square to the Contemporary Jewish Museum.

The resources that follow, part of JFI's Talk Amongst Yourselves program, are meant to extend the experience of hearing these powerful stories, inspiring further reflection, learning, and action.

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Study Guide prepared by:



Questions Upon Viewing the Films

1. The first interviewee, Batinah from Syria, discusses the handmade silver heart that she carries as a keychain. It reminds her of "love, home, family, friends, fun--all these things that I am missing now." Why is it so resonant for her? Can you think of an object that conveys a part of your life?
2. The second interviewee, Shaheer from Afghanistan, talks about his traditional Afghani clothing, which connects him to his identity, childhood memories, family, and religious celebrations. However, in the United States, it also exposes him to hatred and danger. He notes, "Whenever I wear this clothing, people think that I'm a terrorist." How do you respond to this?
3. Do you respond differently to people wearing clothes reflecting their ethnic, religious, or national background?
4. The third interviewee, Madihah from Afghanistan, talks about her currency from Pakistan, where her family lived as refugees when she was a child. She reflects on the difficulty of her family's time there and her desire to return to make things better. Why do you think she chose an object with such difficult associations? Do you or your family have objects that remind you of difficult times?
5. The fourth interviewee, Richard, who left Germany with his Jewish family in 1938, discusses a bowl his parents received as a wedding present in 1930. Why do you suppose his mother brought this bowl? Do you have any objects passed down from your parents or other relatives? What do they mean to you?
6. The largest segment follows Zander, a gay refugee from Uganda. Over the course of the short film, Zander discusses a number of objects he has carried with him.
7. When he leaves home, Zander brings his phone, which has Ugandan music. To "give myself inspiration and courage" while leaving the country, he puts on his headphones and listens to a song which he used to listen to with his parents. He later reflects that "music is like your mom--even if your mind is feeling upset, music makes you feel comfortable." Does music function in your life as a carrier of identity and memories and a source of solace?

8. Zander also brings a picture of his friend in Uganda, whose execution he witnessed. If you were to bring a photograph, what would it be? Is there a difference to you between a printed photograph and a digital image?

9. Zander also collects significant objects along the way:

While in the refugee camp in Kenya for two years, he makes bracelets to remember the time he was there, and that he is a gay refugee.

He buys an America shirt when he finds out that he is able to come the United States.

In the United States he no longer has to feel ashamed, and feels proud. His golden electric shoes, he is no longer afraid of being noticed--quite the contrary.

How is Zander's journey illustrated through objects?

10. What are the themes that the stories have in common?

11. During the [enormous fires in Northern California](#) this fall, many people fleeing danger had to choose what they would take with them from their homes within a matter of seconds. If you had only a minute to save precious objects from your home, what would you take?

12. Do you have stories of immigrating or seeking safety in your family that are meaningful to you?

13. Reflect on the "Story" in "StoryLab." How do different sorts of storytelling affect you differently? What is different about hearing/seeing Zander's account?

14. What do you feel are the responsibilities of the United States towards refugees? Do you see the United States as different from other countries in this regard?

15. In a world with an unprecedented number of displaced people, how should countries make decisions about how many people to welcome, and which people to welcome?

16. The Trump Administration hints that its future refugee admissions policy may be partially merit-based, selecting those applicants seen as more likely to contribute and

integrate. What are your thoughts? How do we weigh differing factors in deciding who has priority in immigrating to the United States?

17. Do you find a comparison between the Jews fleeing Germany in the late 1930s and refugees fleeing war and persecution today appropriate?
18. The Times Square installation brings the stories of refugees to people who did not necessarily come to the space with the intention of listening to them. The voices of refugees, some of whom are here illegally, are perhaps the voices we are least likely to hear in our society. How might you imagine that their stories could be heard more?
19. A public installation like the Times Square project is in some ways the antithesis to the smartphones and tablets where we are increasingly spending our time and getting our information. Discuss the relationship between these different spheres.
20. The Times Square installation displays bright, larger-than-life images of the objects in the refugees' lives in a way that echoes the watches, clothing, and lifestyle accessories whose nearby advertisements dominate this iconic public space. How do you respond to this juxtaposition?
21. Compare Zander's "golden magic shoes" to the brand name athletic footwear being advertised in the electronic billboards nearby in Times Square. In what ways do they parallel each other, and in what ways do they diverge?

