

October 19th, 2018/10th of Cheshvan, 5779

Dear Chevreh,

I just watched a video that made my stomach feel sick. Minister Louis Farrakhan, speaking to a filled amphitheater in Detroit this past Monday at an event marking the 23rd anniversary of the Million Man March, his 1995 rally advocating empowerment for black men, called Jews “deceivers,” “stupid” and worst of all “termites.” While there was a slight gasp from the room and a few people who weren’t clapping, many were enthusiastically clapping and laughing. It was horrifying to watch. We recall during the Hitler years in Nazi propaganda, Jews were referred to as “roaches,” “pests” and “parasites.” We know this kind of dehumanization as anti-Semitism. We see it rearing its ugly head in our own country, in Europe and elsewhere around the world.

We also hear this kind of dehumanization against immigrants and refugees in our country. In March, Trump said, “You wouldn’t believe how bad these people are. These aren’t people. These are animals.” In June, speaking of illegal immigrants, he used the phrase “infest our country.”

Any and all language that dehumanizes groups of people is unacceptable. We are all too familiar with where it can lead.

This is among the reasons we will gather together this evening for the HIAS-inspired Refugee Shabbat. We may have different views on immigration law and what should be done. But we cannot allow Jewish values of welcoming the stranger and recognizing that each individual is created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in G-d’s image, to be tarnished by others. We must speak up and support the best of our Jewish and American traditions.

As Rabbi Sid Schwartz said recently:

“We are hearing heart-wrenching stories from our southern border. Let us remember: We were those refugees only one generation ago. And we’ve seen this movie before. What starts out as linguistic defamation—Hitler called Jews “vermin” and a cancer on society; Mexicans were called murderers and rapists by then-candidate Trump—sets the stage for total de-humanization of the targeted population...**Nothing can be further from the Torah’s teachingthat every person, regardless of race, religion or place of origin, has infinite value.**”

<http://www.rabbisid.org/staying-sane-in-a-world-gone-mad/>

We have more refugees worldwide than ever. According to HIAS, less than 1% of refugees are resettled, and the U.S. has traditionally led the world in terms of resettlement. Because we have cut the number of refugees we resettle by more than half, we have also cut the number of refugees resettled worldwide by about a half.

The HIAS Refugee Shabbat booklet provides the following connection to this week’s Torah portion:

“The Torah portion over National Refugee Shabbat is Parshat Lech Lecha, which tells the story of God commanding Avram to leave his home and journey towards a land that God will show him. God promises Avram that, through his travels, a great nation will come from him, he will be blessed, and God will make his name great. As Avram heads south from his home, famine forces him to detour to Egypt. While Avram would not technically be considered a refugee by modern definitions, as someone who is forced to leave home not of his own volition and as a stranger in a strange land, he does still experience many of the same challenges that today’s refugees experience. As Rabbi Neil Kominsky writes in his commentary on the portion, in Parshat Lech Lecha, Avram – who becomes Avraham in this portion – “set[s] a pattern for much of subsequent Jewish history . . . in countries all around the modern world [where] Jews have lived as immigrants, an identifiable minority within a different host culture.”⁵ Indeed, this parsha is the first time we hear Avram described as “Avram Ha’Ivri” – Avram, the one who crosses over. The Jewish people will come to be referred to collectively as “Ha’Ivrim” – the ones who cross over.”

May we, descendants of Abraham, hear this call of Lech L’cha, and hear where the world needs our particular voice and energy. Lech L’cha, go to where your heart resonates with suffering and is inspired by resilience. Also, as the Hasidic masters teach, Lech L’cha, go inward, start with yourself and stay on the paths that keep you grounded as you heed the divine call.

***I invite you to sign up to eat at a member’s house for Shabbat dinner next Friday as we celebrate Member Hosted Shabbat/New Member Shabbat. The following evening, I invite you to the KHN Poetry Café and Havdalah.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Diana