

What Is Hateful To You, Do Not Do To Another, Part 3: Who do we want to be?

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Before I even entered kindergarten I knew that while my father's family was from Iran, we were not only Mizrahi Jews, but also Sephardic Jews. You see Mizrahi Jews are Jews from the Middle East. But Sephardic Jews can trace their families back to Spain and Portugal. As a little girl, as young as preschool, I knew that hundreds of years ago there had been a horrible thing called the Inquisition that had forced my family to flee Spain.

In fact, I knew about the Inquisition years before I knew about the Holocaust. I knew that was why my Baghdadi born grandma had blue eyes, and why many of my cousins looked different than most Persian Jews, and I knew that our last name had actually been Yom Tov, and only recently been changed to Alfi when our family had to move, yet again, to Iraq.

Because of this, my entire life I have been obsessed with the idea of Jewish migration. How did each generation of my ancestors know when to leave before it was too late? How did they survive the heartbreak of leaving? How did they overcome the struggles of having to rebuild their lives somewhere new and unfamiliar? How did they live with always being outsiders?

Growing up as an American Jew, these questions fascinated me because I could not imagine ever wanting to, or needing to, flee from the land of my birth.

I knew that the history of exile had shaped the way my father's family has seen itself for the last 500 years, each generation passing on not only the story, but also the understanding, that we were really from someplace else. And I can not help but think that in different ways, the same is true for the Jewish people as a whole.

Most Jewish families in the United States are here because along the way, from the destruction of the 1st Temple and the Babylonian Exile in the year 587 BCE to today, there were either people who knew when to get out of town before it was too late or who were forced to leave their homes and settle in a new land.

Considering Jewish history, it is a miracle that any Jews exist at all.

Even if your family is not ethnically Jewish, simply because you live in America, the odds are good that your family came here because they were either running away from something horrible, or running towards someplace that would be better than where they were leaving. Or perhaps it wasn't their choice at all, but they were forced, against their will to leave their homes and settle here.

These are the things I think about when I stand on the bimah every year as the Kol Nidre is chanted by the Cantor, the Choir and the congregation. I think of these things during that prayer because our history of exile and persecution is part of the history of the Kol Nidre prayer itself.

During the Middle Ages the Kol Nidre prayer made it possible for Jews who were forced to convert to come back into the fold, if even just for a night. Because as they chanted this prayer, they were absolving themselves of whatever oaths or falsehoods they were forced to say just to survive.

I think not only of what these words must have meant to my ancestors, the Jews who suffered under the Inquisition, but also to the Jews of the Holocaust who hid in plain sight, posing as non-Jews, each day hiding who they were, just to try to live for another day. Or the ones, in the ghettos and in the Camps who said whatever needed to be said so that they could survive.

And I wonder what do these words mean to us, now, praying that God will forgive us for all of our promises, vows, statements of obligation we have made or broken, since last Yom Kippur.

As you all well know, on Yom Kippur we pray that God will forgive us for all the wrongs we have committed during the year.

But we too often forget that the Talmud also teaches that “Yom Kippur does not forgive transgressions between a person and their fellow — until (or unless) they seek forgiveness from the other person (directly).”¹

In other words, before God can forgive us, we need to seek forgiveness from those whom we have wronged. And to make it more complicated, on Yom Kippur we are to atone not only for the sins we have committed as individuals, but sins we have committed as a community as well.

This last summer as we began to hear stories on the news of families being separated at our southern border, children, even nursing babies, taken from their parents who were seeking refugee status in America. As I saw these horrific images, and read their stories, I could not help but think about my sister-in-law’s father, Peter.

In 1993 when I flew out from Washington, where I was living at the time, to attend my brother’s wedding in the Bay Area, I finally met my sister-in-laws family. I remember being particularly taken by her father, Peter, a sweet, gentle-natured man, tall and courtly. There was something about him that reminded me of my own father. A vague sense of “otherness” in the way he spoke English, as though he had been raised outside of the U.S.

Because I was raised in homes where most of the adults spoke English as a second language, or at least with a heavy New York accent, I’ve always been sensitive to how people speak. It was a sort of game for me to be able to identify the accents.

¹ Mishna Yoma 8:9

So I asked my sister-in-law, where her father was raised. She looked at me shocked and said “what do you mean?” And I said, “well his English, it has a slight accent, the music in his voice is different, like he’s speaks it as a second language, but I can’t place the accent.”