Information About Today's Refugee Crisis

There are an estimated 65.6 million forcibly displaced people in the world today--the highest number since the end of World War II. [See the United Nations' figures showing the scope of today's crisis.](#)

What is a refugee?

People who are forced to flee from their country by violence or persecution are recognized by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, aka the UN Refugee Agency) as refugees.

The majority of the world's displaced people are not considered refugees--generally either because of the reasons for their displacement or because they have not crossed international boundaries. This definition of refugees used by the UN does not include people who are fleeing natural disasters, drought, famine, or poverty. Although Woody Guthrie sang of those who fled Oklahoma's severe dust storms in the 1930s as Dust Bowl Refugees, they would not have qualified as such.

[Learn more from the UNHCR site here.](#)

Historical background

Prominent refugee crises in the twentieth century included displacements resulting from World War I, the Armenian genocide, the Chinese Civil War, the Vietnam War, the Iraq-Iran War, the Rwandan genocide, and other humanitarian disasters. The largest crisis by far occurred in the context of World War II.

You can [use this interactive map of world refugee crises since 1940](#) from the Washington Post to learn more.

Today's global refugee crisis

More than half of today's refugees in 2017 come from three countries:

Syria: Since 2011, war in Syria has been the source of the world's largest refugee crisis. More than half the country's population has been forced from their homes. Nearly six million Syrians have fled the country, primarily to nations in the Middle East and Europe, while another six million displaced people remain inside Syria. [Learn more about the Syrian refugee crisis here.](#)

Afghanistan: Although the war-torn nation has seen recurrent refugee crises since 1978, displacement is now at its height. Three million Afghans have fled to other countries, and another million remain displaced within the country. Although conditions within Afghanistan are still unsafe, many Afghani refugees are being returned to Afghanistan against their will by Pakistan and the European Union, which no longer recognizes Afghanistan as a place at war. [Read about the Afghani refugee crisis here.](#)

South Sudan: There are now 1.4 million South Sudanese refugees abroad, along with 1.9 million internally displaced people, due to civil war. The fighting and displacement have disrupted food production, and famine has become widespread. The Bidi Bidi camp in neighboring Uganda is now the largest refugee camp in the world, sheltering more than 285,000 South Sudanese. [Learn more about the crisis in South Sudan here.](#)

Some of the world's current displacement crises are occurring in the following regions:

Myanmar: In a rapidly accelerating crisis, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority, have fled Myanmar's far western Rakhine State, seeking refuge in Bangladesh, India, and elsewhere. [Read about the Rohingya refugee crisis from the UN here.](#)

Burundi: More than 400,000 Burundians have sought refuge in Congo, Uganda, and Tanzania amidst political chaos and widespread violence. [Read about the crisis here.](#)

Central African Republic: The small nation has seen protracted conflict between the Muslim Seleka militants and Christian “anti-balaka” militias, and those conflicts have now multiplied to include additional interethnic conflicts. More than a tenth of the CAR’s population are now refugees in other countries, while there are more than 380,000 internally displaced. With Cameroon shutting its borders to further migration, the crisis is deepening even further. [Learn more about the crisis here.](#)

Yemen: UNHCR estimates that over 82 per cent of the population of the country require urgent humanitarian assistance, thanks to fighting that has lasted more than a decade. More than three million people have been displaced. [Read about the crisis from the UN Refugee Agency here.](#)

Lake Chad Basin: In Africa’s Lake Chad basin (which encompasses parts of Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria) millions of people have been displaced by conflict, famine, and [the activity of the radical Islamist group Boko Haram.](#)

Somalia: Somalia has remained an enormously volatile country, with [hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees living in camps](#) in Kenya and elsewhere for protracted periods of time.

Central America: Huge numbers—especially of younger people—are [fleeing Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala](#), escaping violence that is linked to the drug trade.

Venezuela: Tens of thousands of Venezuelans have crossed into Colombia as [conditions have recently worsened.](#)

Displaced people in a number of the aforementioned situations do not necessarily meet the UN’s criteria for refugee status.

Importantly, “internally displaced persons” such as the millions of Colombians displaced by the conflict between the FARC rebels and the government, generally do not receive protection from the UNHCR. Rather, the UN places the responsibility for their welfare on their government. In many cases, when the government is not working in the interests of its people, doing so can place the displaced person at greater risk.

