

Love the Stranger

Yom Kippur Morning 5780
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In 1939, Max and Margot Hirsch boarded the S.S. St. Louis along with their two year old son, Joachim, and 934 other Jewish refugees, bound for America. They were leaving behind a brutal Nazi regime as Adolph Hitler began to implement his Final Solution - a modern Exodus, crossing the sea toward freedom. But that freedom was never to be. With their visas still caught up in processing, a media campaign was launched in America, calling these refugees Communists and stoking fear of their intentions. A few days after they arrived in port in Miami, the United States of America denied entry to the passengers of the S.S. St. Louis. The ship was turned back. Upon their return to Europe, the Hirsch family was separated. Max was sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp, and Margot and Joachim were sent to Auschwitz. The Hirsch family was murdered in those camps, along with most of the passengers of the St. Louis.

As a people, we know deeply to our core what it means to be a refugee. Ours is a refugee story -- one full of peril, persecution, destruction, and war. And yet, today, we are together in this sanctuary on this holiest of days as a thriving community -- dwelling in safety and abundance with every possibility before us. Our story continues because we found refuge. We came to distant lands as strangers and were welcomed, time and again, leading us to this very moment. Each of us owe our lives to those people throughout our history who heeded God's commandment to welcome the stranger.

We all remember June of last year, when a new policy was announced in which families of asylum seekers on our southern border would be separated. Children would be taken away from their parents and detained in separate facilities as a means of deterring people from making the journey to America. While I had been dismayed by the heated rhetoric and increasingly troubling policies around immigration, the cruelty of this policy hit me especially hard. And as we know, the problem got worse. Heart wrenching sounds of children begging for ICE agents to call their families. Pictures of squalid conditions in detention camps. ICE raids leaving children with no parents to go home to. Children dying of disease and neglect on our watch. Detestable rhetoric demonizing immigrants coming from our leaders -- all of these things shook me to my core, and yet, I did little. I wrote a sermon. I contacted some of my representatives. I donated to HIAS. But I also turned a blind eye. The problem felt so vast and so systemic that, like many of us, I just did not know what I could do that would make any difference.

Then this past July, after my vacation plans fell through, I saw a call from the Reverend William Barber II to take part in a clergy demonstration in El Paso, Texas and made the decision to go. I had no idea what this trip would hold, but I thought, perhaps, I would learn something that could empower me to come out of my paralysis around this issue that had weighed so heavily on my heart for so long.

On my first full day in El Paso, I found myself in a first-stop shelter for families with children who had just been released from ICE or DHS detention. This austere concrete-walled shelter contained a collection of mismatched folding metal chairs that constituted the intake room. Here, volunteers were handing out pretzels and water to about 50 asylum seekers who had just been dropped off with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the babies in their arms. I was struck that I did not sense relief in these people for having been released, many after months in detention facilities. All I saw was fear and exhaustion. They had come from countries all over Central America, crossing thousands of dangerous miles. The reasons for their exile were many, with common themes of violence, persecution, and extreme poverty. Like the Hirsch family, they had reached their Promised Land, and like the Hirsches, most of them would soon be sent back to the peril from which they fled. I could only look at them and pray that they would not meet the same fate as our ancestors who sailed on the St Louis.

As we made our way through the intake hall to meet with the volunteer coordinator, I noticed a tiny, malnourished little boy crying on a chair in the hallway. He was alone - I would later learn that he was an escape artist, having slipped out of the children's playroom. Giant tears fell from his eyes. As I approached him, he yanked his shirt over his head and hid from me. I asked him, "que paso?" What happened? -- just about the full extent of my Spanish, and he threw himself against the back of the chair and turned his back to me. Not knowing what to do, I squatted next to the chair and put my own head into my shirt, waiting for him to emerge. When I peeked out, he was peeking out, too -- big tears still fell, but there was a hint of a smile on his face. When he saw me looking, he went back into his make-believe turtle shell, and I did the same. We silently played this game for a few minutes, and then I left him there to receive my assignment. Before I walked away from him, I reached out and put my hand gently on his little arm, expecting him to jerk away from me. He didn't.

When the volunteer coordinator saw this exchange, naturally, she placed me in the playroom. A few exhausted mothers of the littlest babies slept against the walls. They each had monitors around their ankles. I was the only person staffing this room, which held about 30 children. Their parents, I was told, were working with volunteers to determine how they would get to their next destination.

