

Abraham's Tent/Sodom's Walls

Kol Nidre, 5779

Last week, on Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about my 5th great grandfathers. Tonight, I want to speak about my 6th great-grandfather, Israel Emanuel. In 1732, he sought to settle in Hardenberg, a small village in the Netherlands. He was not, however, permitted to enter. The mayor of the city stated that because Jews were obligated to provide lodging for their fellow Jews, that Jews who otherwise would just pass through Hardenberg would now have a place to spend the night which would thus increase the risk of burglaries.

What I find striking about this event from almost 300 years ago, is not just that my ancestor was denied entry, not just the false charge that immigrants were inherently criminals but the reputation that Jews had for extending hospitality to others. This tradition of providing hospitality goes all the way back to our Patriarch and Matriarch, Abraham and Sarah.

According to our rabbis, their tent had four doors – one on each side – so that no matter what direction a traveler was approaching there was an open doorway to greet him. In the rabbinic imagination, Abram and Sarah were, in essence, innkeepers, serving food and drink and providing shelter to those who passed their way.

Since they lived hundreds of years before the Torah and its commandments were given at Mt. Sinai, what Jewish activities were Abraham and Sarah doing? They didn't light Shabbat candles, they didn't fast on Yom Kippur, they didn't have a Seder... What they had, however, was one single core Jewish practice: welcoming the stranger. The Book of Genesis relates that when God sent angels to Abraham and Sarah to announce to them that, after years of infertility, Sarah would soon bear a son, the angels, disguised as human beings, were quickly welcomed by Abraham, who urged them to recline under the shade of a tree, bathe their feet, and enjoy a feast prepared by him and Sarah.

But in contradistinction to Abraham and Sarah were the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. In those days, their land was fantastically well watered. It was green, it was fruitful, and the inhabitants of those cities were well fed and well off. The wealth and magnificence of Sodom and Gomorrah were known to all. Yet, though these were two cities with enormous resources and wealth, our Rabbis taught that the rulers of Sodom passed decrees forbidding the entry of outsiders, for they feared that their vast resources would become depleted. Those who managed to make it into their cities were denied shelter and food, and those citizens who dared to share their resources with strangers were severely punished. Small wonder then, the Book of Genesis relates that the cry from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah rose up to the heavens. As a consequence, both Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. Where they once stood is now the lowest point on earth: the Dead Sea.

When it comes to choosing between Abraham's tent or Sodom's walls, our tradition is clear: Hospitality is to be a core Jewish value. The doorways to our homes are to be opened. The gates to our cities are to be opened to the strangers, to the hungry, to the desperate. However, over time, this commandment was modified because it was recognized that not everyone had that great generosity of heart. Not every stranger could be welcomed in to sleep. Not every gate could be left open. Sometimes, real life events demanded that there would be walls, and that, at times, there would need to be guarded borders. So, now, the Torah stated that at a minimum, "You shall not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." "You shall not oppress those who are in your midst who have no one to champion their rights." "You shall not oppress those who do not speak your language. The weak, the powerless, they are the ones you shall not wrong, for you were once in their place."

The history of immigration laws and citizenship requirements in the U.S. over the last 400 years has swung between these two paradigms of Abraham's tent and Sodom's walls. At first, when our country was founded, there was an enormous need for workers. Our borders were wide open. Yet, even then, not everyone was welcome. We closed the doors to those who had a criminal history or who lacked mental competency. We shut the gates, at times, based on one's religion, national origin, health, sexuality, poverty, and political ideology. And, most certainly, we have excluded by race. At times, as well, we have stripped individuals of their citizenship, and used deportation to "cleanse" the country of undesirable elements.

The very first European colony established in the U.S. was not by the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, it was in Jacksonville, Florida, settled in 1564 by Huguenots, who were French Protestants. The following year, however, they were promptly wiped out by Spanish Roman Catholics. When the first twenty-three Jews came to the U.S. in 1654, landing in New York (New Amsterdam at that time), the governor of the Dutch colony sought to expel them. In 1681, the Quakers were run out of Massachusetts by the Puritans. New York State in 1777 banned Catholics from holding public office, and in 1882, all Chinese were prohibited from entering America. As the U.S. prepared to enter World War I against Germany, German-Americans were lynched in major cities just as Mexicans had been lynched in previous years. The Japanese were banned from buying land in California in 1913, and then, as we know, put in detention camps during World War II.

And when, one hundred years ago, at the beginning of the 20th century, as millions of Jews and Italians entered the United States, there arose nativist reactions against them. At first, they simply called for assimilating these foreign hordes as quickly as possible. Theodore Roosevelt, for example, called for an end to the hyphenated American, that is, the Jewish-American, the Italian-American. We were all to be, simply, Americans. But with each

passing year, there was fear that assimilation would not work, and that these immigrants were incapable of becoming “true” Americans.

Decades before the Nazis came to power, prominent American social scientists proclaimed that the U.S. was now being drowned in a sea of racial inferiors. Articles appeared in the national papers, claiming that a high percentage of Jews made up the criminal underworld and that Jews were responsible for masterminding the white slavery trade across the world. Thus, in 1924, immigration quotas were set, which brought almost to an end, Jewish, Italian, Black, and Asian immigration.

