

Yearning to Breath Free

- Jack Krivit

Thanksgiving has always been a special holiday in our home. It brings to mind some wonderful lessons that have been passed down through my family. As the descendants of immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe, we have learned to be grateful for the bountiful life that America has afforded us.

"Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

These words by poet Emma Lazarus stand at the base of the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France, and have welcomed new immigrants into the United States for generations. To my family, this is what America is all about. Sayid Ahmadi is a 33 year -old man from Damascus, Syria, and amidst the religious divide and civil war devastating his country, we've invited him to our house for Thanksgiving. In 2013, Sayid survived the bombing of his neighborhood, but lost his wife, Sara, while trying to escape. Following this attack and many others, Sayid and his two daughters, Rasha (age seven) and Liliane (age three), fled to a refugee camp in Za'atari on foot. There, they were among tens of thousands of similarly displaced Syrians caught in a dangerous civil conflict. Before the evacuation, Sayid was a mechanical engineer, but now he is struggling to support himself and his daughters doing any work he can find. In the storage shed where they have found shelter, they are without clean drinking water and Sayid finds it difficult to get food for his young daughters. Every night, Sayid worries about what his daughters' futures will be like, considering that Rasha has not received proper schooling for almost two years. Sayid's grandfather's cousin came to America from Syria many years ago, and this cousin's son became very famous. His name was Steve Jobs.

As the Thanksgiving season approaches, Congress is debating how to control the situation in Syria. There are many U.S. representatives who are strongly opposed to the idea of the Ahmadi family coming to spend the holiday with me. Our own Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker has expressed that he will do whatever he can to close the door to refugees like Sayid, Rasha and Liliane. This brings to mind the tragic story of the MS St. Louis, the passenger ship that carried hundreds of Jewish families out of Nazi Germany and was denied entrance to the U.S. by Americans who were too afraid to accept these people in need. All were returned to Europe, and many lost their lives in concentration camps due to their ethnicity and situation.

When my family sits down at the table on Thursday, we'll be thinking of our relatives who escaped persecution and risked their lives on a dangerous journey so that we could live in peace and prosperity. We are very grateful not only to them, but also to all of the Americans in their day that made it possible for our family to be new immigrants. We've asked Sayid and his daughters to join us at our table on Thursday, and we are hopeful that they will be able to come.