

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780

We were strangers, too

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L'Shana Tova.

So good to be together with all of you on this Rosh Hashanah, this beginning of a new year. The beauty of these holidays is most visible in what the Cantor and I and the pulpit guests view—the sheer sanctity of all of you gathered together. We are most fortunate to have each other and have this community to propel us forward even as we learn from the past.

So much has happened since last we gathered to mark the High Holy Days. Our world continues to be unsettled, with crises and lurches in one direction or another in countries all over the world. Our nation's divide deepens nearly by the day. And in our own community we have made significant, generational decisions—choices which were filled with difficulty and emotion for every one of us.

Some years, the gathering for Rosh Hashanah seems truly celebratory—looking forward to a new year, a new era, a new future. And some years this gathering is filled with dread as we confront war or disaster. This year's gathering represents something different—uncertainty. So much remains unsettled, so much unknown.

We Jews are well acquainted with uncertainty. Our history drips with episode after episode of not knowing, of wondering what will be. We American Jews experience great good fortune in that comparatively, we experience significantly less uncertainty than most eras of Jewish history. So, when unsettling times arise, our tradition can be our guide.

A year ago, I stood on this bima and spoke of an upcoming trip I was to take to the southern border. That trip happened in late September of last year, and I spent a day and an evening on the US-Mexican border near McAllen, Texas. The people I saw, the fear I saw, the humanity and inhumanity I saw—all touched me to my core.

I know immigration can be a divisive political issue. Politicians have used immigration as a wedge issue far longer than the current crisis. Fear and division serve political purposes. Digging deeper to understand the issues goes against those goals of the politician.

My experiences at the border last year convinced me that I needed to better understand not just the current situation but our Jewish understandings of immigration, migration, refugees, fear and more. I wanted to learn why some Jews see things one way and why others see it from a different vantage point. I have not found all of the answers I sought. But this evening, let me share with you what I have learned, provide a Jewish view on the current crisis, and offer some possible paths forward for each of us here.

One of my favorite musicians, Bruce Springsteen, released a song about immigration and migration to America called American Land. In his song, based on a poem by immigrant steel worker Andrew Kovaly that was set to music by Pete Seeger, Springsteen talks of America as land of hope and dreams, a land where antagonized minorities can find freedom and opportunity.

Sings Springsteen:

Over there all the women wear silk and satin to their knees
 And children, dear, the sweets, I hear, are growing on the trees
 Gold comes rushing out the rivers straight into your hands
 When you make your home in the American land

They died building the railroads, they worked to bones and skin
 They died in the fields and factories, names scattered in the wind
 They died to get here a hundred years ago, they're still dying now
 Their hands that built the country we're always trying to keep out

There's diamonds in the sidewalk, the gutters lined in song
 Dear, I hear that beer flows through the faucets all night long
 There's treasure for the taking, for any hard-working man
 Who'll make his home in the American land.

We American Jews have long celebrated our great good fortune. We have always believed that regardless of our origins, hard work can lead to success. Unlike almost every other country on earth, America offered us as Jews a new reality—namely that hard work would be rewarded and that we Jews could somehow be a part of general society. After millennia of wandering, America, at last, felt like home.

Almost from the beginning, Jews have been ‘the other.’ Jews have known only wandering: Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden of Eden, Abraham left his parents’ home in Ur, our people left Egypt. Jews have constantly been at the mercy of others, hoping that kindness might prevail. Once in a great while the majority culture did share, though far more often Jews were marginalized or worse. (Crane, *The Stranger*, 2019, 26-27)

One might think that such a history would make Jews more insular, less willing to reach out and help another. But in twentieth and twenty-first century America, just the opposite has

been the norm. Jews have generally been unusually charitable, giving to others, helping those in need.

One of the questions for those among us who are staunch supporters of new restrictive immigration policies must be why the change now? Why are we unwilling to help those who are standing where, through most of history, our people has stood?

Jews have always wrestled with what to do with limited resources. Time and again Jews decided to help people in need, to provide for others what for so much of history was denied to us.

No Jewish source exists which guides us to close the gates, to limit opportunities for others. Jewish texts teach us to take care of our own, yes, but we also hear the crystal-clear call to care for others.

Jewish views on immigration usually emerge from the many verses in Torah reminding us that we were strangers ourselves, that we have a responsibility to be good to the strangers among us. This sentiment, repeated over and over again, finds its way into holiday observances as well.

At Passover we are reminded to open our doors and say, 'all who are hungry, come and eat!' We are reminded again and again and again that showing kindness to others allows us to do God's work, to fulfill our covenant with the Almighty.

Even more, we Jews have long believed in the rule of law. Ah, you might say, this gives us the grounds to oppose illegal immigration because the immigrants are committing crimes!' And if the immigrant commits a crime once in this country then yes, the model holds. But if the act of migration is viewed as a crime and used as the reason to oppose immigrants and refugees, then the principle does not hold. Let me explain.

The question is one of Jewish understanding of the role of US law. Jewish law, at least since the time of the Talmud nearly 2,000 years ago, upholds the basic concept of Dinah de Malchuta Dinah—the law of the land is the law as the defining rule. This principle teaches us as Jews that we have a responsibility to follow the laws of the land to be good citizens.

The principle, as my teacher Mark Washofsky teaches, also reminds us that laws to which our government has agreed must be followed and followed equally.