In most cases worldwide, a majority of the refugees are women and children. A huge number of refugees are minors traveling without additional family.

United States Refugee Policy

Beginning with the [Displaced Persons Act](#) of 1948, the United States government has had a policy embracing the resettlement of refugees in America. The determination of which refugees are admitted has sometimes had a pronounced political dimension, as when people fleeing Communist countries were given priority during the Cold War.

Since the passage of the [United States Refugee Act](#) in 1980, the President of the United States, in consultation with Congress, determines the numerical ceiling for refugee admissions.

The United States government recognizes a person who meets the definition of a refugee, but who applies for this status from *within* the United States, as an asylum seeker. Their process is somewhat different from those seeking refugee admission from abroad. [Read a brief description of the US refugee resettlement program.](#) [Read a brief history of the US refugee resettlement program.](#)

Changes under Donald Trump's Administration

Since taking office, President Donald Trump has enacted major shifts in policy towards refugees seeking admission or asylum.

Within weeks of taking office, the Trump administration announced that:

All admissions of refugees would be suspended for 120 days, with admissions of refugees from Syria to be suspended indefinitely.

A 90-day travel ban would be introduced for people from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, making it impossible for refugees from those countries to enter the United States.

The impact of the policy has been particularly harsh on prospective refugees from countries on the travel ban list. [Read, as an example, about refugees from Somalia](#) who were already in the process of achieving refugee status in the United States:

[And read this Los Angeles Times interview with David Murphy](#) of the International Rescue Committee on the impact of the travel ban on refugees:

With the 120-day suspension of refugee admissions soon to end, the Trump administration announced that it would resume the acceptance of refugees, but that there would be a delay in processing the applications from eleven countries deemed as "high risk." The administration would not reveal the names of the countries, but they are believed to overlap largely with the countries listed in the travel ban.

The administration also announced in September 2017 that the ceiling for refugees admitted to the United States [would be reduced to 45,000](#). This is a 59% reduction from the ceiling of 110,000 [during the final year of Barack Obama's administration](#).

[Read President George W. Bush's former Secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff, argue against Trump's ceiling reduction.](#)

The Trump Administration also stated in September 2017 that it will begin [employing new standards in its refugee admissions procedures](#), operating on more of a merit-based system that will "take into account certain criteria that enhance a refugee's likelihood of successful assimilation and contribution to the United States." No further details are available at this time.

LGBT Refugees

Zander's story presented in Refugee StoryLab illustrates the plight of many LGBT refugees from nations with oppressive policies and practices.

With the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the United States made it federal policy to prevent "sexual deviates" from entering the country. An immigrant caught engaging in homosexual acts was subject to deportation. However, subsequent changes in policy reflected evolving attitudes, and in the 1990s the United States began actively awarding refugee admission to LGBT individuals in certain circumstances where returning to their home countries would present a danger.

Under President Barack Obama, it became the government's policy to advocate for the rights of LGBT individuals globally as a part of the United States' commitment to human rights.

[Read United States Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power's 2012 statement](#) on LGBT rights as human rights, which includes a proclamation of the nation's commitment to protecting LGBT refugees and asylum seekers:

The United States has granted [asylum to LGBT individuals from countries such as Iran, Chechnya, and Uganda](#), where returning to their native countries would pose a serious risk.

Many lives have likely been saved as a result of this policy. California has been a leader in resettling LGBT refugees and asylum seekers. Read about efforts in California from the UNHCR. [And read one Bay Area story from radio station KALW.](#)

However, the Trump administration is [rolling back the role of the United States](#) in ensuring the safety of LGBT individuals globally. Many viewed it as ominous when the United States, until recently a leader in the global effort to advance human rights, [voted in October 2017 against a United Nations resolution that included a condemnation of the use of capital punishment for consensual same-sex relations.](#)

With the United States withdrawing from a leadership role in the defense of LGBT rights globally, it is feared that oppression in some countries is likely to increase, and the number of LGBT people seeking asylum is likely to grow--at the very time that the windows for legal admission to the United States are being closed.

A palpable impact of President Trump's ban on refugees from is that the United States will no longer welcome LGBT refugees from Iran, Syria, and elsewhere, despite the fact that they may be at risk. [You can read a summary here.](#)

[Read this article about Ramtin Zigorat, a gay activist from Iran whose effort to emigrate to the United States was scuttled by Trump's ban on immigration from Iran.](#)

[Read this article in the *New York Times*](#) about a gay man from Iraq whose hopes for resettlement in the United States were similarly derailed by the refugee ban.

