

# CONNECTIONS



SPRING  
2021

## “Welcome, ~~Stranger~~ Neighbor!” Putting Our Values to Work at JSS

By Dawn Berney, Executive Director



Early in my tenure at Jewish Social Services, some staff members asked me about the core values of our agency. We decided to use a collaborative process to define our agency’s values. See the infographic we created as a result. We try to ensure that every program decision we make is aligned with one or more of these values. Our next several issues of *Connections* will focus on how JSS puts these core values to work.

Because Pesach (Passover) is coming (the story of when Jews were strangers in the land of Egypt) we decided to

focus this newsletter on “Welcoming the Stranger.” The Torah reminds us to care for the stranger 36 times! Not even remembering the Sabbath comes up as often. What does this mean at JSS? Our clients and volunteers may find themselves either being welcomed in some way here, or helping welcome others. Whether we help those who have moved to Madison from another part of the country, support those who are joining the Jewish community for their first time, or set up a new home for someone coming from the other side of the world, many aspects of our work embody this value.

*Chag Sameach and Happy Passover!*



## Respecting the Stranger

By Maya Garbuz, MSW, JSS Case Manager, and Christina Kantor, JSS Program Assistant



The University of Wisconsin-Madison attracts faculty and staff from the former Soviet Union, and many of

them bring parents or grandparents who speak no English. JSS Case Manager Maya Garbuz has been assisting these families for many years.

Many older Russian-speaking immigrants have advanced degrees, and had successful careers in their homeland. But learning English is a real barrier for many of them, and Maya is one of the few professionals in the area fluent in Russian.

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*This edition of Connections is dedicated to the memories of Jeanne Silverberg, Phil Levy, and Debbie Giesfeldt. All three were strong advocates for JSS’ work to welcome the stranger. We miss them. May their memories be a blessing.*

These immigrants need help understanding and navigating social and economic programs in America, and have come to rely on Maya's steadfast help.

Maya works very hard to get agencies here to treat them with respect. Because they are low-income by American standards, and cannot communicate well in English, professionals working with them sometimes assume

"Many older Russian-speaking immigrants have advanced degrees, and had successful careers in their homeland. But learning English is a real barrier for many of them."

they are not intelligent or accomplished people, and treat them like children.

Many of these immigrants have created a satisfying life for themselves here, and have an active and supportive community. Still, many are anxious about keeping and managing their limited resources, and sometimes hesitant to lean too hard on their adult children for help. A few have no family members nearby at all. Jewish Social Services is the agency they know to call when they need help.

## I Am the Stranger

By Vivi Velasquez, JSS Refugee Resettlement Intern and Edgewood College Student



My name is Vivi Velasquez and I am a stranger in America. While I've been in the U.S. for 20 of my 21 years now, my legal status is uncertain

because I have DACA. DACA ("Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals") is a program created by President Obama that allows folks who arrived in the U.S. as children, the opportunity to acquire a driver's license, work, and be in the U.S. without the fear of deportation for a renewable two-year term. I live with the fear that a change in this policy could interrupt my life in America, as DACA does not offer a permanent solution to the legal limbo it creates.

President Biden has said that he will introduce an eight-year plan that will allow 11 million

undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship. Those with DACA could gain citizenship in just three years. As someone who has never been able to visit my home country, it brings me a sense of optimism and relief that I may be able to travel back to my country of birth, and live a normal life without worry or the sense of being unwelcome in this country. Barriers to higher education, job access, and social mobility will be shattered for me and many others, allowing us to participate as full citizens in American life.

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# Giving Hope – and Opportunity

By Rachael Wortzel, JSS Program Assistant



“I’m grateful for the chance to help our clients build new lives here, because every human deserves hope and opportunity.”

Two years ago, I worked as an intern with the JSS refugee resettlement program. When I started my internship, I knew very little about refugees and the U.S. immigration system, but by the end I recognized it as perhaps one of the greatest humanitarian crises of this century. I was surprised to learn that, of the millions of people around the world seeking refuge, a mere 1% will be resettled worldwide. I was proud to learn that, since the signing of the Federal Refugee

Act in 1980, the United States resettles more refugees than all other nations combined. Even after 9/11, and even in economic recessions, America still welcomes people in need of a safe place to call home.

