




## **SERMON VA-YIGGASH:<sup>a</sup> BRAIN GAIN**

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 31 December 2022  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

- 1 וַיֵּטֶב בְּעֵינֵי פַרְעֹה וּבְעֵינֵי עֲבָדָיו: Pharaoh and his courtiers were pleased that Joseph's family had arrived in Egypt.<sup>b</sup> But why? According to the 19th-century commentator known as the Netziv, it was because Pharaoh reasoned that the brothers must be more-or-less as intelligent as Joseph, and that the kingdom would greatly benefit from the brainpower of these new immigrants.<sup>c</sup>
- 2 This approach is one that is commonplace today. The OECD has an blog post on its website entitled: "Refugees are not a burden but an opportunity".<sup>d</sup> *The Economist* ran a column demonstrating that "migrants contribute more to Britain than they take, and will carry on doing so".<sup>e</sup> And the ICMC, an international Catholic charity that supports refugees, has said: "The cost of receiving refugees may seem shockingly high, but



evidence suggests that the cost can actually be more of an investment.”<sup>f</sup>


- 3 Those articles all make the same argument, and that argument is, with respect, hideous. It’s hideous because it treats refugees as a resource. It’s hideous because it implies that our reason for sheltering those at risk of persecution is our own self-interest. It’s hideous and chilling because, following that logic, if the data was different – if it turned out that asylum seekers didn’t benefit our economy – this would be a reason to turn them away at the border.
- 4 Now, it’s understandable that, sometimes, it is important to argue in terms that will appeal to unsavoury characters. Some of the loudest anti-immigrant voices in our society complain of the cost of accommodating refugees, and it can help to take the wind out of those voices’ sails by observing that, over time, newcomers to our shores give back more than they take.
- 5 But think about how that observation sounds. Migrants have ears too. In Dina Nayeri’s autobiography, *The Ungrateful*



Refugee, she describes her discomfort and visceral disgust at such an approach: “In conversations about the refugee crisis,” she writes, “educated people continue to make the barbaric argument that open doors will benefit the host nation. The time for this outdated colonialist argument has run out; migrants don’t derive their value from their benefit to the Western-born and civilised people don’t ask for résumés from the edge of the grave.”<sup>g</sup>

6 Joseph was overjoyed when he was reunited with his brothers; maybe that was reason enough for Pharaoh to have been happy. But instead, he saw this bedraggled band of newcomers arrive, starving, at his border,<sup>h</sup> and his first thought was: “Opportunity!”

7 It might be tempting to give him some credit for not turning them away altogether. They were, after all, refugees, and he did, after all, give them a home. But the clear implication of the Netziv’s reading is that he gave them a home because, and only because, he surmised that they must share the wisdom-



gene of their brother Joseph. Had any other band of 11 men materialised in search of shelter, they would indeed have been turned away. In my book, that means that Pharaoh gets, at best, no credit at all.

- 8 The arguments we use, even if we're using them with good intentions, say something about us. And they send that message, loud and clear, to those who are most deeply affected by them. The story of Pharaoh celebrating the arrival of Joseph's, supposedly highly intelligent, brothers is a reminder that, in fact, we should rejoice at all human joy, and celebrate every person for who they are. Picking and choosing is a dangerous way to go.

<sup>a</sup> Genesis 45:4-16

<sup>b</sup> Genesis 45:16

<sup>c</sup> Ha-Amek Davar ad loc

<sup>d</sup> Philippe Legrain. "Refugees are not a burden but an opportunity", OECD (2016): <<https://www.oecd.org/migration/refugees-are-not-a-burden-but-an-opportunity.htm>>

<sup>e</sup> Data Team. "Migrants contribute more to Britain than they take, and will carry on doing so", *The Economist* (26 September 2018): <<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/09/26/migrants-contribute-more-to-britain-than-they-take-and-will-carry-on-doing-so>>



<sup>f</sup> Johanna Burke. “Are refugees bad or good for the economy?”,  
International Catholic Migration Commission (14 July 2020):  
<[https://www.icmc.net/2020/07/14 /refugees-good-or-bad-for-economy/](https://www.icmc.net/2020/07/14/refugees-good-or-bad-for-economy/)>

<sup>g</sup> Dina Nayeri. *The Ungrateful Refugee: what immigrants never tell you*  
(Edinburgh: Canongate, 2019), ebook edition: part 5.

<sup>h</sup> Genesis 42:5