[Read these powerful reflections](#) from journalist Masha Gessen in the *New York Times* on Thanksgiving, her mother, and welcoming LGBT refugees.

Welcoming Refugees as a Jewish Issue

The issue of refugees can be seen through two Jewish lenses: that of history, and that of religious thought.

Jews as Refugees in History

Jews have been refugees at many points in history. They include:

Expulsions and slaughter in England, France, Germany, and elsewhere during the era of the Crusades, causing massive displacement and migration towards Eastern Europe

The expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, which brought many Spanish Jews to North Africa, the Balkans, the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey, and elsewhere as refugees

Persecutions in Libya, Egypt, and several other Arab countries after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the Six Day War of 1967

No episode informs the present moment as much as the crisis before the outbreak of World War II, when thousands of Jews sought to escape the Nazis, but often had nowhere to turn. The result was a vast number of preventable deaths.

For summaries of this period, the following articles are helpful:

SS St. Louis: The Ship of Jewish Refugees Nobody Wanted

From the BBC: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27373131>

From the US Holocaust Memorial Museum:

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005267>

[The U.S. Government Turned Away Thousands of Jewish Refugees, Fearing That They Were Nazi Spies \(Smithsonian\)](#)

[How America's Rejection of Jews Fleeing Nazi Germany Haunts our Refugee Policy Today \(Vox\)](#)

[Comparing Jewish Refugees of the 1930s with Syrians Today \(New York Times\)](#)

Religious Perspectives

There is a strong identification with refugees and immigrants in Jewish religious thought. The patriarchs Abraham and Jacob were often itinerant, sometimes fleeing mortal danger. Psalm 39:13 reads, "Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my cry; do not disregard my tears; for like all my forebears I am an immigrant, resident with You."

The principal strain in Jewish thought around the treatment of refugees stems from the memory of the Israelite experience in Egypt—initially settling there in order to flee famine, and

later becoming enslaved and then liberated. This experience becomes integrated into the Commandments, expressed in the obligation to welcome the stranger. In fact, the commandment not to oppress the stranger is the most repeated dictum in the Torah, expressed 36 times.

“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” *Leviticus 19:33-34*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, reflects on the aforementioned text in an [article on the refugee crisis](#):

I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was “Love your neighbour as yourself”. Then I realised that it is easy to love your neighbour because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose colour, culture or creed is different from yours. That is why the command, “Love the stranger because you were once strangers”, resonates so often throughout the Bible. It is summoning us now. A bold act of collective generosity will show that the world, particularly Europe, has learned the lesson of its own dark past and is willing to take a global lead in building a more hopeful future. Wars that cannot be won by weapons can sometimes be won by the sheer power of acts of humanitarian generosity to inspire the young to choose the way of peace instead of holy war.

Some see rescuing refugees as an extension of the commandment to redeem captives.

Maimonides writes in his code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, that

“Redeeming captives takes precedence over feeding and clothing the poor. And there is no commandment as great as redeeming captives, for a captive is among the hungry, thirsty, naked, and is in mortal danger. And one who averts one eyes from redeeming him/her violates, “You shall not harden your heart, and you shall not shut your hand,” and, “Do not stand by your brother's blood,” and “You shall not work him with hard labor before your eyes,” and has neglected the commandment, “You shall surely open your hand to him,” and the commandment, “And your brother shall live with you,” “And you shall love your fellow as yourself,” “Save those who are take to death,” and many like these. And there is no great commandment like redemption of captives. *Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor 8:10*

[For the responses of rabbis from the full spectrum of Jewish movements to the challenge of today's refugee crisis, read here.](#)

[More than one thousand American rabbis have taken a public stand embracing the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the United States.](#)

[This is the Reform movement's resolution supporting the resettlement of refugees in the United States.](#)

For those interested in whether there is a Jewish legal obligation to resettle refugees, [these articles will be of interest.](#)

[Read about some Jewish perspectives and activity during the Syrian refugee crisis here.](#)

[Read a Jewish perspective on Trump's refugee policies.](#)

What Can We Do?

[Sign this petition](#) from HIAS declaring that accepting refugees make this country stronger and have your congregation sign [HIAS's Welcome Campaign](#).

