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Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
Yom Kippur Sermon
October 9, 2008

I was standing next to a long table full of neatly arranged trays of cookies when I felt a light tap on my shoulder. I turned around and saw a woman with white hair smiling kindly at me. Noticing my *kippah* she offered, "The kosher cookies are over here." She walked me over to another table, this one with cookies in wrapped packages labeled with a *hekhsher*, a kosher certification marking. After finishing our march through the tiny town of Postville, Iowa, the hospitality committee of St. Bridget's Catholic Church was waiting for us, eager to show their appreciation that we had come.

I had joined more than 1,000 people who had travelled to the town of Postville to call for comprehensive immigration reform and to support the workers of Agriprocessors, a kosher meat-packing plant that was raided by immigration authorities on May 12 of this year. This had been the largest workplace raid carried out by immigration authorities in American history. Over 390 people, mostly Guatemalans and Mexicans, were detained, and over 250 were arrested and charged with felonies and sentenced to five months in prison. This had been the first time in American history that undocumented people were criminally charged following a raid. They will subsequently be deported and their families will be torn apart. According to one report, two Guatemalan immigrants who have already been deported committed suicide. Traumatized and penniless, they did not have the money to pay back the smugglers who had brought them across the border.

Postville is a town of 2,200 people, a mere three hours from Madison. For much of its existence its residents were predominantly white; cultural diversity was foreign to this tiny Iowan town. In 1987, a group of Hasidic Jews of the Lubavitch movement purchased a meat-packing plant and settled there in order to produce kosher meat. It boosted the economy of the depressed Midwestern town, and many native Iowans were grateful that the Hasidic Jews had come. However, cultural tensions soon developed. Furthermore, accusations of unsafe working conditions, child labor, sexual harassment, failure to pay wages, active hiring of undocumented workers, and cruelty to animals surfaced.

Recently, several Guatemalan women living in Postville came to Madison to speak of their experiences. I listened intently as they told terrible stories of how they were often paid a lower hourly wage than they had been promised, were rarely paid for overtime work, and were fired and rehired so they did not earn raises or vacation time. They were refused permission to use the toilet while working, they were not given adequate training which resulted in serious accidents on the job, and when they did get injured they were forced to return to work with no time to heal. As undocumented workers they were helpless in a system that allows for and even perpetuates worker abuse.

Rabbi Amy Eilberg, a Conservative rabbi who went on a delegation to Postville, reports that there was a regular pattern of managers extorting money from the workers which created a system of indentured servitude. She writes that managers regularly humiliated the workers and occasionally hit them. There were charges of male supervisors demanding sexual favors from female employees and of teenagers as young as 14 working at the plant. Workers who dared to report abuses to the owners were fired. She writes, "An atmosphere of intense fear, harassment, and dehumanization prevailed."

When Rabbi Eilberg was leaving Postville, she asked her college-age children who had come with her what they were thinking and feeling. She writes, "They responded resoundingly: we cannot talk about it right now. I thought of the kind of shocked silence groups often fall into after visiting places where atrocities have been committed, as if the soul needs quiet time to absorb the horror it has seen." ("Stealing from God and from our Neighbors," blog: *Seek Peace and Pursue It*, June 13, 2008)

After the May 12 raid, the symbol of Postville and all that it represents became one of the most divisive issues in the Jewish community this year and a source of outrage for numerous American Jews. Many feel embarrassed that religious Jews would be so closely tied to worker rights abuses, nervous that this event could lead to renewed anti-Semitism, and deeply ashamed that Jews would do such things. Many have pointed to the hypocrisy of the situation, arguing that kosher meat should be more ethical, more rooted in Jewish values of treating workers with respect. Agriprocessors is the largest producer of kosher meat in this country. They ask, "Is this what Judaism is all about?"

Many in the Conservative movement have called for reforms in Agriprocessors. The Conservative movement itself has taken a proactive position on this issue, strongly encouraging kosher meat producers to observe Jewish law that requires workers to be paid fairly and in a timely manner. They are developing a new approach, called *hekhsher tzedek*, which would display a special seal on kosher meat that is produced according to the Torah's laws of justice towards workers and animals.

A large proportion of the Orthodox community has insisted that Agriprocessors is innocent. A delegation of 25 Orthodox rabbis visiting the plant on a trip paid for by Agriprocessors reported that no harm was done. Many in their communities have rallied around this message.

A few weeks ago, however, the Iowa attorney general charged Agriprocessors and its owners with more than 9,000 counts of child labor violations. Immediately afterwards, the Orthodox Union, the leading certifier of kosher food in the United States, announced that it would refuse to certify Agriprocessors unless new management took over, which has now happened, and the Rabbinical Council of America, an Orthodox organization of rabbis, announced that it would form a task force to study the issue.

Perhaps this will lead to changes in the kosher meat industry, but given the gravity of the issues, many have found this tepid response troubling.