If you didn't look too hard, this could have been a classroom in our religious school. A closer look, however, revealed children who had survived horrendous trauma. Their clothing was tattered and dirty. Most of them were not wearing shoes. The

bottoms of their feet were black with dirt. Their fingernails were long, and the smell of sweat and urine that clung to them was overwhelming and stuck to me long after I left. Many were impossibly thin - you could see their collarbones and their faces were sunken. Their hair was matted, and I was warned that some of them had lice.

The older children sat at a craft table. A few were sketching on construction paper. Others just sat, looking around at the other children, or staring at nothing at all. Some of the little ones played together, and one little boy was running in a never-ending circle around the room, arms flailing, flinging every toy that came into his path. A few children cried by themselves in various corners.

As I struggled to get my bearings, strategizing about how to communicate with these children without a common language, a young mother dropped a little boy off in the room and was ushered away to meet with a volunteer. The little boy stood in the doorway reaching for his mother, and he wailed, but he did not cross the threshold. At the same time, another little boy stood at a toybox, hoarding the toys it contained, and lashing out at the other children as they approached. One tiny girl wouldn't pick up the toys at all unless I handed them to her -- all of these things were telltale signs of the trauma they had experienced.

Feeling overwhelmed by how I might reach these little ones, I spotted a package of stickers sitting unopened on the craft table. I know from my work with our own children here at the temple that stickers are magical kid-bribes, and so I ripped open the package and went to the little boy guarding the toybox. I placed a tiny ice cream cone on his forehead. I placed a baseball on the hand of the boy in the doorway. Before I knew it, I was mobbed with children clamouring for stickers. As fast as I could manage, I stuck stickers to little cheeks and noses. The quiet gave way to squeals and laughter. The little girl who would not pick up any toys took each sticker that I stuck to her face and stuck it to mine. Before I knew it, I had a face full of stickers, too. These tiny children, all of whom had woken up incarcerated that morning before making their way to this room, had been through horrors I could not even imagine, and yet, they still found joy in something as simple as stickers. For a few moments, we had peace and laughter. Even a few of the older children joined in.

I never saw the little turtle boy who I encountered in the hallway come in, but in the midst of the sticker mob, he suddenly threw his arms around me and yelled, "Tia!" Auntie. As I fought through my tears to cover him in stickers, a chorus of "Tia" rose up from the children as they clamoured for my attention. Tia became my name in that room. These children understood a fundamental truth that we lose sight of as we grow up in this troubled world - that, no matter where we come from, no matter our story, no matter the color of our skin, we are all family. I knew in that moment that, like our ancestor Jacob who became Israel, I was being called to do everything possible to be worthy of this name.

I know that the issue of immigration in this country is politically fraught, and that there are many strong and varying opinions in this sanctuary about how we should handle our borders and those who seek asylum in our Promised Land. I also know that some of you will feel that my view on this is naive. There are those who feel that we should be doing more to make the situation better for people in their own countries so they will not need to come here, but in the meantime, within our borders our own safety and well-being should be our priority. There are those who are concerned that some who enter our country aim to do us harm, either inadvertently by using our resources and taking our jobs, or through malintent and criminality. These things are realities, and I sympathize with these positions even if I do not hold them myself.

Thirty-six times in Torah, though, we are commanded: Welcome and love the stranger. God reminds us of this over and over again - more than anything else we are commanded to do - precisely because it is hard. Precisely because it can be counterintuitive. Precisely because, at times, it may be dangerous. And precisely because it is the ultimate measure of who we are, as Jews and as people of God. This is not a political issue. It is a moral issue for which our obligation is clear. No matter how we feel about policy, we have a moral responsibility to treat every human being with dignity.

Torah doesn't just tell us that we must do this -- it tells us *why*: for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. God brought us out of that narrow place in Torah, and then again and again throughout our history as our people's journey progressed. As people of the covenant, we must act with kindness and mercy toward those who, like us, have been forced to *lech l'cha* - to get up and go from the places they have known, to take a perilous journey to an unknown land so that they, too, might know redemption.

