

*Refugees Then and Now - Yom Kippur 2015*  
*September 23, 2015 – 10 Tishrei 5776*  
*Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester*  
*Rabbi Daniel Wolk*

Last week, on a beautiful Rosh Hashanah morning, I joined the congregation of Temple Beth Emeth in Albany, New York, where my father had been the rabbi. At the conclusion of the service, I pronounced the final benediction, "May God's presence shine upon you and grant you peace". For several hours I had been embraced by an aura of nostalgia. I was at peace.

Then, in the lobby of the temple, Burthold approached and my peace was broken. Burt, a refugee, came to this land many years ago.

"Shana Tovah, Danny. Shana Tovah. This week was an important week for me", Burt exclaimed. "This week I gave away my families' painting by the artist Maurice Utrillo," and the elderly man, leaning on his walker sighed. "I gave the picture to the Albany art museum. I have closed a chapter."

I was silent." You have not heard the story of my Utrillo, have you Danny? I will tell you:

"I was 12 years old in 1938 and lived in Hanover, Germany. On the night of November 9, Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass devastation reigned in Jewish establishments in Hanover. And later in the night the Nazis imprisoned my father..

My mother thought she would never see him again. But the next morning she went to his employer, a government official, and implored him to speak on my fathers behalf. In those days who would stand up to the Nazis? To her amazement that man, a Christian, agreed although he knew his own life was in danger. But he would not abandon a man whose sole crime was that he was a Jew. He spoke with the Nazi lieutenant and, amazingly, secured my father's release. A miracle.

Burt gazed out the window where the branches of maple trees, not yet bearing there autumn colors, blew gently in the breeze. Then he spoke softly: "One courageous man had made a difference"

Berthold paused." Within days I fled from Germany. I went first. Then my parents. To England, to America. We sailed on the last boat. The very last. My father was prohibited from taking anything with him except a Utrillo painting which was considered degenerate art by the Nazis, art despised by Hitler."

" So now my Utrillo is in a museum." Burt continued."

Utrillo was known for Paris scenes. Monmarte, Chartre, soft urban landscapes. He was also known as the artist of those who were lost in life--how appropriate in the aftermath of Kristalnacht. In the Utrillos, mellow colors evoke a melancholy contrast to the violent, cruel urban landscape of Germany at that time.

“And the rest of your family, your friends?” I asked. “What happened to them?”

Burt hesitated. A pained expression on his face. “My family? My Friends? They were no more. They wandered thru Europe searching for an exit but there was no exit. Gone. Vanished. But I think of them every day. “

As Burt spoke, the members of Beth Emeth passed before me leaving the temple. Well groomed, secure, enjoying the beginning of a new year.

Then, in my imagination, I went back in time. It was no longer the year 2015. It was the 1940's and I pictured a line of Jews in World War II wandering thru Europe, wandering thru Jewish history. They were searching for an open door, but the world had looked away.

I saw the face of our people, carrying rucksacks. Saul and Moshe, Sarah and Ruth. Some were walking and some were only ashes floating in the air.

The last of the Jews passed in procession but my imaginary nightmare continued, except now I envisioned haggard men in T-shirts and jeans, women, faces covered in shawls, faded skirts dragging in the dust. Ahmed and Adibah, Omar and Fatima. The newest wanderers; from Syria, Africa, elsewhere. Some seeking opportunity but most leaving for survival. Like Burt's family these refugees also board ships but they are wooden ships or a raft where the journey often ends many fathoms deep. Aylon Kurdi, a three year old boy, drowned, deposited on a deserted beach, not on American shores.

So there they were, Saul and Sarah, Omar and Fatima, seeking refuge. Different times, similar journeys—The faces of humanity. Yesterdays tragedy. Today's tragedy.

This summer Ann and I joined a culinary tour in Istanbul,. For you who fast please do not listen to the following list of food we enjoyed on that walking tour. Sesame rolls, honey and cream, Turkish coffee, sharma, baklava. It was not a fast day! And then in the midst of a delicious morning as we left the bazaar, the mood changed. We were entering an area of Istanbul overcrowded with Syrian refugees. We were entering the environment that has engulfed all of Europe. The newest Exodus.

In the early days of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, a stark black-and-white picture of Anne Frank framed the entranceway. Beneath the picture were the words: “a world that was and is no more.” That was then. This is now, But once again there are homes destroyed, peoples set adrift, a world that was and is no more. The procession never ends. On and on. An invisible mass accompanying me as I left Temple Beth Emeth, the sanctuary of my youth.

