

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
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Bearing Witness in a Multi-Ethnic Society

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to feel as the gates opened and our bus drove into the parking lot. Taking only a notebook and a pen, we entered the nondescript building and made our way to the back of a large room lined with bright orange chairs. Rows of people sat quietly waiting for their turn. There is a lot of waiting when it comes to deportation.

Our delegation from the Madison-Arcatao Sister City Project stood inside the Migrant Reception Center in San Salvador, which manages the flow of people who have been deported from the United States and Mexico. Our guide, a friendly Salvadoran woman, wasn't expecting the number of questions we had for her.

We wanted to understand what life would be like for the young woman we saw, who left El Salvador as an infant, grew up in the United States, and was sent "home" to a country she barely knows. We wanted to know whether that man carrying only a small bag of belongings, still in his work uniform, had been apprehended in an ICE raid. We wanted to know what will happen to the almost 200,000 Salvadorans living in the United States when our government ends their Temporary Protective Status this September.

The Center is an impressive place, offering free health care, food, and clothing, lined with several cubicles of social workers finding housing and jobs for the returnees – the word "deportees" has a negative connotation, our guide told us. These are our people, returning to us, she emphasized. The center was so welcoming, so orderly, so bright – you could start to feel hopeful that the returnees would fare pretty well once they re-integrated into Salvadoran society.

But their prospects were grim. El Salvador is an exceptionally poor country, not well-equipped to absorb the returnees after they left the center. They were highly vulnerable, some having no family or no means of supporting themselves, overwhelmed from the journey, unsure what home even means, and prey to the gangs that control El Salvador.

There is a fine line between bearing witness and gawking. As we stood in the migration center, immersed in stories of heartbreak and despair, I felt unclear which one we were doing.

Bearing witness implies that we are bringing our whole selves to what we see before us. We open our eyes for the sake of others, show up, and stay present. In so doing we affirm another person's reality. Taken one step further, bearing witness can have an element of action. We allow our experiences to change us. We allow our experiences to steer us into challenging

conversations about who *we* are. We consider how we might add to someone else's suffering – by our assumptions, by our actions or inactions, even by our citizenship status or the color of our skin. When we process these experiences, we grapple with our discomfort and then use that discomfort to help us part ways from problematic assumptions and behaviors so that we can create a different future. Bearing witness can lead us to act and work for a more just, more compassionate world.

Contrast that with gawking, which means “to gape or stare stupidly.” With this kind of seeing we peer into someone else's life for our own benefit. Social media seems to have heightened the appeal of gawking. We post a selfie to show others what *we've* seen, to let others know that *we were there*. Gawking implies holding onto a simplistic perspective and being unwilling to be changed by what we have seen. We might draw conclusions that what we see is discriminatory in some way, but we don't do the difficult work to understand that even with the very best intentions we might be complicit in someone else's suffering. I suppose that gawking is better than turning away and refusing to see altogether. But unlike bearing witness, we are only seeing for selfish reasons.

Throughout the trip I was haunted by one question: “What do we do with our overwhelming privilege?” Being an American citizen, being white and middle-class, bestowed upon me such enormous power. I didn't have to reckon with the grinding poverty, barbed wire, polluted rivers, and the violence that Salvadorans contend with every day.

The urgency of my question was only exacerbated when I returned. That week news emerged that President Trump's administration had detained nearly 3,000 families who had arrived at the southern border of the United States. We learned that most were seeking asylum but when they arrived, border patrol agents separated children from their parents. We learned that children were held in fenced-in pens and forbidden from hugging their siblings. We learned that government authorities did not keep records of where the children had been sent and could not locate them. Even after the public outcry and court rulings forbidding this practice, the fate of hundreds of children separated from their parents is unknown.

American Jews are overwhelmingly appalled by these practices.

For some of us, it's personal. We grew up learning that members of our own families were denied entry to this country. We grew up learning that closed borders meant death for too many loved ones. Stories of deportations, detentions, and mass killings of Jews throughout Europe left their indelible mark in our consciousness.