One of the more chilling aspects of the raid is that the federal government has used it as a laboratory for a new approach to prosecute undocumented workers. Instead of treating them as civil violators of immigration laws and immediately deporting them, immigration officials detained them and charged them with felonies. As Gideon Aronoff, President of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society writes, “Criminal prosecution and months of jail time are not morally appropriate. There was no intent to harm anyone – they were simply playing by the rules of our defacto illegal immigration system. Now many of the workers sit in jail, families are separated and others live in fear that they may be next. And for the community of Postville – the schools, the businesses, the churches – the raid has meant massive dislocation and harm to a once thriving small town.” (Statement from rally in Postville, Iowa, July 27, 2008)

As this saga continues to unfold, Somali refugees have now been brought in to take the jobs of the Guatemalan and Mexican workers rounded up in the Postville raid. Agriprocessors is petitioning the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn a vote to unionize by undocumented workers at its Brooklyn warehouse. And this August immigration officials rounded up 600 workers at a plant in Mississippi, now making this the largest immigration raid in U.S. history.

Immigration is a touchy subject, especially in the Jewish community. It is not because Jewish tradition does not give us guidance on the issue. There are no less than 36 references in the Torah which mandate that we not only *welcome* the stranger but *love* the stranger. We read in Leviticus, “When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:33-34).

It is also not from lack of experience as immigrants ourselves. Our people have migrated from land to land since the time of the Torah. Our history is filled with rich stories of moving from one country to another, learning how to adapt to new environments, and developing unique Jewish cultures throughout the world.

Yet there is significant controversy in the Jewish community over immigration to the U.S. today. As Gideon Aronoff, again, President of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, points out, there are two narratives of Jewish immigration. One argues that Jewish refugees, fleeing persecution, pogroms, the Holocaust, and communism, entered our country legally, waited their turn, and followed every rule in doing so. Therefore, since Jews did not break the law, those who immigrate to America today should also not break the law. Moreover, the Jews immigrated for morally superior reasons – they were refugees, not the so-called “economic migrants.”

The counter-narrative, Aronoff argues, is that the 12 million undocumented migrants who live in the United States today are a contemporary reflection of our own history. Our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents did flee persecution but they also came in search of better economic opportunities and hope for a more prosperous future. In examining our own history we can see that extreme poverty and suffering led many of our families to risk everything. And when people are desperate, they break the law. As the Jewish Emigration Society, founded in Kiev in 1909, reported in 1913, “75% of the emigrants [from Russia] crossed the border illegally, assisted by clandestine emigration ‘agents.’” (“Understanding Immigrants’ Plights, Through the Prism of Our Past,” *The Jewish Daily Forward*, June 1, 2007)

In the 1920s the U.S. passed unprecedented immigration laws in order to slow Eastern and Southern European immigration and to eliminate Asian immigration. This legislation prevented many Eastern European Jews from immigrating to the U.S., but it did not stop them entirely. Estimates of tens of thousands of Jews used fake papers or other people’s papers to enter the country, crossed the Canadian and Mexican border by train, car, foot, or plane, or came from Cuba by boat to Florida or Louisiana – all illegally. The U.S. government investigated smuggling rings that involved American and foreign-born Jews and detained and deported undocumented immigrants.

What is remarkable is how varied our immigrant experience is. We know what it is like to decide to move to a strange new land in the midst of huge waves of immigration when our country’s doors are open. We know what it is like to sneak into this country out of sheer desperation when the doors are shut. And we know what it is like to urgently try to flee persecution only to be trapped in death camps.

We retell these stories on Passover. They are embedded in our tradition. As one Passover Haggadah states, “[A]s Jews, we all remember the bitterness of slavery and the joy of liberation. We know the power of telling an old story and the responsibility it gives to each generation; we must liberate each other, again and again.” (Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, *Immigrant Justice/Racial Justice Haggadah Seder Plate Insert*, April, 2003)

I felt that the Jewish community began to take part in that liberation when I marched in Postville. The diversity of more than 1,000 people, who came from neighboring states around the Midwest, was astounding. Young radicals marched alongside middle-aged residents of Postville. Latino families gathered next to union organizers. Teens from the Conservative movement’s Camp Ramah, Jewish twenty-somethings with matching blue t-shirts reading “Social Justice: If not now, when?”, gray-haired Jewish activists, middle-of-the-road synagogue-goers, and rabbis from all the liberal Jewish movements joined together with a common mission.

We began with an interfaith service – hundreds of people crammed into a tiny church. We read liturgy of courage, hope, and love together in English, Spanish and Hebrew, and

we sang a beautiful rendition of *Hinei mah tov* – indeed, how good it was that we were all sitting there, in our extraordinary diversity, together.

I walked for some time with an older couple who lived ten miles outside of Postville. They kept repeating the word disaster – the raid was a disaster, the working conditions at the plant were a disaster, the plight of the children separated from their parents was a disaster, the deportations were a disaster. They were members of St. Bridget’s, the Catholic church that has been a lifeline for so many of the workers and their families. I asked what people in the church thought of all of this. They answered, “The church just doesn’t like to see families separated. It’s just not right.”

I wondered what the woman at St. Bridget’s who served me kosher cookies thought about so many Jews protesting in Postville. I wondered what she thought about Jews wearing *kippot* marching with Latino immigrants. I thanked her for her generosity. She responded, “We are so happy to have you.”

While debates rage about kosher meat, labor violations, and immigration, something else is happening in this country. Ordinary people – the people who I met at St. Bridget’s Church – are doing something extraordinary. They are reaching out, reaching beyond what they might be comfortable doing, reaching out to hold the hand of the stranger who dwells with us in this land. It is time that we too extend our hands, engage in these issues, and stretch beyond what is comfortable for us.

As we read in Leviticus, “When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:33-34).

Gmar Chatimah Tovah – May you be sealed for good.