Driving home I wondered: What can be done?

It is late October, 1958. Three young Italian men enjoyed a coffee in St. Peter's Square outside the Vatican. They waited for white puffs of smoke that would signal the election of the new pope. One of the men, a Jew, spoke up :” I know the next Pope will be Cardinal Roncali.”

”And how do you know?” His friends asked.

The narrator continued: “I will tell you a story .When I was a child in World War II ,I was on one of those boats that left the shores of Europe bearing Jews, hoping to find refuge. No one would take us in. Other boats filled with Jews sank or were sent back to Europe and the death camps.

”Eventually the boat I was on was becalmed in Turkish waters but the Turkish authorities would not grant us permission to land. We despaired. Would we also be sent back to die in Europe? Out of the mist a boat approached with a man dressed in a white cassock and skullcap. He introduced himself as Cardinal Roncali, Cardinal of Turkey and offered to baptize all of us. That would permit us to enter Turkey as Catholics. At first we refused but the Cardinal assured us that once we were safe we could return to our Judaism. Cardinal Roncali defied the authorities. He saved my life in spite of his own risk. That is why I believe he will be elected Pope”

Hours later puffs of white smoke rose over St. Peters announcing the election of Cardinal Roncali as the next Pope. He would be called Pope John XXIII.

“My father was in prison” Burt had said” but one man pleaded for his release.” And I thought , one person. Whether a Christian in Hanover, or a Pope off the shores of Turkey.

The Talmud says if you save one person it is as if you saved the world. To save one person.

This is today's challenge. Communities can take in one displaced family. Or we can offer sustenance. It is estimated that there are 1 million refugees 0.2 % of the total EU population. Add the population of our country and the rest of the developed nations and it is but a miniscule number of people to absorb---to assist.

We see some response but countries have a myriad of excuses for closing the gates. Politics, terrorists among the refugees, an overriding fear of Muslims that pervades our times or simply a dislike of those who are different from us. In Hungary, refugees come only to be turned away unless they are Christians. The words of the prophet Malachi: “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?”

Apparently not.

There have always been rationales for why we permit people to perish. How many Jews might have been saved in World War II if the leadership in this country had opened the doors— instead 6 million died.

There are questions. How many refugees should we take ? Here. Abroad. Are there some refugees who are so fundamentally opposed to the values of the Western World that they would undermine our culture? The answers are complex but hardly sufficient to close the gates on humanity.

The refugee problem is a world problem but it is also a uniquely Jewish problem. For we have a history. We know too well what it means to be set adrift , without a home. If we cannot be sensitive to today's tragedy who will be?

3000 years ago the prophet Isaiah enjoined upon us a special mission ---to be a light unto the nations. This remains our mission, as Jews, but also as Americans.

Yes, As Americans

I am certain that each one of us realizes how fortunate we are to live in America. Our destiny may have been very different. We may have been one of those with rucksacks slung over our backs, , wandering aimlessly. Instead we became embraced by that lady in New York Harbor --- the Statue of Liberty, her face looking towards the sea, greeting the tired, the poor the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of those teeming shores.

“How blessed we are to live in a land where people long to be, not to flee.” [Bob Greene in the WSJ]

Samuel Wolk, my father, was the son of immigrants who came to these shores from Lithuania. My grandmother, a widow, left to care for five children, was indigent and my father's childhood was spent in an orphanage. The Baltimore Hebrew Home .

Dad loved his Judaism. He loved America, his promised land. 75 years ago, shortly after his ordination as a rabbi, he wrote a poem entitled simply:

America

In earliest days the Indian roamed the fields and forest of this wondrous land.  
Came white man to the shores  
Iberians, English, Dutch  
Each with its own heritage and soul;  
Each with its own, but all expanding to the unity toward which this country strives.  
Germans, Irish, Scandinavians;  
Italians, Poles, Hungarians;  
Welshmen, Swiss, and Balkans;  
The white man, brown and black all came within its confines.

These religions, races, nations, people, souls have brought their offerings all  
And laid them down upon the cherished hearthstone of this land,  
Their tribute and Their pledge!  
No other land upon the earth at any time of past or present, has entertained a hope so high, a dream so noble--  
This land we call America!

May we continue to be that land of hope and liberty , A nation that celebrates diversity , that welcomes the stranger in our midst. Then will our dreams, so noble, become a reality.