Jewish law recognizes that the state is empowered to make laws. More, law must be equitable in its coverage and effect. A law that improperly discriminates among equals is not law for the purposes of the Jewish principle of Dinah de Malchuta Dinah. (Washofsky in *The Stranger*, Freehof Institute, 2019, p62)

Even more, teaches Washofsky, international law has the same restrictions and understandings. More to the point concerning questions of immigration, the acceptance by our country of the 1951 United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees requires certain behaviors by our government. (Ibid.)

The UN agreement of 1951 clearly states that those who immigrate, even illegally, as refugees, are to be treated with a clear set of rights including housing, education, access to courts, public assistance and more. All of this is to be applied without regard to race, religion or country of origin. (Ibid, 62-63.)

When the United States signed the 1951 treaty, we as a nation committed ourselves to a different path of treatment for those seeking refuge. Recent attempts to change policies must first, by a Jewish understanding of law, start with the UN treaty. As Jews, our legal tradition calls us to speak up for those who are refugees, to remind our national leaders to follow the laws equally for all people.

On this Rosh Hashanah, our tradition offers us a clear path. Jewish law reminds us to be good citizens, to pursue the path of law in society. We are called to work for equality, to make sure that our laws are followed and followed equally for all people. Our values are clear. Judaism, by way of Torah, history, and law calls us to recognize the importance of helping those who are immigrating to this country out of need. Ours is a tradition that supports the immigrant, that embraces the refugee, that works for equality for all.

Here in Syracuse, much work awaits us. We have a strong refugee population desperately in need of help. We Jews can reach out, connect with refugees, and offer help. We can hire refugees, provide rides, donate household items, provide tutoring and so much more. Both InterfaithWorks and Catholic Charities, who are deeply involved in refugee resettlement need volunteers. Temple Concord can be a leader—welcoming refugees to our community with the open arms our great grandparents so needed and desired.

More, Temple Concord is a member of the Sanctuary Coalition, a group of houses of worship committed to helping immigrants in need. The coalition meets nearly every Monday afternoon, and can always use more help. We can join together with like-minded neighbors to fulfill the call of our own history and our own Jewish law.

And we can speak out. Numbers of refugees continue to be sharply limited by the federal government. At the beginning of the other 80's, the 1980's, our nation admitted nearly 200,000 refugees. Today that number is slated to be 18,000, one-tenth of the number just forty years ago.

Our representatives need to hear from us, they need to hear the voice of Jewish values. They need to know that we, their constituents, believe in the power and value of refugees, both in helping those in need and in welcoming people who wish to pursue freedom. Join me in

reaching out, speaking out, to do what no one would do for us when we were strangers in a strange land.

At its core, the question of immigration is a question of hope and fear. If we wish, we can live in a world of pessimism, a world that sees problems at every turn. We can look into the eyes of another and create for ourselves a thousand scenarios of hate, violence, destruction.

For too much of Jewish history, others chose this path when encountering our ancestors. They chose limits over freedom, separation over community, fear over hope. In spite of all of that, in spite of being refugees on nearly every continent, our people endured, today living unimaginable lives of optimism and opportunity.

On the eve of this new year, the time has come for us to rise up and give voice to the lessons of our own past. We must choose hope. We must look into the eyes of the other, regardless of age or gender or skin tone or language or national origin—and see ourselves. We must do what so few ever did for us—make sure that they are protected and nurtured and loved rather than being subjected to fear and hate.

The late great Tom Petty wrote powerful words about refugees. He sang:

Somewhere, somehow, somebody
Must have kicked you around some
Who knows, maybe you were kidnapped
Tied up, taken away, and held for ransom

You see, you don't have to live like a refugee
(Don't have to live like a refugee)
No, you don't have to live like a refugee
(Don't have to live like a refugee)
You don't have to live like a refugee
(Don't have to live like a refugee)

We have the power to stop the cycle of fear and hatred, the cycle of refugees being relegated to outermost realms of society. We have the ability to reach out, offer support and care, lifting our voices to bring them into the great American mosaic. We who have been refugees too often in history must not let others continue to live as refugees.

When I stood at the respite center in McAllen and spoke with refugees, I could see the hopes and dreams they carried. And even though I lived half a continent away from them, I saw that in me they recognized a friend and ally. I told them that I represented a congregation in New York, that we believed in their cause, that we were committed to helping them. And for just the briefest of seconds I saw a glimmer of hope in their eyes.

They need our help. We need to help them. Whether by volunteering with local refugees or joining the Sanctuary Coalition or donating funds to help or traveling to the border to visit with refugees in person, each of us can make the world more whole for those in need.

Tonight, as we begin a new year and a new decade, let us be true to our tradition and our heritage. Together let us choose hope over fear. Let us recall the many times when we were refugees, the refuse of society kicked to the curb. Let us look to those now being pushed around and instead of seeing a foreigner, see our own ancestors.

Our people suffered far too long and far too much for us to now inflict that same kind of suffering on another. We Jews know the power of possibility, the power of compassion, the power of hope. Refugees and immigrants in need are living among us.

See them. Embrace them. Help them. Together we will live up to the highest ideals of our country and the highest values of our people. Together we will bring Shalom, wholeness to our world.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be God's will. Amen.