For some of us, our religious tradition shaped our response. We might not have known that the Torah commands us 36 times to protect the stranger, more than any other commandment, but we did know that Judaism was not ambiguous on matters of protecting the vulnerable. Its sacred words shape our deepest beliefs:

“Do not oppress a stranger; you yourself know how it feels to be a stranger, because you were strangers in Egypt.”

“You shall have the same law for the stranger as for the native-born.”

In the Torah our Israelite ancestors were called *Ivrim*, which means those who cross borders. Our very name embodies our own people’s struggles to journey from one place to the next, to find safety, to actualize our ideals, and to create new communities.

In one of President Trump’s tweets he wrote that Democrats “...don’t care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country.” It was straight out of the first chapter of the Book of Exodus: “The children of Israel poured into and infested the land, multiplying and increasing...Pharaoh said: they are too numerous for us! Let us deal shrewdly with them, or else they will join with our enemies in fighting against us, and rise up from the ground.”

Our tradition teaches us that this is how widespread persecution begins, this is what happens when we dehumanize others. I still remember years ago when I studied this line from Exodus in a *parshanut* class in Israel. Our teacher brought in a Nazi propaganda film that showed images of ghetto Jews interspersed with images of rats. Just as rats were migrating through the sewers spreading filth and disease, so too were Jews migrating from Eastern Europe, bringing with them filth and disease to Germany.

We watch as our president aligns himself with people like Richard Spencer who call for a white ethnostate, who advocate white supremacy, who wish to privilege white people over others in our multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-faith country. (As if white people don’t already have enough privilege.) Underneath the immigration policies and refugee ban lies a firm belief that the country must be saved from all those black and brown people who have wrested power away from the country’s rightful white owners.

Just a month after news broke of the Trump administration’s family separation policy, American Jews had another opportunity to consider what it means to privilege one group over another within a multi-ethnic state. On July 19 the Israeli government passed the controversial nation-state bill stating that Israel is the “national home of the Jewish people.” This became Israel’s fourteenth basic law; in the absence of a constitution, a basic law carries similar weight as a constitutional amendment.

It’s a little strange. We know that Israel is a Jewish state. Any of us who have only one Jewish grandparent or who are married to a Jew can become a citizen of Israel. The Israeli flag has a Jewish star emblazoned on it. Its national anthem is Hatikvah, which speaks of a Jewish soul yearning for Zion.

Yet we’ve always been told that Israel is both a Jewish and a democratic state. It’s legally defined that way, and summed up by the Israeli author and journalist, Yossi Klein Halevi as

follows: “Israel is based on two non-negotiable identities. The homeland of all Jews, whether or not they are citizens of Israel, and it’s the state of all its citizens, whether or not they are Jews.”

Whether Israel is a democracy gets confusing, because Palestinians have complex legal statuses based on history, geography, and politics. The 2.5 million Palestinians who live in the West Bank, the 1.9 million Palestinians who live in Gaza, and 350,000 Palestinians who live in East Jerusalem have few rights – they cannot vote in Israeli elections or obtain Israeli passports, though most of their lives are regulated by the Israeli government either through direct military rule in the West Bank or East Jerusalem or through the land, air, and sea blockade of Gaza.

Palestinians who live within the actual State of Israel, though, are citizens. Comprising 22 percent of the population, they can vote, participate in the political process, and serve in the Knesset. Yet even before this new nationality law, dozens of laws privileged Jewish rights over the rights of Palestinian citizens – from immigration to family unification to land ownership to housing. Ahmad Tibi, a Palestinian member of the Israeli Knesset, once remarked, “This country is Jewish and democratic: Democratic toward Jews, and Jewish toward Arabs.” ([Ha’aretz, December 22, 2009](#))

Into this context the nation-state bill arrives. The bill is comprised of three basic principles.

