



Refugees

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 Pharaoh: 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 Canaan. Now please let your servants settle in the land of Goshen.

וַיֵּרֵד מִצְרַיִם – אָנוּס עַל פִּי הַדְּבוּר.
 וַיָּגֵר שָׁם. מִלְמַד שֶׁלֹּא יָרַד יַעֲקֹב אֲבִינוּ
 לְהִשְׁתַּקֵּעַ בְּמִצְרַיִם אֲלָא לְגוּר שָׁם,
 שְׁנֵאמַר: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה, לְגוּר בְּאֶרֶץ
 בְּאֵנוּ, כִּי אֵין מְרֻעָה לְצֹאֵן אֲשֶׁר לַעֲבָדֶיךָ,
 כִּי כִבֵּד הָרָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן. וְעַתָּה יִשְׁבוּ־נָא
 עַבְדֶּיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן.



From the 1951 Refugee Convention

"A refugee is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion."

Countries are obligated to shelter refugees. Someone who chooses to move in search of better economic opportunities is a migrant. Countries do not have to accept migrants and can force them to return home.



Roles Reverse

Whoever shows mercy towards the poor, God has mercy upon him. Note: A person should take to heart that at every moment he requests his own sustenance from God. Just as he wants God to hear his cries, so he should hear the cries of the poor. He should also take to heart that situations are always changing, and in the end he, his children, or his grandchildren may also wind up poor. Whoever has mercy upon others, others will have mercy upon him.

– Shulchan Aruch Laws of Tzedakah 247:3



Was Jacob a migrant or a refugee?

Jacob and his family went to Egypt to escape famine in Canaan. This would seem to be a compelling reason to receive help – if Jacob had been sent back to Canaan, he would have faced starvation and possible death!

But famine, natural disasters, gang violence, and warfare are not included in the refugee convention as entitling people to international protection, and countries cannot afford to take in the enormous numbers of people who may flee such things.

Was Egypt required to accept Jacob's family? What should be done when whole populations flee violence or natural disasters looking for new places to settle?