Writing Our Story

Rosh Hashanah 5787

Rabbi Jen Feldman, Kehillah Synagogue

L'shanah tovah. I want to talk this morning about the story of Jews in America. About where we've been, and, at this turn of the year, where we can be going. But first, a question:

Has anyone else ever seen a beaver at work?

My family can tell you, I am beyond delighted when I have a beaver sighting. They lumber about on land, but glide swiftly and strongly in the water. Most recently, I saw one near dusk, swimming down Stony Creek at Brumley Nature Preserve, mouth full of grasses for building its lodge.

Beavers are incredible. They are second only to humans, according to National Geographic, in their capacity to shape their environment. Those dams they build? They turn rivers and streams into slow-moving ponds so they have a safe place to build their lodge, and easy access to get and store food. But those dams do so much more. They transform the environment around them and create crucial habitat for other wetland plants and animals.

What, you may be asking, does this have to do with the story of Jews in America?

As Yehudah Kurtzer of the Hartman Institute argued in a recent dialogue with the editor of The Atlantic, the American Jewish experience is exceptional. Jews have experienced more "affluence, influence, power and privilege" than in any other diaspora project in history. We've done so, he argues, because we "have played an outstanding, exceptional role in doing the work of defining the version of America that would need to be able to accommodate Jews as insiders." In other words, for much of our history here, we Jews have told a story about an America that includes us. Like my friend in the river at Brumley, we've helped to create an ecosystem in which, at its best, everyone – not just us – can thrive.

The story we've told is about a country that is a multicultural, pluralistic democracy. A country rooted in justice, equality before the law, civic participation, freedom of religion, and protection of minority rights.

In fact, we started telling that story about this place before it was even the United States. The very first Jews to set foot on the continent were Sephardim, fleeing the Inquisition and landing at New Amsterdam in 1654. Peter Stuyvesant, the governor, did not want to let them in; the Dutch East India Company, Stuyvesant's employer, told him he had to. And so he forbade the

new immigrants from serving on the armed watch, claiming other guards wouldn't want to serve with them, and told them they had to pay a special tax instead.

Asser Levy and Jacob Barsimson recognized that to be told you can't protect a place is to be told it's not really yours, and that you don't really belong. They protested, and in 1655 Stuyvesant's decree was overturned. By 1657 they had secured other basic rights, insisting that these did not depend upon one's religion.

In our Chapel Emanu-el hangs another example – thanks to the generosity of Lew Margolis and Linda Frankel. In 1790, following the ratification of the Constitution, President George Washington, accompanied by his Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, took what has been described as a "victory lap" around the new United States. In preparation for his arrival in their town, Moses Seixas wrote Washington a letter on behalf of the Jewish congregation of Newport, Rhode Island. The letter congratulated Washington, wished him blessings, and then framed a vision for the country – a country which, he wrote, generously afforded "to all, Liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: — deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language equal parts of the great governmental Machine...." Cleverly, Seixas presented this vision as if it were already well known and accepted, rather than as a question – and Washington, in his famous response, used Seixas's own words in his statement about what the United States would stand for:

"All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that 'toleration' is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."

Not "tolerance," but equality by nature, embracing diversity of religion and culture. No profession of faith, no allegiance to a political doctrine -- the only requirement of good citizenship being support for the country.

Fast forward: In honor of America's centennial in 1876 – as well as the perseverance of democracy and the end of legal slavery -- France gave us a statue of "Liberty Enlightening the World." The statue would sit at the entrance to the New York and Newark harbors; but Americans had to raise money for the pedestal. As part of a fundraiser, a friend solicited the Jewish writer and activist Emma Lazarus to write and donate a poem.

Lazarus, who dedicated her energies to settling Eastern European Jewish immigrants, and opposed immigration restrictions like the Chinese Exclusion Act – declined. She didn't write on

demand, she said. The friend persisted: “Think of what it will mean for new immigrants to see the statue when they arrive.”

Lazarus’s poem, The New Colossus, was published, but largely forgotten after the auction in 1883, and after Lazarus’s death in 1887. But a friend worked to resurrect it, and by 1903 it was on the pedestal of the statue. Lazarus’s vision transformed the statue from one of abstract “liberty” to one of “world-wide welcome” – and in so doing, one could argue, offered the country a vision for itself:

“Give me,” the Statue now said, “your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

My grandparents fled pogroms in Russia just over a century ago. They – like millions of other immigrants -- were greeted by the Statue of Liberty and Emma Lazarus’s poem when they arrived on these shores.

We have made a place for ourselves, and helped to make a place for others, through the story we have told about the United States.