My litany of anti-immigration policies and abuses towards immigrants over the course of our country’s history is to, first, put the current administration’s immigration policies in perspective. They are not the first, and they, unfortunately, will not be the last to whip up anti-immigrant fears supported by a pastiche of slanted statistics, bogus social science proclamations, and dire economic warnings. It will not be the first time that American nativism has reared its head nor that politicians have sought to pander to those fears. Portraying immigrants as criminals and rapists preying on “the good people” is nothing new. Nor, frankly, is separating children from parents. Slave traders ripped black children out of the arms of their parents in Africa and brought them here to America. And when they, in turn, grew up and had children, we sold their children off to masters many miles away. We Americans have done this before.

But just because we have done so before does not mean that the outrage that is before us, like the outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah, is to be accepted. We cannot be complicit when this administration falsely asserts that the majority of crimes in this country are by immigrants. We cannot be complicit when some, fleeing for their lives, are callously turned away at the border. We cannot be complicit when this administration claims that the majority of children who cross the border are being smuggled in by gang members. We cannot be quiet when there are still children under five – under five! – who have not yet been reunited with their parents, and thousands of children over the age of five who are languishing in detention camps. Many may never see their parents again.

A few of us who are here, this evening, are recent immigrants. Most of us here, tonight, are the sons or daughters, the grandchildren, or the great-grandchildren of immigrants. Thus, it is especially obscene when the Jewish officials and advisors of this administration are complicit in these actions, pretending to forget that their own family members came here to this country with no English, unskilled, and penniless. But we Jews cannot forget. We remember when the borders of the U.S. remained closed to most of the Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. We remember the St. Louis that sailed from Germany in 1939 with Jewish refugees but was refused permission from the U.S. to enter Florida waters and so had to

turn back to Europe. We remember how we were turned away from the shores of Israel by the British and were interned in detention camps on Cyprus.

We cannot be silent when this administration announces a policy of zero tolerance for those fleeing for their lives. We cannot be silent when, not content with the harm already done to immigrant families, it now seeks to penalize immigrants if they utilize the Children's Health Insurance program, food stamps and some forms of Medicaid. We cannot be silent, for we remember that we were strangers in the land of Egypt, and thus we are commanded not to wrong the stranger in our midst. We cannot be silent as we choose the open doors of Abraham's tent instead of the closed walls of Sodom. Yes, the issue of immigration is a complicated one. As global warming continues to heat up the planet, it will propel global immigration; wars and civil unrest will continue to create masses of refugees. We have not had open borders for almost one hundred years nor do I think we ever will again. So we will need thoughtful discussion and planning about this. How many refugees can the U.S. absorb? Should all citizens from countries with hostile governments be banned? Should there be a distinction between those fleeing political oppression and those fleeing domestic violence? Between those starving to death and those who seek a better life? There are hard, hard choices that will need to be made in the days ahead by people of good will.

But for now, right now, people of good will need to reject the current hateful immigration policy of this administration, which is akin to the deeds of Sodom and Gomorrah. All those who over the years have called for "Family Values," now need to step forward and be heard lest their slogan be seen as a cheap, hollow one and they need to disavow those who claim that the New Testament supports taking children from parents. The issue of dividing families, of denying safety to those who flee for their lives is far deeper than partisan politics. This is about behaving morally. This is about what kind of society we want to be and what kind of society that we reject. Whether your political preferences are blue or red or something else instead, all men and women who have a heart, need to step forward to speak out, to take a stand and to say, "This is not me! This is not how I want my community, my state, my country to operate."

Yom Kippur's second name is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. The question posed after the war to the Germans was: what were you doing when your Jewish neighbors' rights were diminished, when their stores were seized, when they were rounded up? The question posed to Californians after World War II was: what did you think when your Japanese neighbors were taken away? On this Yom Kippur, this Yom HaDin, Day of Judgment, the question is asked of us: What were we doing when children were taken from the arms of their parents and put into cages? What are we doing as those fleeing danger come to our borders?

So, yes, join the marches on the streets, if only to say: "No! This is not I. No, this is not us. No, I cannot be silent." Will 20,000 people gathered together in Los Angeles in front of City

Hall make a difference in the immigration policies of the nation? I don't think so. But will 200,000? Will a million? Sign petitions, write letters, donate, support those elected officials who are willing to raise their voice and vote out those who are not. We need to insist that the immigration policies of this nation are being carried out by thoughtful, elected officials, not the misanthropic individuals who have been its architect.

Just as the cries of the wronged went up from Sodom and Gomorrah to the ears of God, so, too, now, the cries of separated children and parents, go up to the very heavens. May we heed those cries, may we reject the closed walls of Sodom and Gomorrah, may we have no tolerance for zero tolerance. May we remember that we were strangers in the Land of Egypt, may we remember the safety that our families found on the shores of this country, may we do our part to help keep open the doors to Sarah and Abraham's tent, to help keep open our hearts.