After spending the day in the shelter, my dear friend and mentor, Rabbi Margie Slome, and I wanted to do more for these families who were in such desperate need of help. We called the shelter and asked them what they needed. They requested Walmart gift cards to give to the families as they left the shelter. Rabbi Slome and I went to Walmart and purchased \$2000 worth of gift cards in \$50 increments and delivered them to the shelter, asking them to tell the families that received them that we are glad they are here. Four days later, a white supremacist gunman drove through the night to El Paso - a place he knew he would find a large immigrant population. The Walmart he chose to shoot up was the closest one to the shelter, located just a four minute drive away. He opened fire, killing 22 innocent souls and injuring 24 more. Even months later, it is hard for me to speak about this, as I will never know if those gift cards, meant as an act of love, might have placed some of those families -- some of those innocent children who named me Tia -- in the midst of a massacre.

While shocking in its violence, it came as no surprise to me that these two issues -- that of mistreatment of the immigrant and white nationalist violence -- collided on that

dark day. The words coming from many of our leaders about immigrants on our southern border are reminiscent of the words that have been used to attack Jews throughout time. From calling the influx of immigrants “an infestation” to declaring Mexicans rapists and criminals to not speaking out when someone yelled “Shoot them” as a solution to the immigration crisis -- the rhetoric coming from the highest echelons of power is leading straight to violence.

During the interfaith service in preparation for our act of civil disobedience in El Paso, Reverend Barber taught us that hatred manifests first in words -- stories which stoke fear; then in works -- cruel policies that act on those fears; and finally, left unchecked, in war-like casualties. And so it was. Twenty-two dead in El Paso. Eleven at Tree of Life Synagogue. Heather Heyer in Charlottesville. Twenty-six dead at a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. Six at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. Fifty-one at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. Nine at Mother Emanuel Church. *Sinat chinam* - baseless hatred toward the other, expressed first in word, and then in deed. We cannot fix this once it reaches war-like casualties, for by then, it is already written. We must change the narrative -- the words we tell ourselves and the words we tolerate from others -- so that next time, the ending can be different.

Chances are, you have heard me speak of this before. I have recounted my experience over and over again since I returned, in newspaper articles, sermons, radio interviews, gatherings of activists, and in conversation with some of our elected officials. I tell it again now because it is on us to change the trajectory of this story as the next chapter is written, and I am asking for your help.

My friends, love in Torah is not a feeling. It is action. God expresses love by clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, defending the oppressed, healing the sick, and comforting the bereaved. This is what it means to love the stranger. No matter how we feel about the politics of immigrants, we are commanded to provide for their basic needs and wellbeing. And so, as a community, we must engage in this work of caring for our human family, acting in God's image.

When our grandchildren ask us what we did in this moment of national reckoning, we must be able to answer that we stood up to live the values we espouse. To this end, we have recently launched an Immigration Task Force. This group, chaired by our own Harry Graber and supported by our Social Justice chair, Carol Brum, will engage in the holy work of caring for asylum seekers in our midst, both locally and at the border. Over the past two months, we have been hard at work determining our next steps. We will be partnering with other faith and charitable organizations from across Hampton Roads in order to make meaningful change for immigrants. So far, we are receiving support from 17 churches, mosques, and faith communities. We are exploring partnerships with Catholic Charities, Tidewater Immigrant Transit Assistance, Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, HUBB, our local school boards, and Jewish organizations at the border.

Already, 30 people attended our first meeting and over 100 people have signed up to help. We have identified a number of needs for which we can provide help, from establishing a Virginia legal hotline for asylum seekers, to creating a much-needed protocol to help immigrant children to register for school in Norfolk and Virginia Beach, to providing supplies to the shelter I visited in El Paso, to working to create and promote humane immigration policy in our government. Alongside these actions, we will be creating opportunities to learn about the plight of immigrants, past and present, so that we might change that story for the better in the future. Join us in the sukkah on October 19th as we welcome immigrants to share their stories and explore how they parallel our own.

The more people we have doing this ambitious work, the larger the impact we can have. We have the opportunity to put our faith into action in a big way. I invite you to write this work into your own story this year. If you are interested in joining us, please email me, or watch for the sign-up in next week's As the Temple Turns email.

Pirkei Avot teaches that we are not obligated to finish the work, but neither are we free to abandon it. We are not powerless. We learn this from the stories of our tradition, from the stories in our history, from the stories of our own families, and from the stories we encounter through our relationships and create through our actions.

Today, as we do the work of teshuvah -- repentance -- while our country is grappling for its morality, may we look deep within ourselves and ask -- when my Book of Life is written, what will this chapter look like for me? What did I do to stand up in this moment of moral peril? Together, let us resolutely say, "We loved the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Please email cantorjen@ohfsholom.org if you are interested in signing up to be a part of our Immigration Task Force.