

We Have Met the Tempest-Tossed, and They Are Us

Kol Nidre

5777

At first, I wasn't sure what I was looking at. The speckles of orange and blue, with occasional dabs of yellow, seemed like some impressionist painting of pixilated flowers, or a magnified view of some microscopic virus. *But the caption said it all.* This was a drone-photographed overview of 100,000 life vests on the Greek island of Lesbos, discarded by the hundreds of thousands of Syrian, Iraqi and Afghani refugees sailing from Turkey to escape their war-torn homes. Surviving the treacherous journey often leads only to imprisonment, deportation and death. The mayor of this small city of 86,000 would later announce that the island had run out room to bury the dead.

It reminded me of that other horrific symbol of displacement and loss, the mountains of eyeglasses, suitcases and human hair I had seen on display at Auschwitz. The context of that experience was admittedly different, but there was an evil symmetry to the enormity of the human suffering revealed in both.

Few if any of us here are descended from natives to this land, despite Mel Brooks' quasi-racist, Yiddish-inflected portrayal in Blazing Saddles. All of us are the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the greenhorns and conversos, the exiles and the excluded of the Old World's last five centuries. Most of us came with little save for our longing to make real the dream of freedom and opportunity, hoping that this

***goldenah medinah* of democracy would provide sanctuary from bigotry, persecution and annihilation.**

American Jewish support for the most vulnerable, particularly those seeking refuge in our nation, is neither conservative nor liberal, transcending even notions of right and wrong that emerge merely from measures of human morality. It is the *very essence* of God's vision for our world as espoused by Torah and affirmed by generations of our tradition. It is the heart of Judaism's counter-cultural embrace of what constitutes *real* success and the ideal exercise of power: To love others as we love ourselves, and to pursue justice as an extension of that love in our attitudes, aspirations and actions.

We are commanded to uplift the stranger 36 times in the Torah, a significant number in itself for those inclined to Jewish numerology. And that command extends to other categories of the least advocated for within the ancient world: the poor, the orphan and the widow. It is a reasonable and relevant leap to apply this command to contemporary groups marginalized based on race, gender, sexual orientation and place of origin.

And if we are not compelled by moral or theological reasons to reach out to the stranger, there is the cold calculus of our history and the basics of our survival to compel reconsideration. My teacher, the eminent historian Ellis Rivkin (z"l) demonstrated how Jews consistently served as

scapegoats in every society in which we lived.

When the strains of foreign incursion or the stresses of domestic unrest threatened the reigning power, blaming the Jews was a sure and tested distraction and release.

Time and again, seemingly well-established Jews who felt more allegiance to nationality or secularism discovered that, when push came to shove, *a Jew is always a Jew...different, suspect, the Ultimate Other. We all know, deep in our kishkas*, that when a society begins to name undesirables, those considered dangerous or disloyal, we are *never far* down that tragic list.

The critical command to love our neighbors as ourselves is a *projected compassion*, emerging both from our sacred history of estrangement in

Egypt, and our more recent sojourn to these shores. As former slaves, we know what it is to be the eternal stranger, and so we have a special awareness of their plight and obligation to act on their behalf. And as relatively recent arrivals to this national sanctuary, we must extend a similar awareness of need and embrace the same obligation to act on behalf of today's afflicted.

Yet, as is so often the case, the clarion call of Jewish values runs up against the base self-interest of human nature. The spirit remains constrained by flesh and blood, but as Jews, we are commanded to transcend our earthly bounds, and to ascend to a height but a little lower than the angels.

Jews, like so many other immigrant peoples, arrive and adjust, work hard to succeed and assimilate, and then, when comfortably established, often seek to close the gates of migration behind them. When we feel secure in our role as part of the established and privileged majority, we blanche at reminders of our humble and humiliating origins, rewriting our stories to excise our foreign past, focusing only upon the crafted narratives of the present and the chapters yet to be written in the future.

Even amongst Jews *in this country, in this city, in this Temple community*, German Jews of the first wave cast a jaundiced glance at the second wave of *ostjuden* from Eastern Europe, and both groups regarded their Sephardic

brethren as inferior, a source of embarrassment in the eyes of the broader community. If this kind of brutal divisiveness can happen within the narrow confines of a small Jewish community branded with millennia of derision and contempt, the challenge to confront such hostility between larger groups seems daunting.

