

Temple Emanu-El YK 5780 Sermon
Rabbi Spike Anderson

Gud Yuntif.

One of the greatest rabbis of the last millennia was Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz HaLevi. A man with such vision and knowledge that the Jews of 18th Century Poland called him The Seer (“*chozeh*”) of Lublin.

A fountain of spirituality, he was sought out by people who wanted to learn how to stay connected to God amidst their busy lives.

My favorite story about The Seer of Lublin is from when he was just a boy, long before he was revered.

Every day, this small child would leave the bustle of his noisy village and walk into the forest to pray.

His father, a learned man himself, one day asked him, “Son, why do you bother to go into the woods to pray? Don’t you know that God is the same everywhere?”

To which, his son, famously responds, “Dad, God may be the same everywhere...but I’m not.”

This simple exchange between a boy and his father has been repeated for centuries because it captures a truth that many recognize as profound.

The purest essence of who you are as a person requires a place free from distraction.

Your most authentic self requires space to listen.

Your deepest connective insights require time to be heard.

Away from the noise and distraction that seems pervasive in our lives.

Temple Emanu-El and Yom Kippur provide each of us with that space to be heard, to listen, and to connect with who we might still yet be.

The arc of our High Holiday storytelling forces us to hear ‘the uncomfortable’. The ‘perplexing’. To wrestle with that which is difficult. This motif begins early in Torah with the first two brothers, Cain & Abel. Cain kills Abel and then buries his body in the ground. God tries to have Cain take responsibility for his actions, asking him “*Ay Hevel Achicha/* where is your brother, Abel?” to which Cain famously replies “*HaShomar Achi Anochi/* Am I my brother’s keeper? (Genesis 4:9)

Am I my brother’s keeper?

We Jews repeat this to remind ourselves the value of human life. We are horrified by Cain’s murder. Yet, our Sages expand the question to force us to ask ourselves ‘whose lives are we responsible for ‘keeping’?

For only our brothers and sisters born of the same parents?

Only for Jews?

Only for our neighbors?

Are we responsible for everyone?

Ideally, we would like to consider everyone in the world our brother and sister, and to watch out for them like a sibling, but, as anyone who has ever had a sibling in dire need knows, the help that you give them takes a tremendous amount of time and resource.

The idea of giving that type of attention to myriads of people is literally impossible, despite what they might desperately need or what we might wish.

Yet, our rabbis clearly reinforce the idea that our brothers and sisters include others who don't share our parentage or our home.

With this conundrum in mind, my wife, Marita and I, felt compelled to travel this summer to the Arizona border with Mexico, in order to learn more about the immigration issues here in the US.

The news that we have all been hearing over the past year has been especially disturbing... but it's very hard to tell which stories to trust. Statements made by politicians only seem to muddy the waters... as opposed to what our real concerns should be: what is really happening to the people on our borders, and in our backyard?

Are we, as a society, making our best efforts to balance our security and limited national resources against helping innocents who come to us truly desperate for aid, shelter, and safety?

We wanted to see what was really happening with our own eyes, if we could, in order to get some clarity.

My perspective on our borders is similar to my perspective of my home. I have walls, and a roof, and doors with locks because I want to protect the people living inside my house. Anyone who comes into my home should be invited, and come through a door. Never would I consider turning a blind eye to people who wanted to get into my house without permission, regardless of their need or intent.

Up until this year I did not pay much attention to the immigration issue, but the images and stories that we have all recently seen make immigration hard to ignore. You see, I'm extremely proud to be an American, and I feel a sense of responsibility for what happens in our country.

The only time in my life that I was involved with immigration was in 1989. As a high school sophomore, I took the train to Washington, DC with my mother and my aunt, where we joined thousands who marched around the Russian Embassy for the release of the Jewish Russian Rufechnik. Remember all the work our Jewish community did to get the Russian Jews to safety? These were our brothers and sisters trapped behind the Iron Wall, whose lives were untenable because they were Jewish. "1,2,3,4 Open Up The Iron Door; 5,6,7,8 Let Our People Emigrate."

Six weeks ago, Marita and I headed to Phoenix to see with our own eyes what was going on, knowing that Immigration is a highly emotional, and complex issue. We agreed that we would go into this with an open mind.

At 4:30 in the morning, we drove to Tucson and then rode with our guide from US Border Patrol to Nogales, a town that straddles the border with Mexico. Marita and I are not naïve, and we knew that Public Relations was going to show us their best face. Officer Jesus Vasavilbaso is in his mid 40's and has a thoughtful yet commanding presence. He was born on the Mexican side of Nogales. As a teenager, he had immigrated to the United States and had finished High School in Arizona.

With stops along the way, he told us that first and foremost the Border Patrol's job is to save lives.

You see, any attempt to illegally cross the South-West border requires desperate people to hire a 'coyote', a smuggler of humans, who leads them blindly through scorching desert wilderness. Imagine what they are fleeing to knowingly take such a risk?

