I invite you to join me in a journey to think of Judaism as a verb…

As the plane descended to the El Paso airport I looked out the window at the dusty landscape and thought about how I’d gotten there. El Paso was definitely not on my top ten places to go….But here I was, accompanied by a gigantic duffle bag crammed with stuffed animals and children’s books in Spanish. I was there to volunteer at a shelter on the border, giving the stuffed animals and books to the children who arrived, tired, sick, frightened, but remarkably resilient. I was there to do whatever I could, in spite of speaking no Spanish. I **am** proficient in Google translate though.

Before you start to squirm and think this is another immigration narrative, let me assure you that there is more to it than that. Yes, I spent several days as a witness to the plight of asylum seekers who had crossed the border legally. They arrived at the shelter, trudging off the government bus sent from the border, tired, hungry, shoelace less, without any personal belongings except the clothes on their backs, and a precious manila envelope. (the border agents take everything, including shoelaces, and usually give nothing back) Those envelopes contain paperwork saying they are legal… for now…and if they could have glued those envelope to their bodies they would have. That envelope never left their possession. Although statistically the majority of asylum seekers would ultimately be sent back, they risked life and limb, literally, in the hopes that they would be among that small number given asylum to live in a country they saw as the only alternative to what they left behind. Our job was to help give them back a bit of their humanity before we sent them off on the next leg in their attempt for a better life.

For four days I drove our guests to the bus and to the airport on their way to their sponsor-you can’t get across the border without a sponsor. In the bus station the new shoelaces told you who had recently crossed the border. Bright shoelaces are a staple at all the shelters on the border. Over the days I spent in El Paso I got more thank yous than I can count (including from people who I met at the bus, airport or in stores) and I am grateful that I got the chance to be part of a positive experience for each of those people.

So why isn’t this just another immigration story? Because it’s about more than what I was doing. It’s about why I was doing it. If you had told me two years ago, that I would have expanded my volunteer work from safe, albeit useful, work on various boards and committees, that I would be a frequent presence at vigils, protests and other actions, holding signs and marching, I would have told you that you had the wrong person-that’s what my daughter does, not me. But I would have been wrong. And how did I get, at my age, from observer to participant? I got there because of some critical lessons I’ve learned at CBE, about Jewish values and the importance of not just talking the talk but actually walking the walk. And I got there because of encouragement from my friends at CBE who stand beside me and behind me. This is a congregation that takes care of each other, but we also take care of others we might not know, whether it’s by serving dinner to someone in our community, or holding a sign at a demonstration, driving someone you don’t know to the bus or a doctor’s appointment or registering new voters at a naturalization ceremony. I invite you to join me in any of these efforts. It is what Tikun Olam looks like. I am grateful that my synagogue has encouraged (okay, maybe even pushed) me to be a better Jew by living those values. I have learned that Judaism isn’t only a noun…it’s also a verb.

As we go into a new year, I’d like to leave you with a quote from the suffragette, Carrie Chapman Catt:

To the wrongs that need resistance,

To the right that needs assistance

To the future in the distance,

Give yourselves.

L’Shanah Tova, may you have a happy and healthy new year, full of good deeds.