First: “The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.”

Second: Arabic will no longer be an official language of Israel; it has now been demoted to a “special status.” (See Janan Bsoul’s “[Arabic was never an official language in Israel](#)”)

Third: “The state views Jewish settlement as a national value and will labor to encourage and promote its establishment and development.”

After Israel passed this nation-state bill, Israeli philosopher Omri Boehm wrote: “The effort to guarantee equal rights for non-Jews has at times seemed like trying to square a circle. Last week, Israel gave up on even trying” ([New York Times, July 26, 2018](#)).

This does not bode well for democracy for Palestinians or for Jewish Israelis.

When the nation-state bill was passed, Knesset member, Oren Hazan, took a selfie of himself with Prime Minister Netanyahu and others. The photograph was emblazoned on the front page of a leading Israeli newspaper with the caption, “The selfie of the nation.”

In response cartoonist, Avi Katz, who had worked at the *Jerusalem Post* for almost 30 years, depicted the selfie as a scene from George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, drawing Prime Minister Netanyahu and the other legislators as pigs, writing, “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.”

He was fired shortly afterwards for “editorial reasons.” ([Jewish Telegraphic Agency, July 25, 2018](#))

As an American Jew with a long and complicated relationship to Zionism, which in its current form is a political movement supporting the principle that Israel be a Jewish homeland which gives preference to Jews over others, I return to my question from El Salvador: What do we do with our overwhelming privilege?

A few weeks ago I took my ten year-old shoe shopping. We ran into a friend of mine, with whom I had travelled to El Salvador. Originally from Bolivia, she had made her home in the United States many years ago and married a Palestinian.

She was standing with her husband's mother and sister, who were visiting from Jordan. After exchanging hugs and greetings we parted ways. My daughter recognized my friend but wanted to know who the other women were. I explained that the parents of my friend's husband had fled Jerusalem during the 1948 war and became refugees in Jordan. Perhaps because her other mom works at a refugee resettlement agency, she had a lot of questions: What was it like in Jordan? Did they live in a refugee camp? Now that the war is over could they go back to their home in Jerusalem?

I told her that they could not, because now Israel is a Jewish state and mostly only Jews can move there and become citizens. Palestinian refugees cannot go home. My words hung uncomfortably in the air.

What do we do, I asked myself, with our overwhelming privilege?

What does it mean that I can become a citizen of Israel when Palestinians who have lived there for generations cannot?

What does it mean that even people on the liberal end of the Zionist spectrum support a Palestinian state – *not* because social justice demands it, but in order to ease the “demographic threat” that Palestinians pose with their higher birth rates?

What does it mean that my American Jewish community will pour millions of dollars into campaigns to delegitimize those Jews and Jewish organizations that do not uphold the values of Jewish nationalism?

On this Yom Kippur we ask ourselves: In what ways are we guilty of gawking? In what ways are we guilty of holding onto a simplistic perspective, unwilling to be changed?

In what ways do we give the larger American Jewish community or the State of Israel a pass, making ourselves complicit in the suffering of Palestinians?

In what ways might we instead bear witness – opening our eyes for the sake of others, engaging in challenging conversations about our own identities and histories, grappling with our own discomfort?

In what ways might we use that discomfort to help us part ways from problematic assumptions and behaviors so that we can create a different future?

In what ways might we use that discomfort so that we can act and work for a more just, more compassionate world?

On this Yom Kippur, let us embrace discomfort. Even as we take to heart our own historical experiences, let us listen just as carefully to the experiences of others and allow them to change us. Let us take responsibility for our actions, and for the actions of our community and our people.

Let us forge a new way forward. In the spirit of what is best in Jewish tradition, let us lift our voices in support of an America and an Israel that treat every person dwelling in their midst with dignity and respect. That treat every person equally before the law. That work to ensure that every person enjoys a sense of safety, belonging, and home.

Gmar chatimah tovah.