A recent article by Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese refugee, characterized the distinctions between refugees and immigrants. The immigrant narrative is one of new beginnings and fresh starts, melding more readily into the American dream and story. Refugees, on the other hand, are what he terms the “zombies of the world, the undead who rise from dying states to march or swim toward our borders in endless

waves.” He goes on to cite that 60 million souls, 1 in 122 people on earth, are stateless wanderers in this limbo between a dying past and dreams of the future.

So let's be honest. We often talk about waves of Jewish immigration, as if our shtetl or ghetto-bound ancestors had the luxury of choice to come here. They were not employment migrants coming to take positions at Microsoft or staking their claims at the start-up roulette wheel. They were often the most abject of refugees fleeing Russian pogroms, Czarist military conscription, winnowing possibilities in the Mediterranean and the coming tempest of Nazi genocide. We were...we are...a refugee people.

Columnist Nicholas Kristoff penned an evocative piece entitled, “Anne Frank Today is a Syrian Girl.” Like the heart-rending picture of 5 year-old Omran Daqneesh that stirred the conscience of our nation too briefly, Kristoff paired a picture of Anne Frank with a bloodied Syrian girl. He further details recently discovered documents that recount how Anne’s father, Otto Frank, tried in vain to find asylum in the U.S. And despite a command of English, a previous residency in New York and even connections to the Roosevelt Administration, the Franks were barred from entering the U.S. *We know the rest of the story.*

But before some of us impulsively run to justifiably differentiate Nazi policy from Mideast

strife, in an attempt to score argumentative points that really miss the point, let us ask ourselves bluntly and candidly: *Where is the profit, the benefit, in engaging in comparative victimology?* Is a Jewish life somehow more precious than an Afghani? *If you prick a Syrian, does he not bleed?*

Despite the overwhelming evidence of our suffering in the 20th century, many countries, including and especially the United States, sought myriad ways to translate fears and prejudice into legislation and policy. The list of justifications is well known: we carry disease, we will take away jobs from “real” Americans, US citizens must focus on the needs of *America First* before extending ourselves to others, even the most

beleaguered. The headlines and policy debates from the late 19th and first half of the 20th century sound eerily and painfully like those heard today. The legislation of noxious, anti-Semitic senators and congressmen, and the toxic rhetoric of the infamous Father Coughlin, find troubling parallels in the messages of some and their reception by many...*too many*.

“But wait, rabbi,” you might be saying.

“Refugees from Arab countries harbor terrorists who are a security threat to our nation. Should we not exclude them all indefinitely just to be safe no matter what the cost?” Well, some of those early diatribes against us leveled accusations that an influx of Jewish refugees might harbor Communist subversives, Nazi saboteurs and

anarchists bent on the overthrow of our government. But the less spoken fear stemmed from threats to the purity of white, Christian America.

And just as the chance admission of German-spies should not have justified the wholesale barring of Jewish asylum-seekers like the condemned passengers on the doomed ship St. Louis, the possibility of a few bad actors entering our nation amongst hundreds of thousands of victims *of that very terror* in the Middle East should not preclude our response to this humanitarian catastrophe. We Jews, *more than any other people*, should know too well the sting of the deeds of the few over-generalized to define the many.

And so, beyond a broadened awareness and commitment to act, how can we affect change? Our local Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and our beloved Jewish Family Service have been instrumental in welcoming and settling refugees into our community, many who are Muslim. It is my fervent hope that we can not only partner more closely with JFS to support their efforts, but that soon, perhaps our congregation might take on the humane responsibility...the sacred obligation in response to divine command...to bring and settle a refugee family from this growing and intractable conflict into our community.

Emma Lazarus was the scion of a wealthy Jewish family who became one of the most noted

American poets. Her most iconic verse, *The New Colossus*, is engraved on a tablet in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, the first image desperate and dreaming newcomers encountered upon entering New York Harbor. Ironically, Lazarus was a Sephardic Jew actually descended from the first Jews to arrive in America. If anyone had a pride of pedigree to hold over the rest of us, it was she.

And yet, she forged her art into a lever for awareness, acceptance and righteous deed—the creation of a more just world for everyone from everywhere. Her words stir us to this day:

**"Give me 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!"**

In the coming year and beyond, may we live out these words fully and well, as we shine forth the lamp of the Torah's wisdom and this nation's promise, embracing our eternal role as *or l'goyim*, a light unto the nations, bearing salvation, freedom and opportunity to the ends of the earth. Amen.