When we were there it was 114 degrees...and don't buy that business about it being a 'dry heat and not so bad'... it was an oven.

Oftentimes these 'coyotes' will abandon their wards, men, women, and children; putting them in grave danger. All through the desert, the US Border patrol has 'mayday stations' which can be used to call for help. If the migrants can physically get there, Border Patrol will drop everything to rescue them, and in doing so, will save their lives. They have to move fast though because that desert is extremely unforgiving.

The second part of their job is to stop drugs from being smuggled into America. What once was marijuana, now are

hard drugs like heroin, cocaine, and opioids. These drugs do not stay in the border towns, but quickly make their way into our country's interior. We know that we have an opioid crisis right here in Georgia. These drugs wreck lives.

We finally arrived at 'the wall' at Nogales. Where it is mere feet from the Arizona town, the fence is 25 feet high with cement-filled steel bars and barbed wire twisting around its top. However, just a mile up the public dirt road, we saw that the fence dropped to 15 feet. A mile beyond that, we could step over the barrier, and soon that yielded to no barrier at all. We were told that where there is a fence, it is merely a deterrent to slow people down until Border Patrol can arrive. I was surprised to hear that 70% of the people who attempt to cross this stretch of land without permission, get away with it. Gone. If we are serious about controlling who can enter US soil, what we have now is not working very well.

The remaining 30% are actively seeking asylum and turn themselves in to the Border Patrol. They are immediately taken into custody and put into a particular system.

Officer Vasavibaso did a good job answering most of our questions, but our hardest questions about stories and images of inhumane treatment were met with pivots and protocol. We were told that they were not allowed to comment about another department's jurisdiction, and since our concerns fell under ICE's jurisdiction, or Office of Refugee Resettlement, or Health and Human Services, we would get nothing.

This was our first view, but not our last, of the staggering government bureaucracy that obscures clear answers and transparency, even when speaking with the people who really are ‘in the know.’

Marita and I drove back to Phoenix for a meeting with a group called Arizona Jews For Justice. Led by an Orthodox rabbi named Shmuley Yanklowitz, this group’s entire purpose is to respond to the humanitarian crisis at their doorstep. A few times a week, dozens of asylum-seekers are released from our privatized detention centers at the Phoenix Central bus station. They are the ones who have been permitted the next step in the asylum process. They are given 10 days to get to their sponsors across the country in order to have their initial appearance before an immigration judge. Then starts a process that can last up to ten years, during which they are not permitted to work, nor to receive any social services. To me, this seems to set them up for failure and creates ripe scenarios for them to be taken advantage of. Under the current system, 80% of them will eventually be deported.

Rabbi Yanklowitz and his volunteers take very seriously the Divine mandate, repeated 36 times in Torah, that we Jews must protect, and treat with respect, the vulnerable foreigners who live amongst us.

*ViGer Lo TilChetz V’Atem Y’daTem Et Nefesh HaGer Ki Gerim
HehYiTem B’Eretz Mitrayim*

“You shall not oppress a *ger*, a foreigner amongst you, for you too know how it feels to be a *ger*, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9)

When they are released from the detention center, these *gerim* have nothing. No money, no language, no phones, no direction, no diapers for their children, no belts on their pants, no shoelaces on their shoes. Nothing. Arizona Jews for Justice acts as a clearinghouse for people like us, who may want to donate materials or *tzedakah* that will cloth and shelter, help them with phone calls, bus tickets, and to get them on their way.

With a bi-lingual guide, we loaded up our rental car with food and necessities and drove to a waystation, operated by Christians at their local church. We were greeted at the door by a little girl who ushered us in with hand gestures and a smile. A quick look around showed us families huddled together, people sleeping in the backroom on army cots and a gaggle of children whose playful energy sharply contrasted with their parents’ exhaustion.

With the help of our translator, we introduced ourselves to some of the adults, and we asked if they would share their story. They did. Each had their own harrowing journey, but to me, they all seemed to be versions of the same story: simple people fleeing desperate situations so that their family could live in safety.

I’d like to share one of these stories with you today. But I have to warn you, it’s a hard story to hear.

We sat with the young father of the little girl who greeted us. We were surprised when he told us that his daughter was both deaf and mute. Through the slow back and forth of our

translator, he let us know that he was from El Salvador. El Salvador is a failed state, run by brutal gangs. His family are farmers and had managed to stay out of the gangs. But something happened, and one gang wanted him to do something terrible. He wouldn't say what, but we can imagine. He refused. They threatened to kill him. He still refused. And so they told him, that if he did not do what they wanted, they would rape his little girl, and kill his entire family. He tried to flee to another part of El Salvador, but they were everywhere. And so he made a choice, an impossible choice, to put his wife and son into hiding, and to flee his country on foot to try to make it to American safety. 2500 miles through some of the most dangerous lands in the world, this father walked with his deaf daughter, to Nogales. There, they lived on the street for weeks, trying to avoid the gangs that prey on people like him waiting on our border. Eventually, his name was called, and he came in asking for asylum. As he told us his story, he was shaking. He was terrified for his wife and son back in El Salvador, who had to remain in hiding. His story was peppered with prayers, and he told us that if he were forced back to El Salvador, he and his daughter would be dead within a week. As he told us his story, we too began to shake.