[Download and read](#) this guide from the organization Belongto on how you can help LGBT asylum seekers and refugees.

[Volunteer with the International Rescue Committee.](#)

[Open your home or an AirBnB rental to a refugee on a temporary basis.](#)

Organizations to support with funds and time

[The New York Times lists organizations worthy supporting refugees to aid refugees.](#)

[The Linking Communities Project](#) - Creating Welcome for Refugees helps support local refugee resettlement programs.

[Belongto is an organization supporting LGBT asylum seekers and refugees.](#)

[JFCS LGBT Refugee Services](#) helps resettle and support LGBT refugees in Northern California.

[The International Rescue Committee](#) is an established organization aiding people fleeing conflict and natural disaster.

[HIAS \(Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society\)](#) supports refugees, regardless of religion or national origin.

[The International Refugee Assistance Project](#) helps fight for rights of refugees through legal aid and policy advocacy.

[The National Immigration Law Center](#) provides legal assistance to immigrants and advocates for their rights.

[The Union of Reform Judaism](#) has taken an active response to recent refugee crises

Further Viewing

“Welcome to Canada,” which tells the harrowing story of Mohammed Alsaleh, a young Syrian refugee granted asylum in Canada in 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BVbyOIB4r8>

The *New York Times* made this video in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, which is home to thousands of Syrian refugees.

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/middleeast/100000004844523/who-are-the-syrian-refugees.html>

David Miliband, the head of the International Rescue Committee and the son of Jewish refugees from Europe, gave this TED Talk entitled “The Refugee Crisis Is a Test of Our Character.”

https://www.ted.com/talks/david_miliband_the_refugee_crisis_is_a_test_of_our_character

This TED Talk by Melissa Fleming of the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is entitled “Let’s Help Refugees Thrive, Not Just Survive.”

https://www.ted.com/talks/melissa_fleming_let_s_help_refugees_thrive_not_just_survive

CNN assembled clips for World Refugee Day, 2017.

<http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/20/world/world-refugee-day-worst-crisis-in-history/index.html>

Selected Books on the Current Refugee Crisis

Seeking Refuge: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis, by Stephen Bauman, Matthew Sorens, and Issam Smeir

A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea: One Refugee's Incredible Story of Love, Loss, and Survival, by Melissa Fleming

Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move, by Reece Jones

The New Odyssey: The Story of the Twenty-First-Century Refugee Crisis, by Patrick Kingsley

Rescue: Refugees and the Political Crisis of our Time, by David Miliband

City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World's Largest Refugee Camp, by Ben Rawlence

The Newcomers: Finding Refuge, Friendship, and Hope in an American Classroom, by Helen Thorpe

Selected Books on Jewish Refugees available from the Jewish Community Library:

American Immigration

After They Closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921-1965, by Libby Garland

Shores of Refuge: A Hundred Years of Jewish Emigration, by Ronald Sanders

The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World, by Tara Zahra

Holocaust

American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945, by Richard Breitman

Flight from the Reich: Refugee Jews, 1933-1946, by Deborah Dwork

Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba, by Margarita Engle

No Haven for the Oppressed: United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1938-1945, by Saul S. Friedman

Why We Watched: Europe, America, and the Holocaust, by Theodore S. Hamerow

Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich, by Steve Hochstadt

The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century, by Michael Robert Marrus

Japanese Diplomats and the Jewish Refugees During World War II, by Pamela Rotner Sakamoto

Holocaust Odysseys: The Jews of Saint Martin Vsubie and Their Flight Through France and Italy, by Susan Zuccotti

DVDs

America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference

Exodus 1947: The Ship That Launched a Nation
Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport
Rescue in the Philippines: Refuge from the Holocaust
Sugihara: Conspiracy of Kindness
We Were So Beloved: The German Jews of Washington Heights

Middle East

Books

The Forgotten Millions: The Modern Jewish Exodus from Arab Lands, by Malka Hillel Shulewitz

Iraqi Jews: A History of the Mass Exodus, by Abbas Shiblak

DVDs

The Forgotten Refugees

Africa

Rescue: The Exodus of the Ethiopian Jews, by Ruth Gruber

Operation Moses: The Untold Story of the Secret Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia, by Tudor Parfitt

Redemption Song: The Story of Operation Moses, by Louis Rapoport