Since 2019, I have been the program assistant for JSS Immigration Legal Services. I am also a graduate student in social work, and I believe strongly in the value of hope and opportunity. I am also the great-grandchild of Jewish immigrants, who came

to the U.S. looking for exactly those things. Welcoming the stranger is deeply important to me. For immigrants, actually getting to America is just one hurdle. Building a new life in America presents a new set of challenges, and JSS gets to make that easier. In my time here, our program has helped many refugees obtain their green cards. Immigration policy is complex and unforgiving, so I consider each of those cards a triumph. I’m grateful for the chance to help our clients build new lives here, because every human deserves hope and opportunity.

## Federal Refugee Admission Program Numbers Set to Quadruple

By Becca Schwartz, JSS Resettlement Director

Over the last four years, the number of people allowed into the United States through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program has decreased year after year. In Fiscal Year 2020, only 11,814 refugees were resettled in the U.S., less than half of the previous lowest number (FY2002). Through all of this, as many resettlement agencies were laying off staff and sometimes closing, JSS managed to keep

all of our staff and even increase the number of staff and programs serving refugees and asylees in Dane County.

On February 12, the new Biden Administration provided a Report to Congress on their intention to substantially increase the number of refugees allowed into the country for the remainder of the fiscal year. The proposed plan includes raising this year’s refugee admissions target from

15,000 to 62,500. We are eager for the chance to welcome more people who are seeking refuge and a chance to build a new life in the Madison area.



# How We Welcome the Stranger at JSS

“ So many people move to Madison to be closer to family, for a new job, or for a slower pace. No matter why you come to Madison, JSS is here to say, “Welcome, *Stranger* Neighbor!” -Dawn Berney ”



“ Welcoming the stranger means recognizing our shared humanity and standing in solidarity with our community newcomers. -Sam Van Akkeren ”

“ I welcome the stranger when I work with individuals who have been disengaged from Judaism for many years. By being present at critical life moments, I let them know that they belong in the Jewish community. -Rabbi Renée Bauer ”



“ When we are welcoming of those who are different, the opportunities for connection, empathy, and love multiply. This is the kind of world I want to pass on to future generations. -Becca Schwartz ”



“ JSS welcomes strangers, helps them settle in, and teaches them how to be Americans, but we do not try to change how they worship or ask them to give up their identity or cultural values. -Rihab Taha ”



“ There is a saying in Russian, “to give your last shirt,” that describes one of the best traits of Russians: generosity – giving without restraint. A stranger, a guest, anyone who enters your home is welcomed. I am reminded of this every time I enter a client’s home and meet the incredible big-heartedness of people who don’t have much but are willing to share everything. -Maya Garbuz ”



“ Welcoming the stranger to me means offering kindness and understanding. It also means building a foundation of trust and being a strong support in people’s lives when a lot of changes are happening for them. -Gretchen Patrisio ”



“ Whatever minor role I have in helping our clients build their lives here, I’m grateful for it because every human deserves to know opportunity. -Rachael Wortzel ”

# Neighbors Helping Neighbors Through Aljirani Madison

By Sam Van Akkeren, JSS Refugee Support Programs Coordinator

Nowhere is the value of welcoming the stranger more evident than in the amazing support JSS volunteers provide for our refugee neighbors. After a great experience interning with JSS last year, I was thrilled to rejoin the agency last fall as the Refugee Support Programs Coordinator. With funding from HIAS, we were able to kickstart a new refugee mentorship program we are calling "Aljirani Madison" (from Swahili "jirani - neighbor" and Arabic "aljar - neighbor").

We knew that launching this program during a pandemic would be a real challenge, but the need for community support and connections are more important than ever. Thanks to the amazing efforts of our volunteers and clients, the program is already making a difference! We have had nine volunteer partnerships working remotely on everything from English practice to career development. One volunteer was able to help his refugee partner (who has with limited vision) gain access to an assistive computer. Thanks to his Aljirani volunteer, our client is now connected virtually and able to access online religious services as well as our community support groups.

I'm excited to see where the program goes and the community connections we can help make between our neighbors. None of it would be possible without our awesome volunteers!

"We knew that launching this program during a pandemic would be a real challenge, but the need for community support and connections are more important than ever. "

## Transportation Assistance Available!

*Need help paying for rides to medical appointments, grocery stores, and other basic needs?*



JSS received a grant from Bader Philanthropies of Milwaukee to allow us to

provide rides for older adults in Dane County who don't drive and have limited resources. Rides to medical appointments, grocery stores, and similar necessities will be made available for a maximum of \$8.00 round trip if JSS cannot find a volunteer driver for you. Fee waivers are available for those who need them.

