

**EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2018**  
**Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley**  
**Rabbi Niles Goldstein**

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is a time of reflection and renewal, a period during which we look back on the year that has just passed and consider a plan for the year to come.

For me, as most of you know, it has been quite an *eventful* year -- one that has involved changes in geography, career, and marital status. But it has gone by very quickly, and most of these changes have been positive and exciting.

I know that I speak for Carolyn when I say that Napa has become *home*; that despite some of the

challenges of living in a place like this, we've got it pretty good.

Since the last time we gathered on Rosh Hashanah, we've weathered wildfires and evacuations; some of us lost our homes, we've experienced the loss of loved ones, suffered personal and professional setbacks, health issues, and any number of other trials that are part and parcel of the human journey.

But here at CBS, here in our warm and inclusive congregation, we have also studied together, prayed together, marched together, and supported one another through another year of our lives. I am so grateful to all of you for welcoming us into this

community, and for embracing me as your teacher and counselor.

I do not take this responsibility lightly, and I will continue to do all that I can to be the best rabbi that I can possibly be. I am especially grateful to our board,

and to all of you who have given your time and talent to make CBS the incredible congregation that it is.

You are wonderful partners, and I look forward to our year ahead.

This past year has also been a time when so many of us have tried to adjust to -- or *resist* -- the “new

normal” that is represented by much of our country’s political leadership.

There are a number of critical issues right now that are roiling, and dividing, our nation -- the environment, race relations, foreign policy, health care, trade, tax policy, and so many more.

Some of us are happy that our current leadership is doing everything within its power, and then some, to *disrupt* what they see as a broken status quo. But the rest of us are *horrified* by what we see, outraged and disgusted by policies and behavior that, at best, seem self-serving and arbitrary, and, at worst, appear destructive, myopic, ignorant, dangerous, and unjust.

Tonight, I want to focus on one issue in particular, *immigration*. I do this because I think that immigration, based on our people's *own* history, is a vitally important subject for Jews. And Rosh Hashanah, this time for renewal, is an especially appropriate moment for us to renew our core Jewish values, to recommit ourselves to living lives *worthy* of our ancient and beautiful tradition.

Jews have been immigrants for millennia. We have been refugees, asylum seekers, captives, and nomads for as long as we have been a people. When the Babylonians and then the Romans conquered the land of Israel, Jews were brought to foreign lands by the

hundreds of thousands, while the rest migrated throughout the world in a great Diaspora. When Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal, they fled to North Africa, Turkey, Europe, and the Americas. When pogroms and poverty ravaged the Jews who were living in Eastern Europe, many of them sought refuge in North America. After the Holocaust, many thousands of Jews also made their way to Palestine, where, against all odds, they built a new, national Jewish homeland, the modern State of Israel.

So, the reality of mass migrations, along with the difficulties and sense of *desperation* that often go along with them, is nothing new to the Jewish people

-- which is all the more reason we need to be *sensitive* to the issue when it relates to others.

As all of us here know, *thousands* of men, women and children, fleeing poverty, crime, and war, are desperately trying to enter our country, while others are already here undocumented. Yet they are being met at the border, and even in our own state, by an American government that is *hostile* to their hopes and dreams.

As Jews, we have an obligation to respond. But in order to do that, we should understand what our tradition says about the subject.

The topic of immigration, and how we should *behave* toward immigrants, is a major focus of the Torah, the foundational text of the Jewish people.

One Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Eliezer, notes that the Torah brings up the issue of how we should treat the *ger* -- the stranger, or alien, who resides among us -- no fewer than 36 times.

One of those instances occurs in the book of Exodus, when, shortly after their *own* flight from the horrors of Egypt, Moses tells his fellow Israelites: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for *you* were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (22:20)

At a time when the Israelites themselves, as they wander through the Sinai desert, are still in a vulnerable state, Moses urges his people to focus on another, even *more* vulnerable population -- the *non-*Israelite peoples who have joined them, and will join them, on their journey. These *gerim* don't speak the Hebrew language; they don't follow Jewish customs; they probably didn't even *look* like the Israelites. Still, Moses gives his people a straightforward and succinct directive: do not ill-treat the stranger.

This command is grounded, not only in morality, but in a sense of *identification* -- the Israelites *know* what it is like to be strangers in a strange land, to be

unfamiliar with their surroundings and uneasy with their role in society.

The Israelites know all too well what it is like to be taken advantage of and oppressed by a majority culture. And so, through the voice of Moses, God tells the Jewish people *not* to act like the Egyptians, and to treat the strangers among them in a just and respectful way.

