

Loving the Stranger

Many years ago, I spoke with you on Rosh Hashanah about a pair of candlesticks; not the tall, sterling silver sticks that Fran and I got as a wedding present from my parents, but a smaller, modest brass set that came from Fran's family. To this day, I remain intrigued by them, because no one in the family could say with any certainty where they came from. So I made up my own story about them, how one of Fran's great grandmothers, both of whom fled Poland for America at the turn of the twentieth century, carefully packed them in her belongings, knowing that these simple candlesticks, testimony to her family's fidelity to Jewish customs and traditions, would be a necessary bridge carrying them forward into the unknown future of America that lay before them. I love those candlesticks, and the story they tell about where we came from, our Jewish values, and who we, as a community have become.

Today, however, I want to tell you a story about a different kind of family Jewish artifact, also from Fran's family, but one that only just recently came to light. A few weeks ago, my father-in-law Bernie received a document from a cousin of his, who had discovered it while looking through his mother's papers. It was a visa application from a different time- nearly a century ago. Dated 1922, it was an application made by Bernie's grandfather Harry on behalf of family members living in Poland. Harry had arrived in America in 1900 as a young man, and now, by 1922, was a carpenter and cabinet maker earning \$65.00 dollars a week, in Newark, NJ. On the visa application, he testified that he had put away \$10,000.00 in savings. That was most certainly a lie, but a necessary one, in order to convince the government that he could guarantee that these relatives would not become a public burden.

And who were the relatives on whose behalf Harry was making this application? His nephew and niece: Szmul and Minna, ages 13 and 11, orphans.

My heart skipped a beat when I read that. Szmul and Minna, 13 and 11 years old, orphans. This piece of paper from the past- like those candlesticks- held secrets; it concealed as much as it revealed. A quick Google check showed that the area in which the family lived was east of Warsaw; an area that often suffered from shifting borders, and that had been forcibly reclaimed by Poland from Belarus in 1921, the previous year. My questions began to multiply: Were Szmul and Minna's parents murdered by soldiers? Did they die of starvation? And the orphans: What traumas had they witnessed? Were they kept safe until their Uncle Harry's visa application came through? On the other hand, did Harry even succeed, or were the visa applications rejected? Did the orphans ever make it to the new world, or did they die, as so many millions of others would, in the Holocaust, a scant two decades later? Although the cousin who gave this document to my father-in-law is determined to do the research that might answer some of these questions, for now, we just don't know. We are simply left with haunting, unanswered questions.

And yet, like the candlesticks, this visa application is a very real and powerful testament to certain truths about our Jewish values, and our collective historical experience. And here is why:

First, it reminds us that from the Torah down to the present day, Jews act on their obligation to care for one another, particularly the widow and the orphan. Throughout the often dire historical circumstances of exile, we have fulfilled this mitzvah, this commandment, to take care of the weak and the helpless. We are all family, and families take care of one another. That's what Bernie's grandfather Harry was trying to do.

And the second thing it tells us is that, throughout this history of dispersion, our fate has often been dependent on the will of others who are more powerful than us: the authorities who have granted us, or not, the right to live in a certain place. In more modern times, our lives have often been dependent on the governments and bureaucrats who have the power to grant or deny visas.

At the Yivo Institute in New York City, there resides a huge repository of aging files, tens of thousands of them, each one telling the story of a Jewish refugee family applying for an American visa in the years leading up to the Holocaust. All too many of them tell the same story of a frustrating entanglement with bureaucracy, insurmountable regulations and heartbreakingly restrictive quotas. All too many of them ended with unresolved, open cases of individuals and families who were inevitably caught and murdered by the Nazis.

A few years ago, a volunteer researcher picked up a file quite by chance- it was mislabelled- and a familiar looking photograph of a father and his two daughters tumbled out. “My God,” she exclaimed. “This is the Frank file. This is Otto, Margot and Anne Frank”. The name Anne Frank speaks for itself. Owing to her diary’s having survived her family’s years of hiding in an Amsterdam attic, and Anne’s eventual murder at Bergen-Belsen, she is arguably the best known victim among Hitler’s six million Jewish victims. Apparently, her family is also a sad example of the failed experience of many thousands of refugees to overcome the United States’ immigration policies of the 1930’s.

