



**The Immigration Crises Then and Now:
What Are the 21st Century Possibilities?**

Ruth Messinger

Ruth W. Messinger, is the inaugural Louis Finkelstein Institute Social Justice Fellow at the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York and is the Social Justice Activist-in- Residence with the Joseph Stern Center for Social Responsibility at the Meyerson JCC in Manhattan. She recently completed the development of a curriculum on social justice for the Melton Schools.

From 1998 to 2016 Messinger was the CEO of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), an international human rights and development organization dedicated to promoting social justice in the developing world. She currently serves that organization as its Global Ambassador, working to engage rabbis and interfaith leaders to work against poverty and oppression across the globe.

Ruth has served on the State Department's Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group and was a member of the World Bank's Moral Imperative Initiative to end extreme poverty, and she sits on a variety of not for profit boards in and out of the Jewish community.

Previously, Ruth had a twenty-year career in public service in New York City as a city council member and Manhattan Borough President.

Messinger is married to an educator and has three children, eight grandchildren and three great grandchildren. Her mother worked at JTS for 55 years, and that is where she cut her teeth on issues of Jewish social justice.

A REFUGEE STORY

“Escaping from persecution and torture and expulsion, an unknown number of people set out by water in a wooden boat. Captured by privateers on the high seas, several were sent back to ruling authorities while 23 men, women and children found another vessel for their journey of escape.

The second ship’s captain agreed to take them on in exchange for all of their possessions and a substantial amount of money. Now penniless and homeless, the ship finally came to the end of its journey at a windswept little town far from any people like themselves.

Not only was the journey not an easy one, neither was their welcome. The captain of the ship put their belongings up for auction to get cash. And the local governor did not want these 23 to infest his land. Thus did their fight continue—against both the captain and the governor.

These refugees?

Those fleeing Syria and Libya?

Those fleeing Myanmar to Bangladesh?

Those fleeing Central America by boat?

Other?

ON ADVOCACY

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?"

Hillel, Ethics of the Fathers, 1:14

"Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may live."

Deuteronomy 16:20

"We came because we realized that injustice in St. Augustine, as anywhere else, diminishes the humanity of each of us....We came because we could not stay away....We could not pass by the opportunity to achieve a moral goal by moral means....We came because we know that, second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man's capacity to act."

Rabbis in St. Augustine, FL 6/19/64

"The three key lessons of human rights are: that indifference is the incubator of injustice; that it's not what you stand for, it's what you stand up for; and that people must never forget how the world looks to the vulnerable."

Rosalie Albella, Canadian Supreme Court Justice

"Leadership begins with taking responsibility. At the heart of Judaism are three beliefs about leadership: We are free. We are responsible. And together we can change the world."

Chief Rabbi Emeritus Lord Jonathan Sacks

"In a free society where terrible wrongs exist, some are guilty, but all are responsible."

"Over and above personal problems, there is an objective challenge to overcome inequity, injustice, helplessness, suffering, carelessness, oppression."

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

“A time comes when silence is betrayal.”

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King 4/4/67

“What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor but the silence of the bystander.”

“The greatest evil of all is our own indifference.”

“We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

Elie Wiesel

“If a person of learning participates in public affairs and serves as judge or arbiter, they give stability to the land...But if they sit in their home and say to themselves, ‘What have the affairs of society to do with me? ...Why should I trouble myself with the people’s voices of protest? Let my soul dwell in peace!’—if one does this, they overthrow the world.”

Midrash Tanḥuma, Mishpatim 2

“Neighbor is not a geographic concept. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man’s dignity and integrity.”

Rabbi Joachim Prinz

“As Jews, we bear a fundamental responsibility not only for our own moral, spiritual and material welfare, but for the moral, spiritual and material welfare of society at large. We are required by our tradition to assure a just and peaceful world and to do so personally through acts of kindness as well as by advocating in the political arena for public policies that we believe reflect these values. We have a fundamental religious obligation to stand up for the rights of the oppressed and persecuted, whoever and wherever they may be, and to do so however we can.”

Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter, 2004

“I want to suggest that there are two levels on which one should act—the personal and the political.

Rabbi Aryeh Cohen in Justice in the City

HOW TO WORK ON IMMIGRATION ISSUES

The best resource is HIAS. They will always have “take action” steps for individuals, congregations and organizations.

They also have an educational webinar series coming up, beginning on June 16th; check out their HIAS@Home hub.

Current and critical actions

Push Congress to add refugee-related provisions to the HEROES Act and to any COVID-related legislation

Call on the US to respect human rights guidelines and laws at the border

Volunteer as an attorney or as a Spanish speaker to remotely represent asylum seekers at the border.

HIAS COVID-19 Public Advocacy Asks (as of 5/15)

- 1. The U.S., like other countries around the world, should take necessary steps to try to limit the spread of COVID-19. Our country can prevent this spread without violating the human rights of individuals seeking safety.**
- 2. Maintain access to the U.S. asylum system and ensure due process for people seeking protection at our borders.** Asylum seekers cannot be turned away and denied the opportunity to seek asylum.
- 3. End the Remain in Mexico Program.** Allowing asylum seekers into the U.S. would help reduce the significant risk of people contracting and spreading the infection in the crowded and dirty encampments along the U.S.-Mexico border
- 4. Eliminate immigrant restrictions on the new Medicaid State Option for COVID testing and treatment.** In order for the U.S. to effectively combat the spread of COVID-19, we must ensure that all people - regardless of immigration status - have access to testing and treatment.
- 5. Include recently arrived resettled refugees, SIV recipients and other immigrants in coronavirus response legislation.** Refugee and SIV recipient employees must have

access to unemployment benefits, even if they have not yet worked the requisite 650 hours, as is currently mandated.

- 6. Release eligible vulnerable and low-risk detainees from immigration detention. ICE should release individuals who do not pose a threat to the public from detention. Elderly, health compromised, and pregnant immigrants should be released from detention immediately. Where appropriate and necessary, alternatives to detention should be used.**