Afterward, my wife and I sat in the church's parking lot, trying to make sense of all we had just heard. At one point, we looked at each other and said with absolute conviction that if it came down to it, we would absolutely hide that young man and his deaf daughter in our basement. There is no way that we would

let them be shipped off to be murdered. And as Jews sitting here today, you know exactly what I mean by that.

There are trees planted outside *Yad Vashem* in Jerusalem recognizing the righteous gentiles who kept a few of us from being murdered at great personal risk to themselves. While walking amongst these living symbols of courage, many of us have shaken with anger that those trees of the righteous do not stretch out as far as the eye can see. *Aychah!* Our book of Lamentations cries out, Why? Why so few?

This, my friends, is our central Jewish narrative! From Egypt to the Inquisition, from the Pogroms to ships like *The Exodus*, with no place to go our own mothers and fathers were turned away from the safety of civilized shores. Our central story is “how dare they! Look at us...we are such good people and we were so desperate. Those who turned us away are forever on the wrong side of history.”

But there is a problem with our own ideal. That question posed by Cain to God, with his brother’s blood still soaking up the ground: *HaShomar Ani Anochi/Am I my brother’s keeper?*

Yes, if it were just that one man and his daughter, no problem, we would let them in. Of course, we would. But what about hundreds like him? Thousands? Millions? Tens of millions? Much of the world is in a desperate state of extreme violence and poverty. Places like America are the very visible exception. As much as we have, it is impossible to help everyone who needs it or deserves it.

Yet hearing the stories that we did, from people fleeing hells in Congo and Cameroon, South and Central America...to look a father in the eye, as he holds his little girl ... no one here today in this Yom Kippur Sanctuary could help but to feel...empathy. Empathy. This type of emotion is not a weakness. On the contrary, it is what our Jewish tradition holds most sacred, and has guided us through the ages as God's partner to take this world from where it is, to where it ought to be.

I have a lot more to tell you, but we have restraints on our time.

I should tell you about going to Eloy Detention Center the next morning, which is literally a massive prison being run by a private company called CoreCivic. They run private prisons that house tens of thousands of immigrants seeking asylum all over America. There are stories that come out of these places, stories that should not surprise us when tens of thousands of people are held without legal representation or any civilian oversight.

These places are black boxes and operate with zero transparency. There is one in Lumpkin, Georgia, called Stewart Detention Center. It's about 3 hours away from here.

I should tell you about Joe and Selena Kessek, the two elders who took us inside the Detention Center. They've dedicated their lives to helping the people inside places like Eloy and Stewart find lawyers and to find regular people like you and me who might bond them out of captivity. With each visit, Joe and Selena drive away the fog of despondency that can overwhelm people who don't see the sun for months at a time. They are armed simply with hints of color, humanity, and hope. In Eloy, we were forbidden to bring anything inside. So all we could

really do was to bring those people, each of whom has a name, a brief sense of dignity. Is there anything more Jewish than this?

Marita and I flew back to Atlanta with lots of questions but almost no real answers. And for that, I am sorry. Our Immigration issue is a hugely complex and emotional issue fraught with conflicting priorities. All of them real. What we think is weighted by the realities of limited resources and safety concerns, but also with the Yom Kippur sense of mercy upon The Desperate, highlighted by our own Jewish narrative.

I would imagine that some of you would want to know more.

Like Marita and I, some of you might want to see things for yourself, away from the noise and distractions.

You might want to help provide *tzedakah* to these *gerim* who are en route to their bondsman: clothing, shoelaces, and diapers.

You may want to help those seeking asylum get access to lawyers so that more people get the American ideal of ‘a fair chance.’

If this is you, then email me. Let’s continue the conversation.

We also have added resources to our Temple Emanu-El website.

Clearly, we can’t help everyone who needs it, but can we at least help some of them?

I’d like to end with a story that I’ve told before, like the Seer of Lublin, profound in its simplicity. It’s called the Starfish thrower.

One day, an old man was walking down a beach. In front of him, stretching out for miles were starfish that had washed up on the shore, and were slowly dying in the sun. There were thousands upon thousands, too many to count. Coming from the other direction, he saw what seemed to be someone dancing along the beach. When he got closer, the old man saw that it was a young girl, who, every couple of feet would bend down, pick up a starfish, and throw it back into the water. When they finally got close enough to speak, the old man said to her, “little girl, why do you bother? Don’t you know that you can’t save them all?” To which, she replied as she bent down and picked up another starfish, throwing it back into the ocean, “I saved that one, didn’t I?” (pause)

Gud Yuntif