She was surprised that I could hear it. She said he came to the United States with his sister, when he was 14 years old. He had been part of a kinder transport, and that it wasn’t something he really liked to talk about.

Over the years as I came to know Peter, and his mother Edith, and learned more of their story, I understood why it was still so painful for them to talk about it.

Their family were German Jews, and as things grew worse under Hitler, Edith was desperate to protect her family. So in 1938, when Peter was just 4 years old, and his sister Steffi was 6, their mother sent them to Sweden, with each of them being sent to a different family, who they did not know, to live with. Edith had hoped that she would be able to join them in Sweden. But it didn’t happen. Eventually she was able to get out of Germany, but Shanghai was the only place open to her.

It wasn’t until 1948 that Edith was able to come to America as a refugee, and finally send for her children, now 14 and 16, to come and live with her in San Francisco.

Their reunion was a difficult one. Their years apart took a toll on their family. Edith had sent away babies and she was reunited with teenagers who didn’t know her.

For Peter and Steffi, just barely teens, it took years for them to fully comprehend and appreciate that they had been sent away from their mother because that was the only way that she could protect them.

Over the last quarter of a century I have had the pleasure of knowing their family, and as I have learned more about what they went through, I have always been struck by how much pain Edith carried with her to her dying day.

It hurts to think of how much pain they all continue to carry with them from their family having been torn apart so many decades ago. And even though the separation between Peter’s mother and her children is what ensured all of their survival, it was still traumatic, and that family trauma has been passed down to Peter’s children and his grandchildren as well.

This summer as I read the stories of the forced separations at our border, and I thought of how the identity of being refugees from Spain had been passed down *dor l’dor*, from generation to generation, for over 500 years to me, and the trauma of the separation of mother and children and forced emigration of Peter’s family has been passed down, from generation to generation, in my sister in law’s family, I could not help but wonder what is going to be the long term effects on these children and their parents, as well as on our society as a whole, because of what has been done, in our name, at our country’s border.

I've thought about my sister-in-law's family story often over the last few months as story after story has come out about the children who were separated from their parents, the many children who continue to be separated from their parents, not knowing if they will ever be reunited.

As I watch those images and learn their stories, I can not help but remember that this same hostile attitude towards immigrants and refugees is what kept the Jews who were seeking safety in the United States from Hitler's Germany, out of our country, and sent many of them to their deaths.

It's what compelled Jews to illegally immigrate to whatever country they could sneak into during the 1930's and 40's. It's why the Jewish community holds up as heroes, Raoul Wallenberg and Chiune Sugihara, two men who violated their nation's laws to assist the survival of Jews they did not know.

During WWII, Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat in Budapest, and Sugihara was a Japanese government official in Lithuania, and both of them created fake papers so Jews could illegally cross borders and seek refuge on the other side.

Because of Wallenberg's faked documents, as many as 10,000 Hungarian Jews were saved. Because of Sugihara it is believed that at least 6,000 Jews were able to get out of Lithuania.

More than 16,000 Jews saved from extermination because of illegal immigration.

16,000 Jewish lives that have been multiplied many times over because they were able to live and be blessed with children and grandchildren, many of whom live in the United States, the very country that had, for the most part, denied a safe haven to the Jews fleeing Hitler.

I asked my sister-in-law to ask Peter if it was o.k. for me to share his story today. He's a private man, and I wanted his permission. My sister-in-law was surprised by her father's response. She wasn't surprised that he said yes, but rather by what he said afterwards. Peter said that he felt that the children who have been separated from their parents at our border have it so much worse than he did.

Here he was, someone who had lost many of his relatives to the Holocaust, who spent his childhood separated from his parents, sent to two different countries, and who for 10 years did not know if he'd ever see any of his relatives again, and he looks at those children locked away in detention centers, and his heart breaks for them, and his response is to say that what is happening to them, is worse than what he went through.

And now we learn that things are continuing to get worse.

Just this month it was reported that the current Administration now wants the ability to hold detained children in ICE facilities, indefinitely.² As of last week we are being told that there are currently more than 12,800 children being held INDEFINITELY.

That is 12,800 children who are not being reunited with their parents, not being deported to their countries of origin so they can be reunited with their families, but 12,800 children, young children, who are imprisoned for the crime of being born to parents who wanted for them a better, safer life in the United States.

