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Woodlands Community Temple

## Loving The Stranger

Sometimes, you're looking at something and you just can't believe what your eyes are telling you.

This summer, I officiated at the wedding ceremony of two lovely young people. During the reception, I was mingling with guests, saying hello and chit-chatting about the couple, how blissfully in love they looked, etcetera, etcetera, when a woman comes over and says, "Hi, I'm Janice Crystal. I loved the ceremony." We were talking for a few minutes when her husband joined us and the following half-thought came into my head, "He looks a lot like Billy ..." Which is when I remember the woman saying, "Hi, I'm Janice Crystal."

[whispered excitedly] I just met Billy Crystal!

Now Ellen, who attended the wedding with me, had sauntered over sometime after Janice Crystal had introduced herself but before Billy Crystal had entered stage-left. So when I looked over at Ellen, I tried to convey to her in nothing more than the glance of an eye, "Oh my God, can you believe it? We're standing here talking to Billy Crystal and his wife! The world will never be the same again!" But of course, I didn't actually say any of that and apparently Ellen didn't *hear* any of that because I could see on her face that she was thinking, "Doesn't this guy look a lot like Billy Crystal?" But she hadn't put it all together yet.

So the four of us are chatting, me knowing it's really him, Ellen thinking it's someone who *looks* like him. And fifteen or twenty minutes go by ... when someone comes over and says, "Billy, I just want to tell you that I love your work." At which point, the cat's out of the bag and Ellen has realized it's really Billy Crystal.

Sometimes, you're looking at something and you just can't believe what your eyes are telling you.

On Tuesday, September 5, United States Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that, quote, "the program known as DACA that was effectuated under the Obama Administration is being rescinded." Unquote. DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program was an American immigration policy that allowed immigrants who had illegally entered, or remained in, the United States as minors to receive a renewable deferment from deportation, and eligibility to work. Approximately 800,000 of these "Dreamers" were enrolled in the program which had been established by the Obama administration in 2012. Today, not only are they candidates for deportation but because they applied and were accepted into DACA, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) knows exactly who they are and where to find them. These young people, who didn't ask to come here, but who only really know America as their home, are now subject to being returned to a country they don't even remember.

While one may reasonably argue against the constitutionality of DACA, President Trump's call for Congress to replace it with a legally-acceptable alternative sounds disingenuous coming from a man who is well-known for his antipathy toward immigrants. Just this week, the White House released version 3.0 of the travel ban it's been trying to implement since January, ostensibly to shore up our nation's defenses against terrorism. But that's a pill that's difficult to swallow after months and months of Donald Trump's campaigning on a platform to ban all Muslims from entering the United States. Federal judges, noting candidate Trump's condemnation of an entire religious population, have deemed his bans to violate U.S. law prohibiting the government from acting on religious preference and have declared the two previous versions unconstitutional.

I simply cannot believe my eyes. I'm stunned to find myself suddenly living in a country where good people crouch in fearful worry that they, their children, or their parents will be taken away in the night, never to be seen again. Does this sound like America to you?

Carlos Ramírez, who's a native of Mexico currently residing here in New York, told a reporter that "there is fear to come out on the street. They are doing raids in Queens. I go straight home from work, and send money to my country whenever I can."

Unauthorized immigrants worry that they will be seized while at work, or seized on their way to work, or seized in the grocery store, or seized at the hospital, or seized right at home. They no longer know who to trust and are reluctant even to enter buildings such as Cabrini Immigrant Services in Dobbs Ferry that house the very offices set up specifically to help them. They simply don't know if or when or where ICE will appear.

One year ago, I shared with you the incredible story of the Yanov Torah, a scroll that had been smuggled, piece by piece, *into* a Nazi labor camp by the Jewish residents of Lvov, Poland, and then smuggled back out again and to America where, ultimately, you and I had the chance to see it right here on this bimah. Incredible as that story was, our hope then was to create another incredible story as I asked you to volunteer to help us rescue refugees from war-torn Syria and help them resettle here in the United States. More than two hundred of you signed up to help. We readied ourselves to receive a family. And then nothing. As the war continued there, millions fled their homes, but the Trump administration slammed the door and locked it tight.

The claim, of course, is that these are dangerous people and, despite two years of extreme vetting before allowing them into our country, represent the next generation of terrorists.

I brought you the Yanov Torah because I wanted you to remember, in as dramatic terms as possible, that once upon a time Jews had been caught behind enemy lines that had once been their home in a genocidal campaign that murdered six million of them, six million of us. Hitler offered Germany's Jews to any country that would take them, an offer that was met with complete silence. Thirty-two countries convened in 1938 at the Evian Conference in France and could come to no agreement on what to do with the German refugees, demonstrating to Hitler

that he could do anything he wanted with his Jews and no one would act to stop him.