But of course, it is not the only story. There were nativists at the turn of the 20th century who viewed the Statue of Liberty not as a symbol of welcome, but as a symbol of the threat of immigration -- as a besieged guardian and protector against “huddled masses” who would threaten our liberty and values.

In our moment, the nation and the American Jewish community -- which has prospered because of the rights and protections of our pluralist democracy it helped to create and protect -- are facing a powerful resurgence of these nativist tendencies. We see this hand in hand with rising authoritarianism and the erosion of democratic norms and institutions.

Coupled with all of this, we are caught in a wave of rising antisemitism. And further, the manipulation of antisemitism and our fears of antisemitism to justify the very anti-immigrant initiatives and consolidation of power which ultimately harm us and countless others.

How can Judaism steady us, and help us hold fast to our values and vision in this confusing time? To move forward with clarity, in service both to our own and to the common good?

I want to suggest that we start in a familiar place: the Shema. The first prayer we learn as children and the last prayer to pass our lips at the end of our lives.

The Shema itself is enfolded in love. The blessing before it – Ahavah Rabbah – speaks of God's abiding love for us. It reminds us that God created the world and us out of love and the Torah is a gift of love. And immediately following the words of Shema is V'ahavta -- our obligation to love God with the fullness of our being. What does it mean to feel God's love, and in turn to love God, and how does that relate to the present moment?

Let me explain. Rabbi Shai Held, author of *Judaism is About Love*, brings forward the understanding of biblical scholarship that love in the Torah is much more than an emotion: It is an orientation or disposition of care toward others.

Emotions are wily beasts. At any given moment, we can have a range of feelings toward those we love – but we try always to act from a place of care, compassion, and forgiveness. Similarly, if our spiritual life and commitments depended on our moment-to-moment emotions, we'd be in trouble: They are just so unpredictable and unreliable.

Torah commands us (Lev. 19:18)

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ אֲנִי ה׳

to love our kinsperson like we love ourselves. Just a few verses later, though, Torah commands that our love must expand beyond the boundary of those who are like us.

The progression goes like this: In Exodus (22:20, 23:9), there are prohibitions against maltreating and oppressing the *ger*, often translated as "the stranger." The commentator Rashi explains that the "stranger" is a person who has come from somewhere else to reside with you. In other words, as Held and other biblical scholars concur, *ger* is most accurately translated as "immigrant," a vulnerable outsider forced to flee their homeland and come to live with you due to war, famine or oppression.

By Leviticus (19:33-34), the prohibition, the command to not oppress the immigrant is transformed and expanded into a positive command to love them:

"When an immigrant resides with you in your land, you shall not maltreat them. The immigrant residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them like yourself, for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt: I the ETERNAL am your God...."

Finally, the culminating step in the progression: By Deuteronomy (10:17-19), God is described as "great, mighty and awesome, the One Who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the orphan and the widow, and loves the immigrant, providing them with food and clothing. You, too, must love the immigrant – for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt."

Listen to the moral urgency and power of this command. The heart of Judaism is to make God's presence known through deeds that reflect God's justice, compassion and care. This is how we are to love God and bring God into our lives and our world.

And so here it is. To fight corruption, and to love, provide for and protect the most vulnerable, the immigrant, the stranger, is *imitatio dei* -- a way of imitating, of loving God. Or, as Held states most succinctly, "To love God is to come to love whom God loves."

We have known this for millennia. It is in our bones. It is the essence of who we are and must be as Jews. It is our sacred calling – and it is the narrative that has carried our Jewish American story. But how, in this moment, do we live it. What are we to do?

This past February our family went to Minneapolis-Saint Paul. We arrived just after hundreds of faith leaders from across the country converged on the city, answering the call from local religious leaders to come in witness and to protest the brutal federal immigration crackdown that had besieged the city. What I saw, and what I heard in conversations with faith leaders and citizens, was chilling. I was in contact with Imam Mowlid Ali, a friend from his days serving the Jamaat Ibad Ar-Rahman Mosque in Durham, who is now serving the Somali American community in Minneapolis. He had spoken of members of his mosque, the majority American citizens, fearful to venture out into the streets or to the mosque to pray. Our family went out to dinner at the Hmong marketplace where more than half of the market stalls were shuttered -- people terrified of going to work, or to shop for their families for fear of being targeted. One rabbinic friend told me of a mom who rallied her neighbors when ICE showed up at morning drop-off at a local preschool. The gathering crowd kept children, parents and teachers safe.

Again and again I heard stories of cruelty and brutality and felt the fear and the isolation in ethnic neighborhoods we visited.

