Refugees

וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיְמָה – אָנוּס עַל פִּי הַדִּבּוּר.

וַיָּגָר שָׁם. מְלַמֵּד שֶׁלֹּא יָרַד יַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ לְהִשְׁתַּקֵּעַ בְּמִצְרַיִם אֶלָּא לָגוּר שָׁם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה, לָגוּר בָּאָרֶץ בָּאנוּ, כִּי אֵין מִרְעֶה לַצֹּאן אֲשֶׁר לַעֲבָדֶיךָ, כִּי כָבֵד הָרָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן. וְעַתָּה יֵשְׁבוּ־נָא עֲבָדֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן.

He went down to Egypt, forced to go according to the Torah.
He lived there – this teaches that Jacob only went to dwell temporarily in Egypt, not to live there permanently. This is as it is written in the Torah: They said to Pharoah: We have come to live in the land, since there is nothing for your servants' sheep to graze on, for the famine is very severe in the land of Cana'an. Now please let your servants settle in the land of Goshen.

Migrants vs Refugees

Today, waves of people fleeing war, gang violence, poverty, or oppression seek shelter in Europe or the United States. There are various terms used to refer to them. Here is what two key legal terms mean:

Refugees: A refugee is someone who flees his home country due to a well founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Governments are required to grant refugees asylum, which means sheltering them at least temporarily and not forcing them to return to the place of danger they fled from.

Migrants: A migrant is someone who chooses to move to a new country. Someone who decides to leave a poor country with limited jobs and low pay to live somewhere with greater economic opportunity is a migrant. Countries can establish quotas and other criteria for determining which (if any) migrants to accept, since there is no legal obligation to accept migrants.

The distinction between an economic migrant and refugee is often very difficult to determine in our current reality and at the heart of current political debate. For example, someone attempting to move from Central America to the United States may be fleeing political oppression, crime, and poverty all at once.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 14.

Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

Was Jacob a migrant or a refugee?

Jacob and his family went to Egypt to escape famine in Cana'an. This would seem to be a compelling reason to ask for shelter- should he be refused and forced back to Cana'an, Jacob would face starvation and possible death!

On the other hand, famine is specifically not on the list of criteria for receiving asylum. Asylum was conceived in international law as a way of shielding a limited number of political dissidents, not a means of alleviating poverty or sparing entire populations from the consequences of natural disasters. Countries may send aid to help those suffering from drought or famine, but to take in an entire foreign population is beyond any nation's means.

Should Egypt have been required to accept Jacob's family? What should we do when whole populations flee violence or natural disasters seeking asylum?