With this as our shared history, is there really any possibility that you or I would ignore the call of a refugee? A year ago, you responded magnificently when we asked that you help Syrian families trying to escape the hell that had once been their home. Thanks to this White House, they never got here. But now, there are refugees who are already here, unauthorized immigrants whose stories are not dissimilar to our own. All they wanted was to be able to leave behind a country that held no future for them, to live in safety here in America, find a decent job, and take care of the people they love. But the Trump administration has decided that to “Make America Great Again,” we have to empty our country of its undesirables and these men and women, and children, have to go.

Tomorrow afternoon, we will read from the book of Leviticus, chapter 19, verses 33-34, that “If a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. He shall be like a citizen among you. You shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

The message is plain enough. When a person is vulnerable, no matter how you found him or how he found you, you offer protection. Whether disabled, impoverished, or seeking asylum, we must look after him, see that he’s provided for, protect him from harm, and ensure that he’s able to care for those he loves.

We have cherished this message for so long and so deeply that, each year at our seder tables, we recount the story of our enslavement to Pharaoh so that we never forget why it is we help others with or without being asked. Because our ancestors were brutalized by the country that had been their home, were dismissed as being sub-servient or, in the mid-20th century, as sub-human, you and I do not merely work to protect our own freedom and our own loved ones, we work to protect others.

Later on, in Deuteronomy, chapter 23, verses 16-17, we are commanded, “You shall not return to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you. He shall live with you in any place he chooses. Do not oppress him.”

There are eleven million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States. It is unrealistic and inhumane to deport them. There ought to be a path to citizenship for them to follow. As President Obama once said, “a background check, paying taxes, paying a penalty, learning English, and then going to the back of the line, behind all the folks who are trying to come here legally.” Most of these men and women are guilty of only one crime: living here without permission. They live peaceably, are law-abiding, they do pay taxes, they frequently take jobs that nobody else wants, and their labor is important to our national economy.

Nevertheless, disregarding all of that, we need only take note that they are here. They have come to our country seeking refuge, hoping to build a better life. We ought to be better hosts.

Once upon a time, there lived a mother and a father whose three children were grown and had relocated to make their way in the world. When one child announced her upcoming marriage, the parents sent word to the other two that they should return home for the celebration. The parents requested that their older child, who had prospered while the younger had not, bring him with them, offering to pay all the expenses they would incur in fulfilling the commandment to honor your father and mother. The older child purchased new clothing for her family and made first-class travel arrangements for them. A day before the wedding, she remembered her brother and sent a servant to fetch him. When they arrived at their parents' home, a great celebration was already under way. The wealthy sister and her family had a wonderful time, but the poor brother was greatly embarrassed by his ragged clothing. When the festivities concluded, the older sister handed her parents receipts for clothing, travel, hotels and other expenses. Her father responded, "How nice! I'm pleased to see that you can afford such fine expensive clothes! May you and your family wear them in good health."

The daughter said, "Let me remind you of your promise to pay our expenses." Both parents regarded their child in astonishment. "We never made any such promise!" Their daughter handed her parents the letter of invitation, saying, "There it is, in your own handwriting!" Her mother read the letter aloud, "I promise to pay all the traveling expenses that you may incur in fulfilling the commandment to honor your father and mother."

"There! You see?" said the daughter. Her father smiled sadly and said, "Had you really wished to honor us, you would have taken pity upon your brother, and not brought him here dressed in tatters. You would have known that the way to honor your parents would have been to care for him."

In Jewish tradition, we often speak of God as a Heavenly Parent. In Hebrew, that's *Avinu Malkeinu*. There are 613 paths on which to honor God, to honor *Avinu Malkeinu*. During these High Holy Days, we try to recalibrate our sense, particularly as Reform Jews, of which paths we need to follow: not just what feels good, but what we understand to be a religious imperative. While we may quibble over which rituals to practice, Judaism's ethical mitzvot, the moral precepts of our faith, may not be easily cast aside. We may argue, and we *should* argue, over what those precepts mean and how we might best fulfill them, but our tradition is pretty clear on this point: God is best honored by how we treat one another, especially how we treat those who are in greatest need.

Unauthorized immigrants are terrified right now. They fear for their well-being and feel they have little place to turn for help. They're afraid even to enter the building of an organization that directly serves the immigrant community because they're scared that ICE will be there waiting for them.

You may be thinking, "What can I do?" The answer is, "Plenty." Our temple, through our new task force, Immigrant Friends @ Woodlands, has begun responding to this crisis by getting involved in what's called The Immigrant Accompaniment Program. Organized by the New Sanctuary Coalition of New York City, an interfaith network of congregations, organizations and

individuals, all standing in solidarity with families and communities that are resisting detention and deportation. Until a more compassionate response is found to the challenge of unauthorized immigrants in the United States, the Immigrant Accompaniment Program helps support families who are facing the detention and deportation process in the following three ways.