There are other powerful examples of the Torah's prohibition against abusing a stranger, or treating that person unjustly. In the very next chapter, Moses again says "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you

know the *feelings* of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” (23:9)

In this passage, God goes even further, adding an *emotional* dimension to this imperative: the Jewish people should not mistreat the stranger, not only because of shared experience and a sense of psychological identification with the other, but out of authentic and heartfelt *compassion*. The literal English translation of the Hebrew is: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the *nefesh*, the soul, of the stranger...”

What does it mean to know someone’s *soul*?

How can we get any closer than *that*?

God is telling our ancestors, and all of *us*, not just to refrain from wronging the stranger, but to act with *empathy* toward that person, to treat even the most vulnerable among us with the *dignity* they deserve, having been born in the image and likeness of God.

Believe it or not, the Torah gets even *more* radical on this subject. In the book of Leviticus, and after some time has passed since the Exodus, Moses again tells his people how to act toward the other, the *ger*:  
“The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (19:34)

While the first directive that Moses gives his people warns against *mistreatment* of the stranger, and the second urges compassion and *empathy*, this commandment approaches the issue on an entirely different level. Welcoming the stranger is not about only behaving justly, nor it is simply about acting with sensitivity -- it is about actually *loving* that person, loving the stranger as you would love your neighbor or even *yourself*.

Think about that for a second... the Torah, the foundational document of Judaism, tells us that we must *love* the stranger, a foreigner we have never met and likely have very little in common with, simply

because they are vulnerable. This is an audacious and *revolutionary* teaching, and it is as *countercultural* today as it must have been in biblical times.

I have a sense of what this experience can be like.

When I was still in Chicago, I worked as a volunteer with a family of Syrian refugees who had only recently escaped the war and entered the United States. They spoke virtually no English; the mother and father were too old and sick to work, and the young son, Hamid, had a traumatic brain injury that hindered his own attempts to find a job. As best I could tell, there were also two daughters, but no one

in the household knew where they were, and whether they were alive or dead.

Over the months I spent with Hamid and his parents, we shared stories of our respective lives, mostly via Google Translate and sign language. I brought them clothing, shoes, and toiletries, and they served me tea and Syrian flatbread. We had almost nothing in common except that we lived in Chicago, but I loved them like my own family. While it wasn't conscious on my part, I believe that I had tapped into my Jewish values; that by embracing these refugees, these *gerim*, I had become a better Jew, and a better human being.

Hatred of the other, fear and denigration of the stranger, are among the oldest and most universal of human passions.

The ancient Greeks called foreigners “barbarians” because their gibberish-like speech sounded to them like the bleating of sheep. The teachings of the Torah stand in stark *opposition* to these widespread expressions of nativism and xenophobia, impulses that are still with us today, both here and around the world.

It is no accident that Judaism was born as the result

of the journeys of immigrants -- *Abraham*, who ventured forth from Mesopotamia, and *Moses*, who fled from Egypt.

These founding fathers, these *refugees*, understood the experience of being powerless and vulnerable; they recognized the necessity of finding humanity and dignity in other peoples; they knew firsthand what it was like to be strangers in a strange land.

Here in the United States today, we know that immigration policy is complicated. For one thing, there are different categories of what constitutes

a “stranger” -- refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented immigrants are all treated differently by our legal system.

But separating children from their parents, under *any* of these scenarios, is *unconscionable*. Likewise, singling people out by their religion or country of origin in order to *ban* them from entering our land is *deplorable*. While our country’s security is very important, so is our *character* and *identity*, our image and role in the world as a nation based on moral principles and values, the same moral foundation that welcomed our *own* parents and grandparents and allowed many of us, in this room, to prosper.

This is not a political issue --it is a *moral* and a *spiritual* one. As our forbears did in the past, we Jews today need to tap into the *audacity* that is part of our DNA, *reclaim* our countercultural impulse and fight against the rising tide of bigotry and injustice that has surfaced in our country under this president. Jews should stand at the forefront of the call for a just and compassionate policy toward refugees and immigrants, toward the vulnerable and the powerless. Our historic memory and our collective consciousness demand it.

The United States is a nation of immigrants, and it always has been. As Jews, we should know better,

and we should *advocate* for better. Right here in Napa, there are a number of nonprofit organizations devoted to helping refugees and immigrants -- vulnerable groups throughout the valley -- and we should *all* get more involved with them.

We have been strangers in strange lands; *we* once stood where they stand now. The Torah commands us to *love* the stranger; it tells us to “circumcise our hearts,” to cut away those barriers within us that *prevent* us from feeling love and empathy toward those who seek opportunity, safety, and shelter on our shores.

Building a country that the rest of the world respects and admires is not about power or “greatness” -- it is about *justice*. And while we need leadership in this nation, it has to be leadership with *heart*, leadership with *principles*, leadership grounded in the values of Torah.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us reclaim and renew those values; let us teach them to others and let us strive for nothing less than the rehabilitation of the *American soul*.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May it be God’s will.