

SEARCHING FOR HOPE
5779 Yom Kippur AM
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

The rabbis of our tradition tell us that, when we arrive in heaven, God will ask us seven questions. Perhaps the most important one will be: Did you live with hope?¹ As Rabbi John Rosove puts it: “It challenges us to maintain a life-affirming attitude, to focus on the half-full glass. Staying positive and hopeful may be the most difficult challenge we ever face.”² Apparently, we will be judged in heaven by how well we try. Hope, the possibility of renewing ourselves is fundamental to the Days of Awe as it is to Judaism.

After all, HaTikvah, The Hope, is the name of the Israeli national anthem. Jewish tradition tells the story of an immortal eagle that flies straight up toward the sun once every 1,000 years. Its feathers are burned off and it falls to earth, where it regenerates its wings. It's a strange tale. If the eagle is going to live forever, why bother renewing its wings every millennium? Why not just live forever with the same pair of wings? The answer? To teach that every human being needs to learn to renew him or herself.

Every week, on Shabbat, we are given the opportunity to renew and refresh ourselves, if we would only take advantage of that time. And, particularly at this time of year, we have entered into a 10-day process of a kind of Spring cleaning of our souls. We are urged to reach for our higher selves, to become the person we wish to be. We do this through teshuvah – not repentance, so much, but a turning to our better selves. We have strayed from the proper path, yet we can always return, readjust – not just at the High Holy Days but, actually, at any time of the year.

Here is how Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz describes teshuvah: “a departure from, a rejection of, and a regret for the past, and an acceptance, a promise of change in the future...a shaking free of the past, a transfiguration of self, and an eager thrust forward into a new identity.”

¹ BT Shabbat 31a

² reformjudaism.org/practice/lifecycle-and-rituals/death-mourning/7-questions-youll-be-asked-heavenly-tribunal

Just think about our patriarch and forefather Abraham.

The first time we meet him in the Torah, he is on the verge of a journey toward reinvention. God tells him to leave his country, his home and his family to go to a new, more authentic place. We don't know a whole lot about him, so the rabbis of the midrash imagine that his father owns an idol shop in Haran. The young Abraham rebels against idol worship so he is ripe to respond to God's call for a new understanding of divinity, for a new way of life.

The very word "Hebrew," our name before we were called Jews, comes from the word "Ivri" which means crossing over – just as Abraham crossed over from Haran to Canaan, we have also crossed boundaries historically as we were forced to migrate from one country to another for hundreds of years. And as Jews we are boundary crossers, seeking a better, more ethical relationship to our world, to our fellow human beings, and to ourselves. As boundary crossers, both in a literal sense and in a psychological and moral sense, we should be predisposed to understand the plight of today's immigrants and refugees.

Now, I don't want to discuss immigration policy. Indeed, I want to shift the conversation away from questions such as:
Should we allow immigrants into this country?
Should we grant amnesty to those who are here without documents?
How many and according to what standards?
Should we build a border wall?

I want to shift the conversation to exploring these questions:
How do we treat the people who do come over, whether legally or not?
Even if the decision is to deport people, what kind of process do we subject them to? Do we view them all as criminals, or do we see in them desires and hopes that parallel our own?

As many of you know, I spent a week of my sabbatical in McAllen, Texas to volunteer for a week with the Catholic Charities Humanitarian Respite Center, set up to assist immigrants newly released from detention. I was fortunate to be accompanied by two congregants, Sandie Nelson and Deanne Edwards. In our work that week, we discovered that a smile can make a huge difference.

The pictures I am going to show were shot by Deanne and myself.

I have also included some news photos as we were not allowed to take photograph any of the immigrants inside the facility.



McAllen is the largest processing center for immigrants seeking to enter the United States. After arriving at the border, they are detained by immigration authorities.



If and when they are released, they are taken to the Central Bus Station. That is where staff and volunteers from the Respite Center pick them up and bring them to the center for a hot meal, a shower, a change of clothes, before being accompanied back to the bus station where they are sent off across the country to meet their sponsor -- usually a family member.

³ NBC News



Once there, they will face a court date and the decision of a judge as to whether they can stay here or be deported back home. Their chances of remaining here are quite slim, especially if they don't have a lawyer. These are actually the lucky ones. They are not placed in detention beyond a few days, and they are not permanently separated from their children. It is not entirely clear why they are being released while so many others are kept in detention for many months – detention in facilities such as this one in Adelanto.



