



## **STUC St Andrew's Day Anti-Racism Brochure 2015**

### **We were all once refugees!**

When you see the pictures of the tens of thousands of refugees fleeing into exile each day from the civil war in Syria, does it engage your compassion, or your sympathy, or your ideology? Do you truly empathise with their plight? Do you feel what they feel? Do you know what it is really like to be expelled from your home, to have to flee for your life and to risk your life to save your life, to have no-one to take you in?

Sadly, that's a story Jewish people are very familiar with – Jewish history has more than its fair share of exiles, from the biblical narrative of the famine that forced Jacob and his family to leave their homes near Beersheba south of Jerusalem to buy food in Egypt where like so many of today's refugees, they were subsequently forced into slavery, through expulsions by the Babylonians, Romans, the Crusades, the Inquisition in Spain, pogroms in Eastern Europe, the Holocaust, and, most recently, from Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and North Africa.

Like many of today's exiles, the Jewish people have always dreamed of returning home. The Exodus from Egypt is not merely an incident in history, but is mentioned daily in prayers, and commemorated in the three "pilgrim festivals" that recall each stage of the journey: the Exodus itself, on Passover, when the tribe of Israel became the Jewish nation; the revelation on Mount Sinai that we celebrate on Shavuot, and the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, recalled by the ramshackle shelters that we build and live in for the week of Succot. Although the biblical Exodus was for us a return, a positive experience, as history has shown it was, ultimately, only a temporary relief.

So we identify and empathise with today's refugees because exile and homesickness are so ingrained in our identity and our faith and our history. We remember the precariousness of being a refugee, taking that risk because the uncertainty of surviving the exodus was preferable to the certainty of extinction if they stayed behind. For me that was echoed in one of the many tragic stories from the current crisis, of the Syrian surgeon whose wife and daughter had drowned, but who still said that it had been rational to take that risk.

The Jewish people went as migrants to Egypt; we escaped as refugees from Egypt; we were exiled again by the Romans. We travelled across Europe – and back again. My mother's family came to Glasgow to escape pogroms in Russia, my father to escape the Holocaust. And we are not the only ones – nearly every family in Scotland has a story of migration, from the Vikings, the Saxons, and the Normans to the Irish, the Asians, and the Eastern Europeans. Who are we to close the door behind us? It's not "There, but for the grace of God, go I", but "Here, by the grace of God, came I".

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The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation no. SC029438