Some made it in, and Otto Frank should have been one of the lucky ones. He had financial resources and family - two of Edith Frank’s brothers already lived in America. And he had some powerful connections. Otto’s old friend, Nathan Straus Jr., was an official in President Roosevelt’s administration, and a personal friend of the First Lady. Otto Frank had once lived

in Manhattan, on the upper west side. Anne was studying American shorthand, in preparation for their new lives. Yet, the 70 plus page Frank file details the heart-breaking twists and turns of a dysfunctional immigration system that ultimately failed the Franks, as it failed so many others.

In those years, the American public's wariness towards refugees outweighed their sympathy. When, in October 1938, The Nazis orchestrated Kristallnacht, a nation-wide pogrom against Germany's Jews, the world was shocked. Not long after Kristallnacht, a poll found that 94 percent of Americans disapproved of Nazi treatment of Jews. And yet, the same poll showed that 72 percent still objected to admitting large numbers of Jews.

The reasons for the opposition then were the same as they are for rejecting refugees today: We can't afford it, we should look after Americans first, we can't accept everybody, they'll take American jobs, and they are dangerous. With a World War under way, German Jews were widely seen as threats, stereotyped, as either communists, or as embedded Nazi spies and saboteurs, under the cover of being refugees. It all sounds so sadly familiar today.

According to NY Times columnist Nick Kristoff, news organizations back then tragically didn't do enough to humanize refugees and instead, helped to stoke the xenophobia: The Times published a front page article about the risks of Jews becoming Nazi spies, and The Washington Post published an editorial thanking the State Department for keeping out Nazis posing as refugees.

As in any story of this nature, there are villains, there are the passively indifferent, but there are also heroes. Perhaps you saw the PBS film a couple of weeks ago about Waitstill and Martha Sharp, a Unitarian minister and his wife from Wellesley Massachusetts. The Sharps were recognized some years ago by Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial, as

Righteous Gentiles, two of only 5 Americans to be so designated. In 1939 and 1940, the Reverend and his wife left the safety and comfort of their life in Wellesley, entrusted the care of their young children to others, and undertook a series of dangerous journeys to Czechoslovakia and France in order to rescue Jewish refugees. They were an unlikely pair of spies. In fact, Reverend Sharp's superiors had asked 17 other clergy couples before them to take on this mission, but Waitstill and Martha were the first to say yes.

While most Americans in those years chose not to make the Jewish refugee crisis their issue, the Sharps chose otherwise. They learned the art of spycraft and risked their lives to save men, women and children who had no other hope. Their exploits included accompanying a group of Jewish doctors and professors with forged papers on a harrowing train ride across Nazi Germany to Holland; arranging for groups of children to be flown to England; spiriting groups of Jews through Vichy France, and hiking with them through dangerous mountain passes to reach the safety of the Spanish border.

The Sharps' story is inspiring. They uprooted their lives in order to fulfill the commandment of their Biblical tradition, which of course is also our Biblical tradition, *to love the stranger as yourself- v'ahavta et hager- , for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt- Ki gerim hayitem b'erezt mitzrayim.*

And their story is also humbling. 75 years later, we are also witnessing a refugee crisis, the largest since the Second World War. And most of us, like Americans in the 1930's and 40's, are choosing not to make it our issue. Elie Wiesel, *alav hashalom*, who passed away in July, survived Auschwitz, and became one of our generation's greatest moral voices. He often spoke about the evil of indifference. Speaking at the White House in 1999, he taught, and continues to teach us to this day: **"Indifference is not a beginning, it is an end. And, therefore, indifference**

is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor -- never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees -- not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity we betray our own."

Today, there are sixty million displaced persons around the globe, due to factors ranging from civil war and ethnic persecution to famine and economic collapse. 11 million of them are Syrians who have fled their homes because of a relentless civil war characterized by callous indifference to the lives of civilians. Of those 11 million, 7 million are displaced within Syria and over 4 million are refugees. Most of those are languishing in ill-equipped, squalid tent cities in Jordan, Turkey or Lebanon. Months are turning into years, while young children grow up without schools, and families' hopes for a return to normalcy grow ever dimmer.

The United States will accept 85,000 refugees from around the world this year, a number which has gone higher and lower over the years. But that's the number of total refugees. Only 10,000 of those spaces will be for Syrians. The numbers are very small, and yet nevertheless significant. For, as the Talmud teaches, he who saves even a single life is like one who has saved an entire world.

