

# How To Have Difficult Conversations About Refugees with Family and Friends



Welcome the stranger.  
Protect the refugee.

## Items Needed

- Handout – [How to Talk About Refugees with Family and Friends](#) (best printed double-sided; 1 per participant)
- Handout – [Refugee Torah text study](#) (1 per participant)
- Handout – [HIAS Sukkot Posters with stories of refugees](#) – pages 4, 5, and 9 (1 per participant)
- *Optional:* Handout – [“Some Helpful Definitions” and “The Global Refugee Crisis: The Top 5 Facts”](#) (best printed as one double-sided handout; 1 per participant)

## Framing

This program will help participants develop skills for talking about refugee issues with people with whom they may not agree. It will ground participants in the basic facts of the global refugee crisis, as well as equip them with language from Jewish textual tradition that undergirds the Jewish responsibility to support refugees.

## Instructions

Begin the program by welcoming participants and asking them to find a partner and take 2 minutes each to briefly share why they came to today’s program and why this issue matters to them.

After 5 minutes, bring everyone back together and say:

“In our increasingly politicized world, it can be difficult and even painful to talk to loved ones with whom we disagree about some of the issues that we hold most dear, including the global refugee crisis. The question we are here to unpack this morning/afternoon/evening is how we can speak authentically and Jewishly about this issue while also enabling those with whom we speak to safely and fully express their concerns. Over the course of the next hour, we are going to spend some time looking at best practices for having difficult conversations, finding Jewish language to talk about our responsibility to refugees, and equipping ourselves with some of the basic knowledge we need to address common misunderstandings about refugees. We will be using HIAS’ Conversational Guide for How to Talk About Refugees with Family and Friends as our guide.”

Hand out copies of the [Conversational Guide](#).

Ask for four volunteers to read aloud from the four sections on the front side of the Conversational Guide – Listen Fully, Build Empathy, Draw On Your History and Values, and Bring the Facts.

After you finish reading these, you may want to acknowledge that, while we all know that we should listen fully to those with whom we speak, this can be particularly hard to remember when a conversation gets heated. Ask participants to share any best practices they have for remembering to let someone finish speaking before they respond, even if the other person says something upsetting or offensive.

Take a few minutes to review the answers to the frequently asked tough questions on the back of the Conversational Guide.

If your community is just tackling this issue for the first time, you may also want to consider distributing [HIAS' Helpful Definitions and Top 5 Facts handout](#) and taking turns reading aloud to ground yourselves in a shared understanding of the basic definitions of refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, and migrants, as well as some of the top-line facts about the refugee crisis and refugee resettlement in the United States.

Finish this section of the program by saying to the group:

“In addition to knowing this information, it is also important for us to help others use accurate language to talk about immigrants and refugees. For instance, we can remind people to use the word refugee or asylum seeker when speaking about someone who has specifically fled violence or persecution because of who they are, rather than the umbrella term of migrant, as refugees and asylum seekers have particular legal rights. We can also remind folks that we should say refugee, asylum seeker, or migrant, rather than illegal alien or illegal immigrant. While people cross borders in a multiplicity of ways, no human being is illegal.”

Hand out copies of the [Refugee Torah text study](#). Say:

“With this basic information under our belts, we are now going to spend 15 minutes looking at various Jewish texts that address our obligation to welcome, love, and protect the stranger. Please find a partner and follow the directions at the top of this text study.”

After 15 minutes, bring the group together and say:

“I hope the last 15 minutes gave each of us a firmer grasp on how we can use Jewish texts to respond to claims that the refugee crisis should not be a Jewish concern. Of course, while it is certainly important for us to bring factual information to our conversations and to apply the values we learn about in our holy texts, for many people, what is most moving is to have a real face put on this vast and often overwhelming crisis. Let’s spend some time reading real stories of real people who have been forced to flee their homes due to persecution and violence and think about how we might tell their stories to respond to common concerns people express about refugees.”

Hand out the posters with the stories of Rawan, Carlos, and Ahed. Have participants count off as 1’s, 2’s, and 3’s. Ask everyone to find a partner with their same number. Say to the group:

“1’s: you will be looking at Rawan’s story. 2’s: you will be looking at Carlos’s story. 3’s: you will be looking at Ahed’s story. Take a look at the questions in the front of the room to guide your conversation. You might even try taking turns assuming the role of the person with the concern and the person responding to the concern and practicing how you would respond.”

Have the following prompts written on three large butcher paper (large enough that everyone can see from where they are sitting):

1. How would you use Rawan's story to respond to the sentiment that refugees will change the American way of life and/or American values because they will not acclimate?
2. How would you use Carlos's story to respond to the sentiment that refugees do not support themselves but, rather, just "milk the system"?
3. How would you use Ahed's story to respond to those who say that Muslim refugees are actually terrorists trying to hide amongst non-Muslim refugees?

After 10 minutes, bring the group back together and say: "As we close today's program, I hope we are all feeling more confident in addressing these issues with those in our lives who may not agree with our support for refugees. Before we end the program, I invite everyone to share one thing they learned tonight or something they are thinking about differently, as well as one commitment you would like to make to build on what you have learned or practiced today."