

Proclaim Liberty throughout the Land

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A friend from college called me as I was racing up 95. He asked, in an ambiguous tone, “Why are you going to the Elizabeth Detention Center?” I was on the Bluetooth in my car, which can sometimes muffle voices so I wasn’t sure if his tone meant, “Why are you going there? Because I’m curious and I want to know more.” or if he was asking, “What moronic reason do you have for going to that dreary depressing cement hell hold?”

Simply put, I was heading there because over that past week Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE agents, had taken a few of the undocumented Indonesian immigrants from our community. The day before I went to protest, a friend of mine, Arino Massie, had gone in for his routine check-in. Instead of being cleared and sent back home to his family, as had been the norm, they began to process his immediate deportation. We only found out about it after calls had been made when he didn’t show up to pick his ten-year-old up from school. As I was driving up to protest and hopefully stop his deportation we were all concerned that they would ever see each other again.

We came out to protest his deportation and the deportation of three others from our community. Little did we know that before we were in our cars heading there with our signs and words of faith and protest, that Arino had already been placed on a plane destined from Indonesia. His fate, a complete unknown. What would happen to him when sent back to a land he fled from because of persecution?

It was real hot on the day of our protest, but the center felt like this icy cold cement block of a building. I stood outside with several other clergy members as well as congregants not only from their churches but from our Temple family too. There were about 50 of us standing together in religious opposition. None of us were particularly imposing, but I suppose the director of the detention center wanted to make real sure that we weren’t going to do something crazy like scale the walls and stage a prison break. So to ensure our safety he sent out about a dozen or so officers, some dressed in riot gear to oversee our protest. I leaned over and whispered to Reverend Kaper-Dale, “It’s amazing to see how intimidating a *kippah* and a frock can be.” That being said, the police were polite, kind, and respectful.

As I told the crowd then, and as I do with all of you now, what we did that morning was not an expression of political dissent, it was an act driven by faith. My belief that we should care for the undocumented in our community is not because of my political affiliation. I want to be real clear with you, this is not to bash Republicans or venerate Democrats. If you ask me, both sides have failed us when it comes to how we should respond to these people. My belief that we should care for the undocumented in our community is not because of my political affiliation. On the contrary, it is a direct result of my religious journey. I want to take you on that journey now so that you may understand why I chose to go to that cement block of despair.

I grew up always very curious about the Jewish side of my family, and its genealogy in particular. I knew a lot about my father's family; we could trace them throughout multiple centuries, but what about my mother's family. I was always very curious but never got the depth of knowledge that my father could provide. It frustrated me greatly because at the time I was too young to fully grasp the magnitude of the Holocaust – that it meant more than the destruction of life, but also the destruction of memory. Perhaps we knew where the previous generation or two were from, but certainly not more than that. So as I went through my Hebrew day school, the broad narrative of our people became my family's personal story. And as all families have it, there was triumph, and there was heartache. There was the foundation of the State of Israel, but there was also its necessity born out of anti-Semitism even in lands that we thought we were safe. We found new homes and places of growth and innovation, but again, defeat as we were exiled from our home or threatened by death. Our family's history is a vicious cycle of prosperity, and then, jeopardy.

The undocumented Indonesians that we were fighting for left their home because they were Christian, and were the subject of horrible persecution because of their faith. Not too dissimilar from our ancestors. When I heard their story from their own lips, I could not help but think of the Pogroms. It was as if I could imagine my great-great-grandfather bundling up children to get them away from the Czar, finding them a haven, and then being told that they had to go back. Their stories are so similar to ours.

Faith, too, plays a part in this for me. The commandment to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger is repeated in the Bible more so than any other mitzvah. Why are these three listed: the widow, the orphan, and the stranger? Because in their society, these

were the most vulnerable people. It is not only a good deed to care for them; it is a religious imperative and obligation to care for the disenfranchised.

The "disenfranchised." I often struggle with what term we should use for these individuals. Do we call them illegal immigrants? I often struggle with that term. It feels wrong to me. For me, it harkens back to days when we were made to feel as though we were illegal or illegitimate human beings just for being Jews. Being a Jew in Spain during the 1500s meant that you were an illegal citizen, but while a modern-day deportee only knows an uncertain fate, our *converso* ancestors knew what their fate would be if they were found out. Their fate would be death.

These people that I am standing up for today are not criminals. These four had been living in this country for at least 16 years and have American born families. They have no criminal record let alone even parking tickets. I've met Arino, Oldy, Rovani, and Saul. You've met their friend Harry who is also undocumented. Harry spoke at our congregational Passover dinner. These are good people. There is not a wicked bone in their body. When Hurricane Sandy hit, Harry went down with the four of them to help rebuild the Shore. When Harvey hit, Harry jumped in a truck and went down with a hammer in hand. He is still there right now. As I speak he is rebuilding homes in Houston. His four friends would have gone down too, but our country deported them three months ago. I will not argue against deporting violent criminals, but these four that we went to help save, aren't them. And for the most part, neither are the vast majority of individuals that are now living in terror, whether they are Dreamers or people seeking asylum or refuge.