A better, safer life, just like our ancestors who crossed the Atlantic and sailed past the Statue of Liberty to Ellis Island, wanted for their children.

A better, safer life, just like what Edith wanted for her 4 and 6 old children.

On May 13, 1939, the MS St. Louis, a German ocean liner set sail for Cuba. On board were 937 passengers, most of whom were Jewish refugees seeking safety.

On May 27th the boat docked in Havana. And while the passengers on board had legal visas, just weeks before the ship arrived, Cuban laws had changed, now restricting entry of all non-US citizens, requiring them to have a bond of \$500 and authorization by the Cuban secretaries of state and labor. Any permit and visa that had been issued before May 5 was invalidated retroactively. None of the passengers were aware of what had happened until they tried to get off the ship.

The ship then changed course and tried to dock in the United States. Again, the refugees were refused entry. Canadian officials also refused entry to the ship, and it was forced to return to Europe.

Because of a cash guarantee provided by the American Jewish Joint Jewish Distribution Agency, Belgium, France, Holland and the United Kingdom were willing to take in the refugees. Of the 937 passengers, 254 ended up being murdered by the Nazis.³

Cuba, Canada and the United States all refused to accept the Jewish refugees seeking asylum. It was their legal right to do so.

However, history has shown that it was not the morally right choice.

By 1939, The Nuremberg laws had been passed. Kristallnacht had already happened. America was well aware of what the Jewish refugees were fleeing.

Our indifference, the world's indifference, helped embolden the German government.

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/trump-admin-plans-hold-migrant-kids-indefinitely-defying-decades-old-n907006>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27373131>

I cannot help but wonder, was there a point when the Holocaust could have been averted? The Nazi government stopped? What would have happened if Germans had risen up and said NO! No to the Nuremberg Laws. No to Kristallnacht. No to the dehumanization of Jews by their politicians. No to deportation. No to an immoral government that acted in their name.

Following WWII, the German pastor, Martin Niemöller travelled throughout Europe and preached about how he and other Germans had been complicit through their silence in the face of the Nazi regime, and he felt this was particularly true of the Protestant churches. In his sermons he would say:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out
—because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out
— because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out
—because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me
—and there was no one left to speak for me.

What is happening in our country has everything to do with us. ALL of us. It has to do with what type of country we want to live in. What type of people we want to be?

When the government acts, they do so in our name, and with our permission.

And what is happening with families at our border, is against all that is in our Torah, both its specific commands that we should treat the stranger with justice and with love, and the entire spirit of it as Hillel summed it up “what is hateful to you, do not do to another.”

My teacher, Rabbi Lee Bycel, was part of a delegation led by HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and the ADL (the Anti-Defamation League) on August 21st - 22nd that traveled to the San Diego border to observe the immigration trials held at the federal courthouse.

He described watching 19 people, 18 men and 1 woman, all who had pled guilty, as they were brought in to the courtroom, shackled, and having been held in maximum security conditions, with little to eat, and lights kept on in their cells all night long. They met with their court appointed attorneys for 15 minutes before the hearing.

Their attorneys had encouraged them to plead guilty because a not-guilty plea would lead to many months of detention, that would still likely end in deportation. After their trial, they were deported, now with a criminal misdemeanor on their records. Rabbi Bycel described the entire process as lasting 90 minutes.

As he said, what he saw was legal. But, he also points out, that just because something is legal, doesn't mean that it is ethical.

These 19 people had no opportunity to tell their story, to explain why they had risked their lives to make the dangerous journey to America. No real opportunity to make their case.

As Rabbi Bycel contends “We have criminalized human migration. We have dehumanized the human story. We have created an efficient and legal system, but it is not fair, it is not just, and it does not reflect Jewish values.”⁴

I have long wondered how the Nazis got away with what they did. How they turned Germany from a highly civilized, educated democracy into a brutal authoritarian dictatorship in just a few years.

How?!?

How did people let such things happen?

This is how.

The dismantling of morality happens step by step by step, while society just goes about its business without stopping vile acts such as what has happened at our borders, because their own personal lives are not affected by the horrendous acts their government does in their name.

We must never confuse legality with morality. And if we do, we should remember that when the Nazis forbid Jews to go to movie theaters, or to schools, and forced them to wear yellow stars on their clothing, they were just enforcing the law.