If you or anyone you know might benefit from this program, call (608) 442-4081 or email [office@jssmadison.org](mailto:office@jssmadison.org). We will connect you with one of our social workers who will be happy to help you access this service. We thank Bader Philanthropies for their support of our community.

## "She Looks Like Me" – Rihab Taha's Unique Role With JSS

By Christina Kantor, JSS Program Assistant



Many traditional Muslim homes have a guest room ready for a stranger who may appear in need of refuge. This ancient custom recalls the time when Mohammad and his followers were driven out of Mecca by idol worshippers. These earliest

followers of Islam sought refuge from persecution in the city of Al Madina, and later in modern-day Ethiopia. Hence Islam explicitly tells its followers to help the stranger (Q'uran; Al-Hashr: 8-9).

This commandment of hospitality

*Continued on page 6*

is one of many links that Rihab Taha, a case manager for JSS Refugee Resettlement, identifies between her faith and Judaism. From the Unity of G-d, to the directive to care for widows and orphans, to the importance of sharing food (prepared according to similar purity laws), to welcoming the dispossessed – Judaism and Islam are woven from sister threads.

Muslim refugees are sometimes apprehensive about being resettled in the U.S. by a Jewish agency. One-sided portrayals of the Israel-Palestine conflict in some Middle Eastern media have left them with fears of being dependent on Jewish people when they arrive.



“Many traditional Muslim homes have a guest room ready for a stranger who may appear in need of refuge.”

Meeting a Muslim woman who works with the Jewish community organization is an eye-opening experience. Rihab, who wears the traditional hijab, and explains that she can say her daytime prayers at work, gives these

new immigrants confidence that they too will be accepted. They quickly come to understand that JSS respects their identity and their faith, and will help them adapt to life here without giving up their heritage.

Many of us have found ourselves strangers in a land not our own. When Rihab came to America nearly 20 years ago, she was highly educated and widely traveled, but still found building a life in this country a challenge. Now she is an ambassador for JSS, sharing the organization’s mission to help refugees learn to navigate life here, while still drawing strength from their culture and religion.

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# Staying Active and Involved with JSS

By Volunteer and Event Coordinator Paul Borowsky



Merilyn Kupferberg and Roz Gusinow are two faithful and valuable JSS volunteers. Merilyn started to volunteer at

Lechayim 18 years ago. She has helped set a welcoming tone over the years checking in Lechayim guests. While she says that nothing will take the place of being physically present with each other, Merilyn enjoys getting to just be a participant in online events these days. She often starts her week at Monday morning yoga. "Betsy is terrific and I enjoy the social, physical, and mindfulness aspects of the Monday morning program."

Merilyn also looks forward to our end-of-week programs. She likes the variety of topics as

"I received as much – or more – happiness and satisfaction as I was able to give."

well as third Thursday "Torah Study and Tradition: with Rabbi Renée." She enjoys the opportunity to learn with others and to join in our discussions.

Roz is also a frequent program participant who asked me a few years ago if we could use another volunteer at Lechayim. A welcome and hard-working volunteer, Roz says, "Everyone involved – JSS staff, other volunteers and guests – are so kind and welcoming. It inspired me to continue volunteering AND join in on additional activities. I look forward to everyone being able to get back together again!"



*Merilyn and Karen, another dedicated volunteer, chat while waiting to welcome guests for Lechayim Lunchtime Plus (February 2019).*



*Badger Backer Roz gets ready to deliver Purim treat bags (March 2021).*

## Purim 2021

By Paul Borowsky,  
JSS Volunteer and Events  
Coordinator

JSS Volunteers and Staff: Thank you for making Purim happy for all of us by helping fill and deliver Purim treat bags! You do a great job – and make everything you help out with good and fun! (Treat bags included some delicious hamentaschen from Adamah Catering.)



## Volunteer Opportunities

If you are interested in volunteering, opportunities include no-contact delivery of groceries, phone contact with isolated people, or tech help for Zoom. As COVID restrictions continue, we want to thank all our volunteers for staying involved!

For further information on programs or volunteering, contact Paul Borowsky at [paul@jssmadison.org](mailto:paul@jssmadison.org) or (608) 442-4083.