Unfortunately, with all things politicized, the names of things are meant to give you a visceral response. Calling someone illegal then creating a hotline to report crimes by immigrants reinforces the erroneous belief that "They're criminals, they're rapists, they're thugs, they're dangerous, and they're taking our jobs." It makes you think that perhaps some of them are decent human beings, but can you really take that chance?

If you look at the crime statistics in this country, the group most likely to hurt or harm you are not those trying to find a haven, its individuals who are citizens of this country. Citizens pose more of a threat to you than most of these "Undocumented Immigrants." The politicizing of the crimes of the few who do troubles me greatly. It is as if our government is going on a crusade to dehumanize immigrants, particularly Latinos. I

have a friend from seminary who once overstayed his visa because the timing didn't work out for finals. He wasn't concerned though, he was a white guy from Canada, and the thought of ICE knocking down his door really wasn't a concern to him.

Now, while reporting him to ICE would have made a really great April Fool's Day joke, his lack of concern versus the concern that our neighbors have, speak volumes. And our neighbors, both the undocumented and legal immigrants are petrified every time the President uses inflammatory rhetoric against them. I know this because every time he speaks out the New Brunswick school population drops. I was at an emergency clergy meeting with the mayor's office three weeks ago, and his representative informed us that they were letting preschool and high school teachers go because school registration had dropped tremendously. It dropped not because the number of eligible students has dropped, but because their families are too afraid to register them for fear of deportation.

This isn't just happening here; it's happening all over. Can you imagine the damage that will be done to our larger community, state, and country if we allow a generation of individuals to not go through formal education and to grow up with a fear of the government?

The undocumented in our midst may not be trying to flee concentration camps, but they are fleeing from gangs and violence, from poverty and despair. They are fleeing trying to make a better life for themselves and their families. That's why all of our ancestors came to America. And don't think this involves us just because we have similar narratives. We all know that this is more than just about immigration, just turn on the TV. What this is really about is the return of a rampant racist form of nativism.

Our country's history of immigration reform and rhetoric is littered with racism. Anytime there is immigrant growth that occurs while there is an economic slump, there is always a resurgence of a nativist fundamentalism paired with the growth of hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

What we are seeing now is no different. What makes it scary is how it is being used for political gain. Again, history repeats itself because those confederate statues were not put up following the Civil War, they were erected in the early 1900s and again in the 1960s as a way to harness and channel xenophobic hate for political gain. And no, not everyone who argues for immigration control is a racist, and no, not everyone who wants to have a

dialogue about it is either, but our leaders are purposely using it in a racist way for political gain.

We saw it last year when there was a call for a ban on Muslims and a call to reject refugees and a call to build a wall, because “we shouldn’t let those people in.” or because “we need to let the melting pot cool a little.” When we heard people talking about bans and limitations, we should have known that it would only have been a matter of time until there would be people in the streets carrying torches and chanting “Jews will not replace us!” By the way, the sentiment behind “letting the melting pot cool,” is why our relatives on the St. Louis were sent back to Nazi Germany and the death camps. And neither side of the political isle is looking for a way of making change, they are just interested in maintaining whatever power they have.

Three weeks ago I went down with 3,000 other clergy members for the Minister’s March on Washington. We gathered for the 54th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. We marched from his memorial to the Justice Department to call out Attorney General Jeff Sessions for all of his and President Trump’s anti-Semitic and racially incendiary remarks as well as racist policy and agenda items that his administration is advancing.

I’m embarrassed to say that I wasn’t originally going to go. But a week beforehand I was stopped in my tracks twice. The first time was when I pulled into a parking lot in Piscataway, and the car next to me had a swastika dangling from the rearview mirror. It was dangling there just like you would see a cross or a car scent or even a pair of fluffy dice. I looked at it stunned and wrote it off reasoning that it may well be a naïve college student trying to reclaim the Buddhist symbol because who would be brazen enough to display a swastika? Besides, there aren’t Nazi’s here, right? But then three days later, as I was driving down Livingston Avenue and turning onto New Street I saw a Skin Head doing goosesteps shouting “White Power, White Power!” while doing the Nazi Salute. That happened just a few days after Charlottesville. When I saw this New Brunswick Nazi saluting, I thought to myself, I can't sit this one out anymore. We cannot be on the sidelines for this. This isn’t just a Latino fight or a Muslim issue; no, it's our issue too. And we shouldn’t have waited until the Neo-Nazis of Charlottesville to get involved.

Five months ago there was an ICE Raid here in New Brunswick, in truth there are many of them, and they are constantly happening. But what made this one particularly poignant for me was that it was captured on Facebook Live and in the background of the video was the dome of our Temple. Our Temple, which is supposed to serve as a sanctuary to those in need. When you leave here today, go out our front entrance and look to that corner. That's the exact spot where the ICE agents tore apart that family.

