

Rosh Hashanah 2018 5779
Rabbi Jennifer Feldman
Kehillah Synagogue
Compassion without Borders

L'shanah tovah

This summer, a beloved friend who had come to be as family to us, Professor Peter Bauland, died after a long, well-lived life.

Peter and his family fled Germany when he was 6 years old. Before leaving, his parents took a refresher class in English, dragging Peter along, afraid to leave him at home alone, as he wrote, “in the land of unpredictable and unimaginable horrors.” He and his family arrived in Philadelphia on November 9th, 1938 – Kristallnacht.

Peter picked up English faster than his parents re-learned it. His primary resource (along with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck) was a guide in English to historic sites of Philadelphia. He learned the material so well that in his first week in America, he was able to serve as a tour guide for his family in this same city. His distant relative who helped them that first week was so impressed that he declared – and Peter agreed – that Peter was already an American. But, as Peter wrote:

We were both wrong. Exactly how wrong we were became clear a scant few days later when I went off to school for the first time. My classmates...saw only a funny-talking foreigner. When the teacher told them of my origins, they made the normal inductive leap that....German equaled Nazi; Nazi equaled me.

There were a few students who instantly and instinctively showed him kindness – his African-American classmates. They understood, Peter said, what it was like to suffer inexplicable meanness and they saw him as one of their own.

Peter's family had to move again after a few weeks. And he found that in his new school he immediately was “tagged resident foreign freak.” He was targeted on the schoolyard and began to wonder if there really was such a difference between Germany and America.

But his new first grade teacher, Alice Thomas, a woman of wisdom, kindness and compassion, intervened. She told Peter's mother that the problem was that Peter did not look American, even though he was quickly losing his accent. The itchy woolen shorts worn by all European schoolboys had to go. The fashion of the day was corduroy knickerbockers, and Peter wrote, “they [the other kids in the class] all went zhzhht-zhszht when they walked..At Strawbridge and Clothier's, in Jenkintown, PA, it was possible to get a sturdy pair of corduroy knickerbockers for \$2.98,” one quarter of Peter's father's weekly wage.

Peter wrote: “We paid for the britches ourselves and on the day I walked into McKinley School zhhzhht-zzhtint -ing like all the other American boys, I finally became one. “

Peter’s family pooled resources with other refugees and shared a home in a crowded immigrant neighborhood . As the War continued, Peter became increasingly aware of how lucky his family was to escape the horrifying fate befalling relatives and friends who had been unable to get out in time.

Of rebuilding life within his immigrant and refugee neighborhood he wrote:

“There was a life that was gone forever, and a new one to be built on soil none of us knew.... It was not the life my parents had dreamed for themselves a continent and an eternity ago, but it was a life.....” Even as a child, he said, he had understood that this – the chance for life – was the greatest gift that immigration to America had given him.

In recounting Peter’s story, we must remember that many who sought a safe haven from persecution during the 1930s and 1940s found their efforts thwarted by the United States’ restrictive immigration quotas. Our laws reflected the national climate of isolationism, xenophobia, antisemitism, racism, and economic insecurity after World War I. Between 1933 and 1941, hundreds of thousands of European Jews applied to emigrate (from Nazi-controlled territories) but were blocked from entering. Peter and his family were among the lucky few who got in.

In this room today, we come from a rich variety of backgrounds, with many different kinds of family histories to tell. All of us came from somewhere else, and all of us have stories, some still evolving, of what it has meant or means to “become American.” Wherever we are from, and however we got here, we “know the heart of the stranger,” as Torah commands.

I tell you Peter’s story this morning at the turn of the year not only to honor a friend, but also to talk about all the ways in which our own histories and the moral voice of our tradition demand that we welcome the immigrant and the stranger.

I am not suggesting that the circumstances of Peter’s time and ours are equivalent. But the changes and challenges we see in our world include economic upheavals for workers at every level due to technology and globalization; increasing demographic diversity; challenges to norms around gender, race and sexuality; and waves of migration created by violence, wars, poverty and climate change.

When people sense that their survival is threatened or that the status quo is under attack, they may seek to create order, turning to leaders who promise to protect them and drive out threatening outsiders. In the words of Professor Jonathan Haidt, “In case of moral threat, lock down the border, kick out those who are different, and punish those who are morally deviant.”

In these turbulent and disturbing times, Judaism is an unwavering moral compass and a rebuke to the authoritarian impulse. It declares unequivocally the humanity of the stranger and calls us to

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love, welcome and protect them. The sages state that this commandment appears 36 times, more than any other command in the Torah.

וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת-נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי-גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
“You shall not oppress a *ger* (stranger or immigrant), for you know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Ex.23:9).

You will notice that I translated the word “ger” both in the familiar way as “stranger,” but also as immigrant. Rabbi, professor and respected Torah scholar Jacob Milgrom writes that the *ger* is someone stuck in limbo, who can no longer go home and so must live as a quasi-part of someone else’s society. Rabbi Shai Held, quoting Christian Bible scholar Frank Spina, says that *ger* is better translated “immigrant,” and suggests its relationship to a similar word, *gur*, meaning fear (see, e.g., Deut. 1:17) – the *ger* is one who arrives fearing for his/her life.

Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch, the 19th century rabbi who is the intellectual founder of Modern Orthodoxy, wrote about our responsibility for the *ger*. First he cited the verse “You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt,” and then went on:

Here it says simply and absolutely, “for you were strangers,” your whole misfortune in Egypt was that you were strangers there. As such, according to the views of other nations, you had no right to be there, no claim to rights of settlement, home, or property. Accordingly, you had no rights in appeal against unfair or unjust treatment. As aliens you were without any rights in Egypt, out of that grew all of your bondage and oppression, your slavery and wretchedness. Therefore beware, so runs the warning, from making rights in your own State conditional on anything other than on that simple humanity which every human being as such bears within. With any limitation in these human rights the gate is opened to the whole horror of Egyptian mishandling of human beings.

How many of us, hearing Rabb Hirsch’s words, see the faces of immigrant children – some even younger than 4 years old– in detention centers, frightened and alone?

For Hirsch, the equation is simple: All people are entitled to basic human rights - unconditionally. The idea that it’s acceptable to treat “citizens” and “non-citizens” differently is the first step on the road to Egypt. If we are not to be Pharaoh, we must provide protection to the *ger*, the immigrant.

Social justice activist Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz takes this idea further, arguing that our responsibility specifically to the undocumented immigrant is deeply rooted in Torah. He starts his discussion in what may seem an unlikely place: *Eglah Arufah* – the biblical ritual for responding to an unsolved murder.

Deuteronomy, Chapter 21, addresses the question of accountability when a murder victim is found outside of the boundary of two cities on public land. He or she is stateless, unidentifiable, unknown. The elders and magistrates must go out and measure the distance from where the person was found to the boundaries of the two cities. Once the closer city is determined, the elders of that city are obligated to go to the site where the victim was found and offer a sacrifice. They then must declare “Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done.” Next, those same elders plead with God to absolve all of Israel from any guilt for the life that was taken.

What does this have to do with undocumented immigrants?

The rabbis imagine that the victim’s story was not a mystery after all. He had been hungry, but the leaders of the city refused to provide the outsider with food. Wracked with hunger, he was forced to steal bread to survive, and was killed in the act. The responsibility for his death, according to the Talmud, lies with the leaders of the city, as they didn’t provide him with food or assistance. (BT Sotah 38b). Many commentators such as the The Maharal of Prague , a16th ce. Jewish scholar and philosopher, elaborate: Even though he was killed while trying to commit an illegal act, those who refused to feed him are responsible.

Rabbi Yanklowitz compares the stateless wanderer stealing food to those who cross our borders illegally to escape poverty and violence: “Just as the wanderer who was commemorated through the ritual of *eglah arufah* broke the law, so too undocumented immigrants today break the law. Nevertheless, the leaders who turn a blind eye to their needs are responsible for their suffering.”

The great teacher of Torah, Nechama Leibovitz, goes further still, insisting that responsibility rests not only with the leaders. She writes,

Responsibility for wrong doing does not only lie with the perpetrator himself and even with the accessory. Lack of proper care and attention are also criminal. Whoever keeps to his own quiet corner...who observes oppression and violence and does not stir a finger in protest cannot proclaim with a clear conscience that “Our hands have not shed this blood.” (Studies in Devarim, pgs. 207-208)

The obligation to care for our fellow human beings, especially those most vulnerable, transcends borders and visas. And the obligation rests with all of us - not only with the lawmakers and the professionals, with the “elders of the land.” We at Kehillah must not stand in our own quiet corner, silently observing as the most vulnerable in our community are the victims of growing hatred and xenophobia. We will do what we can.

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The Sanctuary Movement is a multi-faith movement to provide support and protection for immigrants in danger of deportation and to advocate for just treatment of immigrant populations. Our neighbors across the street at the Community Church are opening their doors to provide sanctuary, a place to live, for an immigrant family or individual who is at risk of deportation. They'll be working with local immigrant rights group to identify those in need of help. For some, their lives may be at risk if they are deported. Often times, these are people who have lived in our country for many years and have a strong chance of winning appeals for their deportation orders. The sanctuary gives them protection and time to prepare their appeal.

This Past May, our Board of Directors approved a Social Action Committee proposal for us to partner with the Community Church in providing volunteers for this sacred work. We are welcoming volunteers to work in shifts to be present for the family 24 hours a day. In addition, volunteers will be able to provide meals or go to the grocery store, run errands, do laundry, or provide transportation for the immigrant's family members to visit. Look for a Kehillah e-mail to sign up to be a part of a volunteer team, or you can reach out directly to Kathleen Rounds to help in this important work.

Spending a few hours with the individual or family, or dropping off a meal, might seem like such small acts given the sheer numbers of families affected by deportations. But our small acts are moved by the moral force of our tradition and our own community's history of finding sanctuary in this country. For Peter Bauland, of blessed memory, a teacher's compassion and a \$2.98 pair of shorts turned him into an American. Our actions, small and large, can contribute to building a world guided by compassion and humanity, not fear and hatred.

Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch teaches us:

The degree of justice in a land is measured, not so much by the rights accorded to the native-born inhabitants, to the rich, or people who have, at any rate, representatives or connections that look after their interests, but by what justice is meted out to the completely unprotected "immigrant."

May it be a year in which we heed the lessons of our history and the mandate of our tradition to show compassion to the immigrant, protect and advocate for those stripped of rights and power, and remember our common humanity. In doing so may we find blessing in building a community that reflects God's justice, compassion and love. L'shanah tovah Rabbi Jen