

Rabbi Michael S. Beals

Rosh Hashana 5780 Day Two Draft

Shana Tovah.

The Washington Post reported that Valeria was a cheery child. Not even 2 years old, she loved to dance, play with her stuffed animals and brush her family members' hair. Her father, Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez, was a stalwart. Nearly always working, he sold his motorcycle and borrowed money to move his family from El Salvador to the United States. Martínez wanted to save up for a home there. He wanted safety, opportunity for his family.

They traveled more than 1,000 miles seeking it. Once in the United States, they planned to ask for asylum, for refuge from the violence that drives many Central American migrants from their home countries every day. But the farthest the family got was an international bridge in Matamoros, Mexico. On Sunday, June 23, they were told the bridge was closed and that they should return Monday. Aide workers told The Post the line to get across the bridge was hundreds of people long.

They were desperate. Standing on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, America looked within reach. Martínez and his daughter Valeria waded in. But before they made it to the other side, to Brownsville, Texas, the river waters pulled the 25-year-old and his daughter under and swept them away to their deaths.

The next day, a photo of their bodies among matted reeds, locked in a final embrace, was published by the Mexican newspaper La Jornada and later by the Associated Press, shocking the world with a viscerally clear moment of desperation reminiscent of a 2015 photograph showing a 3-year-old Syrian boy who lay drowned on a calm Mediterranean shore.

Martínez and Valeria were met by twin disasters: fast-moving waters and an asylum system unprepared for the crush of Central Americans fleeing crime and poverty.

Perhaps you have a political opinion. Perhaps you have a personal connection with organizations and families working to help these refugees. Perhaps your ancestors had similar experiences attempting to enter this country and establish themselves.

Perhaps you are like me with all of the above thoughts and an appreciation for the same occurrences in our age-old texts, particularly the Torah.

When I think back on everything broken at our country's Southern border, the story of vulnerable mothers and children facing death is nothing new. It's as old as the bible itself.

Just yesterday we read:

“Va-yashkem Avraham ba’boker .. Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the desert-wilderness of Beersheba. When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under the bushes, and went and sat down a distance, a bow shot away, for she thought, ‘Let me not look on as the child dies.’ And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.”

How can you hear these verses and NOT be moved by Hagar's plight? Of course in this story of a vulnerable mother and her child, God hears the cry of the child and responds with a well of water and a blessing. Mothers and children on our Southern border are not so lucky.

Later in the Torah, after we experience the brutal whip of Egyptian slavery under Pharaoh, *avadim hayinu*, and we become a free people, God reminds us no fewer than 36 times to remember the widow, the orphan, and particularly *ha-ger* -- the stranger – the undocumented asylum-seeking immigrant --- Why? Because, says God, “you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Our call this year to *tikkun olam* did not originate in the Board deliberations of Congregation Beth Shalom. No. Our call to *tikkun olam* originated 3,200 years ago, atop Mount Sinai, when the Torah was given to the Jewish people with the hope of creating a better world.

Yet we don't need to reach back 3,200 years ago to remember tough times as an alien people fleeing oppression with the hope of a better life somewhere else.

By a show of hands, how many of you are the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of immigrants who left a foreign land to make a new home here in America. [pause] I dare say almost every one of you in this room should have raised your hand.

New question: By a show of hands, how many of your ancestors fled Europe not solely because of economic opportunities in America, but because of the threat of violence back in the Old Country? [pause]

So, it is not just about earning a living, but actually living.

My family fleeing story, on the side of my beloved late father is the same on both branches of the Beals and Tammer family tree. By 1827, Czar Nicholas I had embarked on a policy of 25-year military drafts for young Jewish men in order to crush the Judaism out of them by ripping them from their families. Both my great-grandfathers went AWOL and escaped to London's East End to make new lives for themselves. I am sure many of you have preserved family stories similar or far more harrowing than mine.

The Torah anticipated, be it Egyptian slavery, or 19th century Russian oppressive policies against Jews, we would understand the plight of the stranger because we had been there ourselves – if not through direct experience, then through the experience of those who came before us so that we, sitting in this comfortable sanctuary this morning, could have a better life.

“Children in detention. Family separation. Denial of a fair and humane asylum process. The crisis at the U.S. –Mexico border is a moral one,” warns HIAS, which has been helping immigrants in need, since 1881, when it was our own people who were in peril.

HIAS reports that currently more than 13,000 asylum seekers in Ciudad Juarez, just south of El Paso, are either waiting for their opportunity to present themselves at the border so they can request asylum, or they have been sent back to Mexico to wait for their asylum claims to be adjudicated. This is part of the Administration’s “Remain in Mexico Policy” --- known as Migrant Protection Protocols or MPP. These asylum seekers are not aware of their legal rights and don’t understand the very complicated process of seeking asylum in the U.S.