I have always been particularly fond of the name of our Temple, Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple. Anshe Emeth, the People of Truth, the People of Faith. Our congregation has had quite a history. Founded in 1859, we were known then as Temple Anshe Emeth. It wasn't until later that our name was changed to Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple in memory of the Jews who had died during the First World War and other previous conflicts. As the story goes, when this building was built it was done so to stand as a living memorial for those who sacrificed everything for the sake of others. Our actions in the name truth and faith sanctify their lives. So when we call ourselves Anshe Emeth, it means that we have a sacred obligation to be moral leaders in our community

We are a people who stand resolute and aim a high target at how we as a society should function. We do this not just as a people, but as a congregation of faith. Since our founding, almost 160 years ago, our congregation has always served as a moral beacon to the people of New Brunswick: whether it was in the 1890s by partnering with the Salvation Army located next door to us when we were on Albany Street; or in the 1910s when the Ladies Auxiliary Group collected and gave out infant clothing to those who needed it; or in the 1930s when our Temple responded to the Great Depression by creating an Emergency Relief Effort to give out clothing and diapers to the needy of New Brunswick. Our Community Development Corporation may have only have been established almost two decades ago, but in every decade of our Temple's life, you can find works like this and others. Helping the people of New Brunswick and standing as a moral beacon is in our Temple's *kishkas*.

We are a congregation that heeds the words of our Scripture, and we know that: “אֱמֶת וְאִמּוּנָה חֹק וְלֹא יִעָבֵר” that “Truth and faith are imperative that shall not be wiped away!”

We know the words of our scripture that tell us... no they declare to us: “לֹא תִוָּכַל לְהִתְעַלֵּם”ⁱ

“לא תטֹה מִשְׁפֹּט גֵר יְתוֹם” You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless.”ⁱⁱ

“וְקִרְאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ לְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל” You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי־עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם” Always remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.”^{iv}

Always remember that we were slaves, that we were refugees, that we were in ghettos, that we were in pogroms, that we were targets of inquisitions and crusades, that we were slaughtered by the millions by those whose emblems are still being worn proudly today in our country by the same nativists who look with detest at anyone who isn't white. Always remember where we come from and what we were, God commands it. God is not indifferent to the plight of the disenfranchised and God's people are to emulate that nature.

When I saw that video of a family being torn apart and destroyed with our beautiful, doomed sanctuary in the background, my family's history, our family's history, came rushing back to me and I can be indifferent no longer. Our fragile community cannot afford for us to be indifferent any longer. We must blow the shofar call of liberty throughout the land. We must be the voice that our elected officials ought to be using.

Those who govern our country, both Democrat and Republican, have surrendered the role of being a moral beacon for society, and we...we have to fill that void. Clearly there is a difference between those who enter this country and commit crimes and those who are dreaming of a better tomorrow, ones whose dreams include a roof over their head, food on the table and education for their children. We should look at these immigrants with Jewish eyes of compassion and love that our Torah tells us to use. Our Scripture reminds us that, “There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger that dwells among you.”^v What we afford for ourselves, we must afford for others. Please, do not look at these individuals with distaste or disdain, look at them and see the holy spark that resides within.

I know that this is a topic that is controversial. I am aware that there are many views out there that are not my own, ones that do not stem from hate or prejudice. I have shared with you my feelings and beliefs on the matter, and I invite you to share yours with me. Over the next several months we will have many opportunities as a community to meet with people, with lawyers and politicians, with immigrants, both legal and undocumented. We will be discussing with them and with ourselves, what it would mean if we were to

declare ourselves as a Sanctuary Congregation. To stand up in the tempest of hate and anger and say, we will protect you and keep your family safe.

The other day I was driving my boys home from the Temple and we were passing the corner where I saw that New Brunswick Nazi. When we came to that corner the next song on my playlist came on and Gavin started singing along. It was the song “This Land is your Land.” I instantly thought of the last few versus that were on the original manuscript, but were never recorded. They are incredibly powerful and end with a deafening question. These are the words that Woody Guthrie wanted to end the song with:

There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me;
Sign was painted, it said private property;
But on the backside it didn't say nothing;
This land was made for you and me.

Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking that freedom highway;
Nobody living can ever make me turn back
This land was made for you and me.

In the squares of the city, in the shadow of a steeple;
By the relief office, I'd seen my people.
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking,
Is this land made for you and me?

אָמֵן וְאָמֵן לֹא תוֹכֵל לְהִתְעַלֵּם we cannot remain indifferent. Amen v'amen

ⁱ Deut 22:3

ⁱⁱ Deut 24:17

ⁱⁱⁱ Lev 25:10

^{iv} Deut 24:22

^v Exodus 12:49