

In Tribute to America
Independence Day 2019
Shelach 5779

It is the natural course of things that actions or comments which initially strike us as offensive, hurtful, or both, diminish in their impact over time. It was for this reason that the Sages, in their deep wisdom, cautioned us, *al teratzeh et chavercha b'she'at ka'aso*, better not to appease someone in their moment of anger. Time does its own work, and does it quite well.

And yet, rarely, the opposite experience maintains. A comment or action which may initially have been perceived as inappropriate, unwarranted, but not of particular significance, can, on occasion, and upon reflection, reveal itself to have been far worse than initially considered.

Nearly two weeks ago, Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez of New York's 14th Congressional District stated, "the United States is running concentration camps on its Southern border."

She went on to repeat this charge at least three more times in her brief remarks, and lest it be dismissed as mere political posturing, she then made a point of saying that "she did not make her remarks lightly".

My initial response, for a variety of reasons, including the ambient political context which rewards posturing and hyperbole, was deep disappointment, but hardly surprise. Naturally, I was offended, as a grandchild of a Holocaust survivor, but, admittedly, did not have a stronger initial response.

And yet, since that time, given the utter lack of remorse that this public official has shown, and the sycophantic reaction of her apologists, some of whom have decades more public service than she does yet apparently feel the need to ingratiate themselves to her, has created the highly unusual scenario which I described: I am far more upset today than I was when these remarks were first brought to my attention.

Let me be very clear: as I have spoken about repeatedly in our congregation, and written about, in my messages to you, I am deeply troubled by the situation on the Southern border. As Laura Bush, no liberal, wrote of the current policy, “it is immoral, it is cruel, and it breaks my heart.”

And yes, a large part of my anger comes from the lessons of the Holocaust, about the trauma of family separation, and my sense of the greatness of America being tied up with its immigrant history, as well as my awareness that the quotas of the 1920’s made what should have been a great haven for my family made this country unreachable when my family and nation needed it most.

The pictures we saw this week of a father and his daughter drowned in each other’s arms should sadden and anger anyone who believes, as Chazal did, *chaviv adam she’nivra b’tzelem elokim*, ‘beloved are all people for they have been created in the very image of God’, as well as anyone who takes seriously the Torah’s repeated mandate to care for the stranger and convert based on our own historical experience in the land of Egypt.

Reasonable people can and should disagree about comprehensive immigration policy, which is certainly not my subject this morning, but our community, in evaluating the range of responses to the current moment, has a solemn obligation to remember our own history as largely unwanted immigrants. As such, it remains a source of deep regret for me that the Orthodox community as a whole does not seem overly troubled by the plight of migrants at our country’s Southern border, and the scale of the human suffering unfolding there, especially as it concerns children.

And yet, one need not, should not, and dare not compare human suffering of any kind to the greatest crime in the history of humanity. As Deborah Lipstadt wrote, “I think American policy to the people crossing our border is generally mean and vindictive. I think the separation of children from their parents is horrifying and degrades us a nation and a people,” Lipstadt said. “Something can be horrible and not be like the Holocaust.” She referred to the comparison made by Representative Ocasio Cortez as inaccurate, false, and deceptive.

I would go further. I believe it to be a form of Holocaust distortion, something just short of Holocaust denial.

The Representative's tortured attempt to draw a distinction between concentration camps and death camps, a theory first proffered by one of her many apologists, and subsequently embraced by the Representative herself, bears some measure of scrutiny.

While I deem it completely implausible that she had this distinction in mind when she made her initial remarks, I cannot prove my skepticism. I doubt very much that even today the Representative in question can identify the six death camps she asserts that she was *not* referencing: Auschwitz, Maidonek, Treblinka, Sobibor, Chelmno, and Belzec.

What I can definitively say, however, is that if she did have it mind, it makes matters far worse, not better, in so far as she would be acknowledging specific knowledge of conditions in Nazi concentration camps, as opposed to death camps.

Approximately 3.2 million Jews were cumulatively murdered in the aforementioned six death camps. You will notice that is only slightly more than half of the total number of Jews killed in the Holocaust.

In concentration camps, which Yad VaShem immediately and rightly pointed out were equally part of the Final Solution, of 'extermination through labor', there was of course torture, starvation, medical experimentation, and mass murder as well.

I'm going to just list places to which my own grandfather, Ruvim Fridman had a connection. This is only a partial list of his war experience, and all the more so, of the full network of concentration and labor camps- not death camps. Buchenwald: 56,000 murders. Flossenburg: 30,000 murders. Dachau: 41,500 murders. Stutthof, outside Danzig, 61,000 murders. Salaspils, outside Riga, 2000 murders. The point is self-evident.