In spite of the fact that refugees have to go through a rigorous, multi-leveled vetting in order to enter the United States, a process that has become more stringent since 9/11, and that can take up to two years, our national conversations around this subject are often heated and filled with fear. And not entirely without reason. In the last ten months alone, we have lived through the mass shootings in San Bernadino and Orlando, a knife rampage in a Minnesotan mall, and a partially successful multiple bombing in New Jersey and NYC, all perpetrated by

Muslims who either had come legally into this country, or whose parents had arrived as immigrants. I struggle with the “what ifs” and the uncertainties of a future that we can neither predict nor control. It seems reasonable to be afraid of widening our doors to immigrants who, they or their children may be susceptible to radicalization and terrorism. Who knows? I, too, feel fear’s constricting grip on my own heart. And yet, I also know that fear clouds our judgment and blunts both our wisdom and our moral compass. It can cause me, against my sounder sense of reason, to paint an entire people with one brush, to buy in to the same arguments that were used against Jews by others, not that long ago.

This very dilemma that we face in this moment was eerily, almost precisely anticipated by our Rabbis, 1500 years ago, in a Midrash on the very story that we read this morning in the Torah.

Go back in your mind to the scene in which Abraham complies with Sara’s order to cast out Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. Alone in the desert, with insufficient water, Hagar succumbs to thirst and despair, and gives up. She and Ishmael, her child, would have died in the wilderness, had not God, according to the text, “heard the cry of the boy ‘*B’asher who sham,*’ where he was.” Now, that’s an interesting turn of phrase- *ba’asher who sham- where he was*. Listen to how the Midrash interprets its significance: The Torah simply says that an angel urges Hagar to look up so that she should see that there was actually a well filled with water, thus saving Hagar and her child. However, according to the Midrash, some of the angels protested to God. “Why are you saving Ishmael?” they ask. “You know that his descendants, the Arabs, will be the enemies of Isaac’s descendants, and try to kill them. Why not just let Ishmael die?” And God responds to them with his own question. “Look at the boy,” God says, “and tell me. Right now, is he innocent or is he guilty?” Well, the angels had to admit, he’s innocent. Right now,

he's a child, but someday... "Stop," says God. "I don't need to hear any more. I am responding to the cry the child 'Ba'asher who sham, ' where he is right now, in this moment!" My friends, our Rabbis were aware that moral decision making in a complex world is difficult. Yet, they are telling us through this beautiful *midrash* that we must cut through the rationalizations, the what-ifs, and the maybes. They are telling us that sometimes you have to cut through the fear and respond to the need that is right in front of you, and that is what we as Americans and as Jews are being called to do now.

In the final analysis, as a Jew, I have no choice but to come down on the side of our country welcoming in refugees, including Syrian refugees. And I will tell you why: Our Torah surpassed the moral standards of its time by repeatedly linking the widow and the orphan, who epitomize the most defenseless in ancient society, with the Ger, the stranger who lives among you. **Leviticus 19:34 teaches us:** *The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Speaking about the current refugee crisis, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks remarked, **"I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was 'Love your neighbor as yourself'. Then I realized that it is easy to love your neighbor because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose color, culture or creed is different from yours."**

Some scholars propose that the word Ger, stranger, comes from a Semitic root that means fear. And who is more afraid than the stranger, the refugee, who has no community to protect her? And, at the same time, who do we fear more than the stranger, because he is different, because we don't understand him, because she is not one of us?

Fear is a constricting emotion. You can feel it in your body as the heart pumps faster and the breath grow short. It undermines the clarity of mind and heart, the striving for renewal and for growth, which is the essential quality and message of this day.

Each day from the beginning of the month of Elul, to the end of this month of fall Holy Days, we say a special psalm, psalm 27. And the essence of the psalm is in its opening words: Adonai Uri v'Yishi- mimi Ira?- Adonai is my light and my salvation- of whom should I be afraid? Rosh Hashannah is about taming our fear, and seeing a renewed possibility in life. We cannot erase or banish fear, but we can make wise, even courageous decisions, in spite of it. The Rabbis often talk about two kinds of Teshuva: Repentance out of fear, or repentance out of love. The first kind is when we are motivated either by a fear of punishment, or by guilt, even self-loathing, because of what we have done. Repentance out of love, however, has an expansive, imaginative quality. It grows from a vision of who we are capable of being, and what it might be like to act in alignment with God. On Rosh Hashanah, we affirm that the world is continually created anew, and so, potentially are we. In this paradigm, fear's power over us withers.