As we prepared for Shabbat and I reflected on our visits to Hmong, Somali and Latino communities, I had no doubt this was not an act of immigration enforcement. It was meant to intimidate, to terrify, to target those who were not white or who were suspected not to be native born.

While the massive operation has calmed in the Twin Cities, we know that ICE activities continue to expand in our country -- with North Carolina's first mass detention center slated to open in Hertford County this fall or winter.

A few days after this visit, I joined dedicated Kehillah members in Washington, DC for a major protest by the Jewish community at ICE headquarters. We were told to bring our shofarot – our shofars and be prepared to sound them. At the gathering, my colleague, Rabbi Emma Kipley-Ogman from the Twin Cities, shared these stirring words:

“Mishna Taanit teaches that a city suffering in drought

Would sound a t’ruah, a wailing shofar call.

For drought, plague, and collapsing buildings,

The rabbis argue about whether neighboring towns should also sound the shofar:

How far should the loud alarms spread?

How many neighboring cities need to know and muster to protect the people?

For blight and locusts, for dangerous beasts and violent attacks,

Matri-in b’kol makom we sound the shofar everywhere,

Because these are calamities that spread.

What about when a city is occupied by a fighting force

Committed to dehumanizing, violent, and cruel action?

The Mishna teaches that when such a group surrounds a city,

We sound the shofar everywhere, even on Shabbat.

This is an emergency that we all need to answer.”

In the three short and three long whistle codes that her neighbors used to warn the vulnerable, or to call people together for witness and protection, Rabbi Kipley-Ogman heard echoes of the shofar summoning us to action, and quoted Leviticus 25:10, commanding us to sound shofar to “Proclaim liberty throughout the land, and to all the inhabitants thereof.”

In Torah, this signifies the start of Yovel, the year of forgiveness of debts, of freeing captives and those in servitude. And, of course, these words are familiar to us, too, as the inscription on the Liberty Bell.

“Shofar carries our fear,” Rabbi Emma continued,

“Shofar carries our fury,

Shofar carries our grief,

And shofar calls us to build liberation with everyone in this land.”

Tomorrow we will sound the shofar. What will we hear? How will it stir us to act? At Kehillah, we have many ways to answer the shofar’s call for justice and compassion. Here are just a few.

First, you can provide direct service and care:

Kehillah partners with the Community Church right across the street in their Immigrant Justice initiative. The church provides temporary housing to asylum seekers who are legally in the country. Volunteers are needed to drive guests to appointments, teach English, daily living skills, act as interpreters and provide outings to bring joy. Please contact Kathleen Rounds of the SAC to learn more.

El Centro Hispano, the largest Latino-led social service agency in North Carolina, currently is in need of an ESL volunteer teacher for virtual, one-hour sessions twice a week. Training is provided. For a staff in Carrboro there is a need for an English language partner. There are ongoing needs for folks to run errands for immigrant neighbors afraid to leave their homes; others may need someone to accompany them as an advocate to help with critical medical and legal appointments. Please reach out to Emi Ismaeli of El Centro and our Social Action Team to learn more.

Second, you can help us advocate and organize for immigrant rights:

On Sunday, October 18th, Justice United of Orange County – of which Kehillah is a member -- will be gathering in Wake County with sister organizations from across the state to press our two Senate candidates on their plans to protect immigrant rights, along with affordable housing and healthcare. There is power in numbers. We hope to be a 500+ multi-faith, multi-ethnic, multi-racial gathering – but this only happens if folks commit to showing up. We'll have a sign-up going out shortly – new member Scott Badesch is organizing our participation. Please join us.

Finally, you can help protect and strengthen democracy this election season:

Kehillah is part of the national, non-partisan Jewish Partnership for Democracy. The focus right now is in helping to ensure free, fair, safe and accessible elections. We've been helping to recruit poll workers, volunteer attorneys and are inviting people to sign up as well to join "Chill Teams"—a group of trained volunteers who provide nonpartisan safety support during early voting and on election day. Please watch your emails to learn about these and other opportunities as they evolve.

The American Jewish story is still being written.

It is on us to continue to write it, urged on by our sacred values: love of the immigrant; protection for the vulnerable; unwavering commitment to creating a society where no one is silenced, every voice matters, and all are honored as B'tzelem Elohim, created in the divine image.

Let us work together to build this democratic America of our values and our vision - for ourselves, and for all who live in the land.

L’Shanah Tovah. May it be a new year of creating and receiving blessing, a year that brings sweetness and goodness, a year of right action and strength in community.