# UPCOMING EVENTS

## April End of Week:

### *A Left-Handed Whopper: Celebrating April Fool's and Laughter*

How did this tradition of April Fool's come about? A chance for some gags, pranks, and laughter. Join in with Betsy Haimson and Paul Borowsky to celebrate the day.

Thursday, April 1, 3:30–4:30 pm

### *The Arab Spring: Ten Years Later*

Although autocrats still rule the Middle East, what lessons have we learned and what are the prospects for positive change and reform? Join Professor Daniel Stolz for a look back and ahead.

Friday, April 9, 10:00–11:00 am

### *Torah Study: Fasting: A Spiritual Practice or a Religious Obligation?*

with Rabbi Renée Bauer

In solidarity with our Muslim siblings who will be fasting this month for Ramadan, we will learn about the tradition of fasting in Judaism. We will look at the origins and goals of Jewish fast days, and explore the deeper spiritual underpinnings of fasting.

Thursday, April 15, 3:30–4:30 pm

### *Earth Day 2021: Restore Our Earth*

Wisconsin senator Gaylord Nelson established an office to support thousands of grassroots environmental efforts, but proclaimed that "Earth Day planned itself," when an estimated 20 million Americans gathered on April 22, 1970, to confront ecological troubles and demand action.

Thursday, April 22, 3:30–4:30 pm

### **Schmoozing and Yoga continues every Monday Morning**

Schmoozing at 11:00 am and Yoga from A Chair at 11:30 am

Go to [www.zoom.us/join](http://www.zoom.us/join) and type in Meeting ID **406 575 567**.

No computer? Join by phone! Call (312) 626-6799 then when prompted, type in Meeting ID: **406 575 567#**.

### **To Find Links to All Upcoming Zoom Programs:**

- Watch for an email. If you are not on the list, but wish to be, please let us know.
- From a web browser go to [jssmadison.org/calendar](http://jssmadison.org/calendar) and choose a program by date. Click on the event title to open up a window with details and a Zoom link for that program.

## How Do You Want to be Remembered?



Everyone wants to make life easier for those they love. But not everyone likes to plan ahead – especially not for something like a funeral. However, there are very compelling reasons to arrange and pay for your final wishes ahead of time.

- You will spare your loved ones the stress of making dozens of decisions during a time of grief and emotional upheaval.
- You will relieve your survivors of the financial burden of paying for funeral and burial services. Even if you have resources to cover costs, they are not likely to be available immediately.
- You are securing today's prices for funeral and burial services and for your plot.

### **How Can You Plan Ahead?**

- Talk with your congregational Rabbi, or call JSS community chaplain Rabbi Renée Bauer at (608) 442-4081 if you do not have one.
- Learn more about Madison's Jewish cemetery at [jbamadison.org](http://jbamadison.org). Use the online contact form, or call (608) 467-3493 with questions.

# Tribute Donations

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*It's Passover! Look inside to see how JSS  
"Welcomes the Stranger"!*

## Passover 5781: A Bittersweet Moment



By Rabbi Renée Bauer

We are in a strange time. Many of us are vaccinated, yet we still wear masks and limit travel. COVID cases are going down, but not all children are back in school.

Spring is blooming, but we are not quite sure what lies ahead. And many of us are celebrating a second COVID Passover. Our mixed emotions are like the those of Israelites after escaping slavery. Many of us have moved out of a time of distress, but are not sure how hopeful to be about what lies ahead.

The structure of the Passover Seder mirrors our spiritual and emotional journey through the pandemic. Rabbi Ben Lanckton suggests that this moment is like the "Korech," when Seder participants eat a sandwich of matzah with bitter herbs and sweet charoset.

A year ago, it felt more like the first moment in the Seder when we eat Matzah – giving up the familiar and comfortable as we fled the virus. We have moved beyond maror, the bitterness and tears during the height of the pandemic. But we are not enjoying freedom or

singing praises ("Hallel") in celebration of the end of the pandemic either.

Korech symbolizes the bitterness of slavery mixed with the sweetness of freedom. Just as there is no special blessing for the bitter-sweet sandwich, we may lack words to describe the feelings of grief, fear, and joy that swirl around us at this unusual moment in history. The Passover Seder can help us embrace and honor our full range of feelings. May each of us allow ourselves to taste the bitterness of this pandemic while also enjoying the sweetness of the freedom that we glimpse ahead.