It may be because they have a sponsor and a credible case for asylum, but no one we spoke to was entirely sure as the system seems to be somewhat arbitrary. However, their situation is far from fortunate. They come primarily from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, countries torn apart by violence and plagued by extreme poverty.

⁴ Daily Kos

These immigrants are fleeing violence, often fearful for their own lives and that of their children. Their dangerous journeys average 3-4 weeks during which they travel by foot, by bus, and/or on La Bestia, the freight trains whose rooves they ride. Some of the women are pregnant, some of the adults are carrying newborns.

Once they turn themselves in or are arrested at the border, they are put into detention for 3-4 days, in what the immigrants call “La Hielera” – the Ice Box -- because of how cold it is.

One woman, Maria Luisa, told us that she was separated from her two sons, forbidden from hugging them, forced to sleep on the floor with only an aluminum blanket, barely fed a frozen burrito, allowed to shower once for three minutes, and kicked awake at 3 o'clock in the morning. She, along with all the others who are released, was forced to wear an ankle monitor to ensure that she will appear for her court date. Maria Luisa's ankle bracelet, as was the case with the others we saw, was tight and uncomfortable, and made her leg swell. In order to shower, the women had to cut open their jeans to remove them over the monitor.



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This inhumane treatment is in marked contrast to how these immigrants are welcomed at the Respite Center, which was established four years ago by Sister Norma Pimentel. In that time, something like 100,000 immigrants have come through their doors. The motto over the front door, "Restoring Human Dignity," is what drives the staff and the revolving groups of volunteers from around the country. The immigrants here are met with kindness, concern and care.

⁵ NMPolitics.net

When they first arrive, they are rather stone-faced and wary, but soon they relax and respond to the warmth being shown to them. We tried as much as possible to look them each in the face and to smile, acknowledging their humanity.

We served them a bowl of homemade chicken soup, helped them find a fresh set of clothes and shoes, and guided them to the showers where we kept two washing machines and two dryers going constantly to keep up with the volume of towels.



Because the clothes on their backs had been worn for close to a month, we threw them away. We also put together snack bags and sandwiches to take with them when they returned to the bus station for the next step of their journey which involved from one to four buses with several hour waiting times in between.

One of my congregants was asked by some of her friends whether the children we saw actually belonged to the adults they were with. There is no question that these adults were their parents! They demonstrated a great deal of love and affection for their children, and the children were clearly very attached to them.



These asylum seekers are people like you and I, seeking a better life for themselves and their family.

"There but for the grace of God go I..."

They are looking for a new start, one with possibilities, one with hope.

Isn't that also the story of the Jewish people?

The Haftarah for the second day of Rosh Hashana is a passage from the prophet Jeremiah. He declares:

"A cry is heard in Ramah – wailing, bitter weeping -- Rachel weeping for her children."

Rachel, as you may recall, is one of the matriarchs who was barren for a long time. But the rabbis interpret Rachel's weeping for her children as her wrenching pain over the exiled Israelites.

God tells her to stop weeping because her children will return.

"There is hope for the future," says God, in this haftarah.

This is what our forebears were also looking for as they crossed into Canaan seeking to worship the one God, or came to America to escape persecution. It's what we strive for every day.

It is true that we cannot accommodate all the refugees in the world: there are 60 million driven out of their homes by war and famine and persecution. But do we need to treat them like criminals?

Certainly, there are some bad apples among them. And certainly, there are those who wish to take advantage of us.

⁶ San Antonio Express-News

But they are the exception, not the rule. Many of the same arguments were used against us when a boatload of Jews fleeing Germany on the Saint Louis was turned away by our government, or when in 1939, the US refused to admit 20,000 Jewish orphans. Laura Delano Houghteling, FDR's cousin and the wife of the U.S. immigration commissioner, put it plainly at the time: "Twenty thousand charming children would all too soon grow into 20,000 ugly adults."⁷

As we enter the 10 Days of Awe, we too are in search of a new beginning. We too want a better life, one that is more fulfilling, one that is more kind, one that is more secure. Even so, most of us have been quite blessed, blessed to have lived in a country with limited violence and great prosperity, and blessed to have homes and work and community. Let us be thankful for our good fortune. Let us also resolve to remember those whose lives have been disrupted by war, civil unrest, gangs, and poverty. At the very least, we can offer them a smile, a reminder that they too are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image.

⁷ <https://www.ozy.com/flashback/when-the-us-turned-away-20000-jewish-children-fleeing-nazi-germany/79700>