If the Congresswoman from New York truly thought her comparison was valid because she was not referring to the six death camps, but only to the aforementioned concentration camps, it is amongst the most ignorant and vile comments I have ever heard in American public life.

And yet, as we approach July 4th, my sense of outrage over the remarks, the failure to apologize, the absurd defense along the concentration camps death camps distinction, has actually shifted in nature. Not only should we all be offended as Jews, but as Americans.

As we passed the seventy fifth anniversary of D-Day just a few weeks ago, we would do well to honor the memories of the tens of thousands of Americans who sacrificed their young lives on the shores of Omaha Beach, in the hedgerows of Normandy, in the snowy forests of the Ardennes. and those who were maimed in so doing, and those who survived whole in body, but perhaps not in spirit, given what they had seen and experienced.

We ought to honor the rightful pride of every American GI, and their families, and their children and grandchildren, and of the nation as a whole, for having participated in what General Eisenhower termed, in his famous D-Day message, a battle during which “the eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty loving people everywhere mach with you”, and, as President Roosevelt prayed with the nation later that very day, “to free a suffering humanity.”

As Americans, there is no finer moment in our history, to use Lincoln’s phrase, “as a nation conceived in liberty, dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” than our victory over Nazism in the Second World War, over those who proudly promulgated theories of race, of master races and *untermenschen*, the latter of whom they sent to *actual* concentration camps.

As such, to falsely accuse this nation of running concentration camps is an assault not only on the Jewish people but on the American people as well. It is so very disturbing to me that a Representative of this government does not feel ashamed to accuse her nation

of such a horrible crime, no matter how legitimate and necessary criticism of current immigration policy may be. And it should resonate with all of us with greater force this morning, as we read of the spies, and the severity of libelous speech, bearing in mind the rabbinic observation, ‘the fate of our ancestors was sealed on account of evil speech.’

In researching this morning’s sermon, I recently came across a remarkable cable sent by the General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, to his mentor and commander, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Geogre Catholic Marshall.

While General Eisenhower’s decision to force local German populations to witness the horrors of the concentration camps first hand, while the stacks of corpses were still fresh, is widely known, this document, I believe, sheds new light on our contemporary moment. It is dated 19 April 1945, four days prior to my grandfather’s liberation outside of Dachau by Pattons’ third army.

“We continue to uncover German concentration camps for political prisoners in which conditions of indescribable horror prevail. I have visited one of these myself and I assure you that whatever has been printed on them to date has been an understatement.

If you would see any advantage in asking about a dozen leaders of Congress and a dozen prominent editors to make a short visit to this theater in a couple of C-54s, I will arrange to have them conducted to one of these places where the evidence of bestiality and cruelty is so overpowering as to leave no doubt in their minds about the normal practices of the Germans in these camps.”

Would that some of the leaders of Congress today be prepared to take a similar trip before engaging in Holocaust distortion and vicious attacks against this country.

As we prepare to celebrate her 243rd year, we remind ourselves that ours is a country which, yes, has never been perfect, and yet, which has made the most wonderful strides: she has abolished slavery, she has welcomed millions of poor, tired huddles masses-

including our own- lifted them from dire poverty, and rescued them from hatred and prejudice; she has enfranchised women and people of color; she has secured equal protection and due process for all; she has served, in President Roosevelt's phrase, as the world's 'arsenal for democracy' and freedom. She has defeated Nazism and Soviet Communism, each of which was responsible for the murder of tens of millions of innocents.

Her work is not done, but in this, she bears no fault. *Tzedek tzedek tirdof*, our pursuit of a more just and virtuous society is never finished.

My grandfather, fittingly, passed away on July 4th eleven years ago, and this year, his *yahrzeit* will be observed on that date as well. He was saved by the brave soldiers of this country, on a death march outside Dachau, and this is a gratitude that runs marrow deep in our family.

I love this country for all of those reasons, and always will, no matter how much I may disagree with a specific policy I believe to be immoral.

As we always have, we shall move past this current moment of unnecessary and unjustified harshness towards those, the vast majority of which, simply seek a better life in this land of the free. For, as President Reagan wrote in 1994, as he bid farewell to the American people, as he descended into senescence,

In closing let me thank you, the American people for giving me the great honor of allowing me to serve as your President. When the Lord calls me home, whenever that may be, I will leave with the greatest love for this country of ours and eternal optimism for its future.

I now begin the journey that will lead me into the sunset of my life. I know that for America there will always be a bright dawn ahead.

May we always be proud of our history as Americans.

May we always strive to further perfect our union, to tirelessly expand the blessings of liberty and freedom.

May we always be optimistic about the bright dawn ahead.

And may He, of whom King David said three thousand years ago, “to whom is the earth, and all that fills it; civilization, and all who dwell therein”, bless these United States of America.