A few weeks ago, on the 15th anniversary of 9/11, the Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan chose to write about one particular hero of that terrible day. Welles Crowther was a twenty-four-year-old Boston College graduate who was a junior associate at Sandler O'Neill, the investment bank. He worked on the 104th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center. When United Flight 175 hit the tower, it came in at an angle, ripping through floors 78 through 84. After Welles realized what had happened and had found the one free staircase down, he carried or escorted traumatized and wounded people to safer lower floors, and then went back to rescue more people. Again and again.

Welles Crowther eventually made it out of the building, but he never made it home. Instead of fleeing for safety, he stayed behind to work with the firemen, saving even more lives. Welles' Dad was a volunteer fireman, and Welles himself had recently applied to the NYFD.

His body was found 6 months later in the remains of what had been the command center of the NY Fire Department, along with the bodies of heroes of the Department.

When Peggy Noonan asked Welles's family, how do you make a hero, his mother responded by talking about Welles's innate courage and caring, and the values of honesty and of taking responsibility, which were always important to their family. Noonan, however, had her own take. She writes:

“The way I see it, courage comes from love. There's a big unseen circle of love that hums through the world, and some plug into it more than others, more deeply and surely, and they get more power from it. And it fills them with courage. It makes everything possible.”

Although Peggy Noonan probably knows little if anything about the Jewish mystical tradition, our Rabbis offer us a similar teaching: *Hesed Yibaneh Olam*: the world is sustained through Lovingkindness: *Hesed*. All of creation flows, and is sustained only through the Divine quality of Lovingkindness.

Entering the year 5777, what would it be like for all of us to plug into that circle of *Hesed* which surrounds, infuses and supports our world? What courage might we find? Do we have the moral imagination to see ourselves acting as fearlessly as Waitstill and Martha Sharpe, or as selflessly as Welles Crowther? Released from some of the fear that so often keeps us stuck in our tracks, what modest, yet concrete steps might we take here, locally, if we were empowered and motivated by *Hesed*? What would now seem possible?

We cannot, on our own, bring peace to the war torn places around our planet. But we can at least respond in some small ways to the many victims seeking refuge. Our local Jewish Family Service of Metrowest will be settling 12 to 14 Syrian refugee families in the Boston area, beginning in the coming months. And they are asking for our help. Temple Israel has been

invited to join a group of Metrowest congregations to work with JFS, to help re-settle three Syrian families in Framingham.

JFS works in conjunction with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), which is one of nine national resettlement agencies that are working with the State Department to resettle refugees. As Marc Hetfield, President and CEO of HIAS often says, “In the past, HIAS resettled Jews. Now, we resettle refugees because we are Jews”. *Because we know the heart of the stranger.*

JFS Executive Director Marc Jacobs anticipates that each of these families will be coming from refugee camps, and will have young children. These children may be attending a real school for the first time. Marc anticipates that parents and children both will be dealing with trauma, perhaps PTSD, not to mention the incredible gulf of language and culture that they will have to cross. And we are being offered the opportunity to help. There will be a need for tutoring, or help learning English; arranging for rides, or getting a driver’s licence. They will need furniture and clothing. And, there will be crucial opportunities simply to welcome, to help, one sympathetic face to another, to restore a sense of normal human decency and safety, to families for whom all of that has been compromised. I am so proud, and touched, by some of the reactions of our members who have already heard this news, and have volunteered to help, in any way that they can. I will update all of you shortly after the Holidays with news about this amazing project and the specific opportunities that there will be for you to help.

As we enter a new year, what could be more important than our prayers for peace? The custom of including the phrase, “*V’al Kol Yoshevi Tevel, all the inhabitants of the earth,*” at the end of the Kaddish, began after 9/11. Communities added them to the Kaddish’s prayer for peace, because that tragedy showed us just how small and vulnerable the world has become.

And yet, saying those additional words somehow opens my heart just a little more, and makes me feel safer. (I was surprised, and deeply moved, to her that when Tvia Peres, the daughter of the late visionary leader of the State of Israel, Shimon Peres, led the Kaddish at her father's funeral last week, she added a similar phrase: *v'al kol bnai adam*). *Oseh Shalom Bimromav, Hu Ya'ashe Shalom Aleynu... May God Who establishes peace in the heavens, establish peace for us, for the land and people of Israel, and for all people with whom we share this good planet.*

V'Nomar Amen!

May 5777 be a year in which we and our loved ones are happy and healthy, a year in which we grow in our capacity to love the stranger as well as each other, and a year in which we find a renewed courage that grows from the place of the heart!