When Jews were sent to extermination camps, the Nazis were enforcing the law.

When the Nazis shot someone for hiding a Jew, they were enforcing the law.

When Southern slave owners whipped their slaves, pursued them across state lines when they tried to escape, sold their slave’s children or murdered them, it was legal.

And when Southern sheriffs attacked Civil Rights protesters with fire hoses and attack dogs, or beat them until they were bloody, they were enforcing the law.

On the other hand, when Jewish refugees who were smuggled into British Mandate Palestine in the middle of the night, they were breaking the law.

When Miep Gies hid Anne Frank and her family, she was breaking the law.

When black and white civil rights workers had the audacity to sit next to each other at a segregated Woolworth’s counter and order a cup of coffee, they were breaking the law.

⁴ “Bearing witness to injustice as we approach High Holidays,” by Rabbi Lee Bycel, August 31, 2018, J. The Jewish News of Northern California - <https://www.jweekly.com/2018/08/31/bearing-witness-to-injustice-as-we-approach-high-holidays/>

When Rosa Parks sat down in the front of the bus and refused to move, she was breaking the law.

When Rev. King wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, he was there, because he had broken the law.

Just because something is legal, or illegal, does not mean that it is moral, or immoral.

A government may define what is legal, but our faith must define for us what is moral.

In Judaism, we are taught that if we are confronted with a law that is in direct opposition to our religious laws then we are called upon to speak out against it, to resist it and if need be, to fight it.

In Leviticus, chapter 19, in what we call the Holiness Code, The Torah calls out to us that “the stranger that sojourns with you shall be to you as the home-born, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Eternal your God.”

Just so you know, whenever you come across the phrase “I am the Eternal your God” – this is the Divine equivalent of your parents saying “because I said so!” – what it means is that this law is not up for discussion or debate, a Divine ruling has been made.

Because while we are commanded 36 different times in the Torah that we must care for, and protect, and even love the stranger in our midst, we must also remember that we are commanded to do so not only because it is good for them, for the stranger, but it is also about who we are supposed to be as Jews. It is about living according to a moral code, our moral code, one that teaches us that it is not enough to be created in God’s image, but we must also act accordingly.

I remember sitting with Edith on many occasions, listening to her tell her story, sharing with me the 10 years that defined her for the rest of her life. And every time I spoke with her, it broke my heart.

In many ways she was a tortured soul. While she had been able to save her children, and her husband, and she herself survived the Holocaust to know her grandchildren and even her great-grandchildren, she took little joy in it. Because it was hard for her not to focus on her many loved ones who she was not able to save.

For the rest of her life she beat herself up for not being able to do more. When she looked around a holiday table, it was easier for her to see the people who were not there, than it was for her to see the people who were.

I am proud of our congregation for becoming a Sanctuary congregation and inspiring other houses of worship to do the same.

I am proud of our congregation for having a Refugee Assistance and Immigrant Justice Committee.

I am exceedingly proud of the youth in our congregation who had the vision and dedication to lead us in creating Camp Nefesh, a summer day camp for refugee children.

But when I read of the thousands of immigrant children who are still not reunited with their parents, about those who were seeking asylum here being treated like criminals, or the racism directed towards immigrants who are people of color, I remember Edith, and I hear a nagging voice inside of me ask, could we be doing more?

We, more than any other group knows what it feels like to flee for our lives, only to have the gates of entry slammed shut in our faces.

But this sermon is actually not about immigrants and it is not about our immigration policies. It is about who we are and who we want to be, as individuals, as Jews, as Americans, and as human beings.

Rabbi Hillel taught: “What is hateful to you do not do to others. This is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary, now go out and learn it.”⁵

But it is not enough to go and learn it, it has never been, and it will never be enough just to learn it. We must go out and live it.

And on this day of all days, on this Day of Judgement, we are reminded that ultimately we will not be judged by how we pray, or how we fast, but by how we act, every day, towards every person. Because Yom Kippur does not forgive transgressions between a person and our fellow.”⁶ God can not make that right, only we can.

I pray that our actions will always be guided by our highest ideals. And on this holiest of days, the day when we stand before our God in judgement, may we be judged with the same amount of compassion that we have shown the stranger who seeks to dwell with us.

Ken yehi ratzon – may this be God’s will.

⁵ Shabbat 31a

⁶ Mishna Yoma 8:9