First, the program provides a support structure to strengthen those caught in the net of deportation proceedings. Frequently, those detained by ICE are subject to alienation, isolation and intimidation. The Immigrant Accompaniment Program offers companionship, friendship and an organized strategy as these individuals navigate the net in which they've been trapped.

Second, the program keeps family members informed at every step of the process as their loved ones move forward. The program offers comfort in the knowledge that their loved ones are okay, and in the hope that they might just get to come back home.

And third, it holds legal officials accountable for providing accurate information and serving due process. This is achieved by legal citizens – you and me – accompanying detained immigrants at each step of the process. When ICE takes them into custody, we appear as soon as possible so that the immigrant sees they have support on the outside, and ICE sees that citizens are watching them and are expecting them to be professional and respectful at every step in the detention process. Later, when the immigrant appears before a judge to determine whether or not they will be deported, we stand with them, a simple but powerful gesture that, again, not only supports the individual in custody but signals to the judge that due process must be observed. This can often slow down the deportation process and sometimes curtail it altogether.

The Immigrant Accompaniment Program pairs unauthorized immigrants with citizen volunteers who accompany them to their required, periodic check-ins with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Intensive Supervision Appearance Program (ISAP). The New Sanctuary Coalition of New York City is asking us to accompany individuals not through processing in Manhattan but up here in White Plains, close to home for the detained immigrants and close to home for you and me.

Here is a very concrete way that we can offer our assistance to the most vulnerable among us. By doing so, we will fulfill the Torah's demand that we love the stranger and that we honor our Heavenly Parent.

If you understand the imperative – both in Jewish tradition and as caring human beings – I hope that you will visit [wct.org/immigrantfriends](http://wct.org/immigrantfriends) and let us know that you're ready to help. Anyone can join us. We are especially looking for lawyers and people who are fluent in Spanish. But don't let that stop you from signing up.

On Monday, August 21, the day of the total eclipse, Ellen and I were boarding an airplane and I brought with me several pairs of approved viewing glasses. I had figured we'd try to watch from the plane, because wouldn't that be cool? But Ellen had a different idea. After checking our bags, she dragged me back outside to the curb where cars and taxis were unloading

passengers and luggage. It was there that we donned our special glasses and viewed the eclipse. Sure, it was only partial, but it was still cool as all get out. After a few minutes, we began offering our glasses to others as they got out of their cars and were able to spend a few minutes gawking at the sun before heading into the airport. One family, of perhaps Indian or Pakistani descent, accepted our offer and had a wonderful time gazing skyward. Soon after, the father came over to me and very quietly said, “Thank you. So many people ignore us.”

And that was it. That was the essence of Judaism’s imperative, that we welcome the stranger. And of America’s imperative, that we join together, “one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Sometimes, you’re looking at something and you just can’t believe what your eyes are telling you. You and I are living in an America that we never thought we’d see. And it can be mighty difficult to accept. But there it is, my friends. And we are not permitted to stand idly by, either covering our eyes as we would during an eclipse, or watching passively as our neighbors bleed.

Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov was known for his love of humanity. One dark night, with a heavy snow falling outside, he heard someone tap at his window. Moshe Leib looked up and saw a strange man, dressed in tatters, lacerations on his hands and face, and a gleam of madness in his eyes. The rabbi hesitated only for a moment, and then thought to himself, “If there is room for a man like that in God’s universe, surely there is room for him in my home.” He opened the door wide and invited him in.<sup>1</sup>

Avinu Malkeinu, Heavenly Parent, such a beautiful world You created. Placing us in Your garden, You not only wanted us to enjoy it but You hoped we would take care of it. And while some of us do not have it within ourselves to care, most of us do. On this Yom Kippur, as we seek forgiveness for things we have done that You have seen and might not believe Your eyes, may we do better, always do better, in the year ahead, determined finally to understand just what You meant when You asked that we love the stranger and not do him wrong.

*Ken y’hee ratzon ... may these words be worthy of coming true.*

### Closing words

President Abraham Lincoln was once consoled by a friend who said, “I hope that God is on your side.” To the friend’s amazement, Lincoln replied that this was not his hope. “My wish,” he said, “is that I am on God’s side.”

Avinu Malkeinu, Heavenly Parent, while we can’t even know for certain that You exist,

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<sup>1</sup> *Touching Heaven, Touching Earth* (Rabbi Shmuel Avidor Hacohen, 1976).

let alone what You want from us, nevertheless Your Torah has been a source of pretty good wisdom and guidance for the past three thousand years. As a New Year begins, if we get nothing else right, may we understand that You really do want us to just take care of each other.

*Tzom kal ...* may your hunger on this Day of Atonement be for justice and peace. Shabbat shalom.