At the recent AIPAC National Rabbinical Symposium held in Washington, my fellow Conservative rabbis sat down with Rabbi Debra Newman Kamin, the newly-elected and second woman to hold the post of President of the Rabbinical Assembly. Representing our Movement, she went down with a HIAS delegation to Juarez.

Debra told us that a generation or two ago, when kids asked their parents what they did to save Jews during the Holocaust, often the older generation just looked down at their shoes in shame, whispering that they didn't know what was going on at the time.

Debra said, thanks to the work of HIAS, we Jews need not look down at our shoes in shame when our children ask us what did WE do in the face of such inhumane treatment against asylum seekers at our Southern border? HIAS, representing the Jewish people, has launched an emergency response program to ensure that asylum seekers have access to legal representation. HIAS is organizing pro-bono attorney delegations.

Here are Tikkun Olam opportunities.

If you are a lawyer and want to help, go to the HIAS website and fill out the interest form.

If you are a fluent Spanish speaker and can give up a Sunday through Friday, to travel from El Paso to Ciudad Juarez, helping inform asylum speakers of their rights, go to the HIAS website and fill out their interest form. Your work will be so important.

Under the current Administration, any asylum seeker who illegally enters the United States and is caught, can NEVER again apply for legal asylum to this country in the future. It is vital that asylum seekers know this – but they don't.

In March 2019, HIAS along with another organization, T'ruah, brought more than 20 rabbis, cantors, and activists to the border as a human rights delegation. I joined more than 1,500 Jewish clergy from across the country in signing a HIAS letter to Congress which reads:

We - Jewish clergy from across the country - call on our elected officials to protect the fundamental right to seek asylum in the United States.

The right to flee one's country and seek safety in another is protected under both U.S. and international law. For those requesting asylum in the U.S., to be denied a fair process could mean a return to situations most of us cannot imagine in some of the most violent countries in the world...

Asylum seekers face an ever-lengthening list of injustices including family separation, long periods of detention in jail-like facilities, and denial of due process in their legal proceedings. Simply put, our country is treating these individuals as criminals, even though seeking asylum is a legal right. This must change.

We call on our elected officials to act immediately to provide a just and humane asylum process for those seeking safety in our country, wherever they come from and however they arrive.

I signed this months ago! However, you could ask other Jewish clergy you know to join me in signing this letter. The HIAS website has a clergy-seeker function, so you can quickly see which rabbis and cantors still need to sign it. And of course, in the spirit of *Tikkun Olam*, after you take care of Congregation Beth Shalom's financial needs, you could donate to HIAS. That way HIAS can afford to put more lawyers out in the field to help asylum seekers know their rights and advocate for a reversal of the Administration's zero-tolerance asylum policy. This aid would assist Central Americans fleeing narco-terrorism, rape, theft, extortion, and ineffective governments incapable of protecting their country's most vulnerable citizens: women and children.

Note that HIAS has teamed up with our local Jewish Family Services of Delaware to care for approved refugees who have made a new home in the First State of Delaware. The story of the Mohammadi refugee family from war-torn Afghanistan is truly inspiring.

With the help of our CBS Tikkun Olam Committee, the Mohammadi family has integrated into the fabric of Delaware, with a recent baby shower held right here in this synagogue for the newest arrival of their family. This level of care indicates how seriously we take the mitzvah of treating the refugee with kindness. Among the leaders of the Mohammadi's resettlement process is a long-time, beloved Congregation Beth Shalom family. They, themselves, were Jewish refugees who fled the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 with nothing but the clothes on their backs. This tells you that at least some of our congregants have learned the lesson of caring for the stranger because we, too, were strangers.

Let's return to the scene of Hagar crying as her son, Ishmael, languishes for lack of water in the desert lands surrounding Beersheva. Rabbis have argued that Sarah had to throw Ishmael out along with his mother. Why? Because Sarah had to ensure that Isaac, and not his first-born rival, Ishmael, would inherit and pass down the blessing of land and people God extended to Abraham. Even if we understand that this is the way things had to be, how can we not, as human beings, not be moved by Hagar's tears and fears – a cast-out refugee caring for her vulnerable son?

In the same vein, there are those who would hear my words and remind me that the asylum crisis is part of a larger, bi-partisan immigration problem, and it's not fair for asylum seekers to jump the line in front of others who have waited their turn for years to enter our country. And there are still others who would say that we should be focusing on and solving the root causes which drive women and children to flee their ancestral homes for an uncertain future in our country.

I raise up and honor of all these responses. And I STILL say, in the meantime, we must be moved by the plight of those Central American asylum seekers on both sides of our Southern border who need an immediate alleviation from suffering. *Tikkun olam* is about mending a broken world, and we must each do what we can to at least begin the process of repair, even if we cannot solve the problem ourselves.

As Pirket Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, teaches us:

מְמַנָּה לְהַבְטִיל חוֹרִין בֶּן אֶתָּה וְלֹא לְגַמֵּר הַמְּלָאכָה עֲלֶיךָ לֹא .

“You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it”

Shana tovah.