

Erev Tov. Immigration and the concerns of the immigrant community have been an important part of CJC's *tikkun olam* work this last year. In Feb., our congregation took a stand on immigration and I quote an excerpt from that policy: "In striving to fulfill Jewish law, CJC donates food and clothing for those in need and engages in other service projects throughout Howard County. The Torah teaches that we must act to meet our moral standards, and these standards are not dependent on whether a person in need is in compliance with current immigration rules and procedures. We, therefore, provide our services equally to all those in need. We do not deny food, clothing, or other services based on a person's religion, ethnicity, or citizenship. At CJC, we believe that the governments of Howard County, the State of Maryland, and the United States of America, should take action according to the principles upon which our Nation was founded, to love the "strangers", to provide for their well-being, and to treat them justly." Since then, I have watched our *tikkun olam* committee network with other organizations that are working on this issue, allowing our community to become a part of the fabric working to provide a safe haven for those who are new to our county. Think globally; act locally.

Throughout this journey, I have been struck by how unified (not unanimous, but unified) CJC and the larger Jewish community have been about protecting the rights of immigrants. We might disagree on labeling ourselves a sanctuary community, or the extremes we are willing to go to protect those undocumented. I do not want to whitewash some very complicated and difficult differences, but for the most part, when it comes to dreamers, pathway to citizenship and non-violent undocumented neighbors, the Jewish community stands firmly in support of immigrant rights. The question for me is why? We so rarely agree on anything-why agree on this?

One can argue that the protection of the stranger is as ancient as the Bible. After all, the precept to protect the stranger appears in the biblical text according to Rabbi Art Waskow 36 times, which is more than any other commandment. All very similar to the quote found in Lev. 19:33-34 “ If a stranger will sojourn in your land, you will not afflict him or her. Like a citizen you will treat him or her. And you will love him or her like yourself because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” First we are commanded to treat the stranger like a citizen. Can this verse sound more contemporary? The stranger is to have all the same rights as any other citizen.

But this verse does not stop there; it continues with the concept of loving our neighbor found in Lev. 19:18. This verse was so important to the rabbis that it was incorporated into the morning liturgy where we say every morning “For the sake of the union of the blessed Holy One with the Shekinah, I stand here, ready in body and mind, to take upon myself the mitzvah, ‘You shall love your fellow human being as yourself,’ and by this merit may I open up my mouth.” This declaration of love and respect for those I do not know comes before I am able to thank Gd for the pure soul placed inside of me every day. Liturgically we do not focus on ourselves until we have acknowledged the divinity in someone we do not know.

For still others it is Ben Zoma in Mishna Avot 4:1 who asked, “who is wise?” One who learns from all people: all people-not just the ones that look and sound familiar. Or it might be Ben Azzi in Avot 4:3 who insisted that we were forbidden to regard anyone with contempt...for there is no person who does not deserve his place. Or the *midrash* where the rabbis asked why Gd created Adam alone. The answer was so that no one people can claim that our ancestors were created first, implying that my ancestors are better than yours. German Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen from the late 1800s wrote, “The stranger was to be protected although he was

not a member of ones family, clan, religion, community or people. Simply because he was a human being. In the stranger therefore human beings discovered the idea of humanity.”

Why has the Jewish community united around today’s immigration experience?

I wish I believed that the Jewish community was united around the immigrant experience for all the legitimate *halachic*/legal reasons I have begun to outline for you. The truth is, I really do not believe that is why. Rather I believe it is because not too long ago so many of us were them. For the one or two of you who stayed up to 1:30 am when I testified before HC county council in February, I apologize for repeating a little bit of my testimony here. You see, I began that testimony by sharing two short stories I would like to share here this evening. One about a woman named Sarah and the other about a man named William. Sarah was born and raised in the old country. She was the youngest in a very big family that was targeted for violence, unemployment, discrimination, and hate crimes on a regular basis. Her family designated her older single unattached brother to come to the United States of America. It took years before the system worked and he was finally granted legal passage to the United States. Unfortunately, by the time the papers came, he was sick and unable to leave his family. So Sarah dressed up as a man and left the old country at the age of 18. There was one small problem yet to be solved, Sarah needed to be sponsored by an American citizen. Thankfully for her, there were men who were for hire. You paid them enough money and they became your uncle for the day. I say “lucky for her” because she had the money in hand to pay; others paid by becoming prostitutes until they had paid off their sponsorship.

The other person’s story I would like to share with you is William’s. William was also born in the old country. His family’s papers to immigrate to the United States did not come until he was 6 years old. When he was four, he fell down a flight of stairs. He destroyed his ear drum

and never heard another sound again. Because of the lack of medical and educational resources available to those in poverty, he never made any sounds except to grunt. When his family got to Ellis Island, they lied and said he was shy, fluent in two languages, and had a head cold.

Both Sarah and William were allowed into this country and eventually became naturalized citizens. William grew up and married Martha, another child immigrant. Sarah married Morris, who also immigrated as an adult. Between the four of them, their descendants became TV repair men, successful business men and women, CPAs, high school English teachers, decorated service men in the Navy and infantry, sign language interpreters, a New York City defense lawyer, a Columbus Ohio TV sports reporter, and social workers. Their descendants marched for civil rights and the end of the Vietnam War, lobbied our legislatures for better child care, education, and marriage equality. They even have a congregational rabbi who lives and works in Howard County in their family tree. You see Morris, Sarah, William and Martha are my grandparents. All four of them immigrated to this country, two of them legally, following all the rules while two of them, Sarah and William's parents, lied, manipulated, deceived and bought their way into this country. The only thing that separates Sarah and William from the undocumented residents of Howard Country is 100 years. I wish my grandmother and grandfather's story were anomalies but they really aren't. In fact, they were more the norm than the exception.

You see, in the 1920's the US was closing its borders and tightening the restrictions on who could get into this country legally. In June 1930, the Attorney General's office in Washington received a letter from the assistant U.S. attorney in Miami describing the case of Chaim Josef Listopad, who tried to enter the country using false papers provided by the smuggler Samuel Weisstein and was apprehended. Typical of this illegal immigration was Naftoli

Lederman of Poland, who tried to enter from Mexico using crude faked documents and was arrested, which was considered a victory for law enforcement. In Windsor, Ontario, just over the border, a journalist described blocks of dingy hotels used by smugglers and referred to as “Alien Row.” Authorities in Bombay, New York in 1926 arrested Clara and Tola Zacharjasz, teenage Polish Jews. They had been illegally smuggled into this country from Canada, along with four Irish men and an Irish woman with three children. So common was this practice that immigration officials were instructed not just to work at the border, but to pursue illegal Jewish entrants throughout the interior, into boats, trains, or private automobiles suspected of transporting such individuals. Professor Robert A. Slayton, a humanities professor at Chapman University wrote, “Given the illegal nature of this migration, we will never have definitive numbers of how many Jews broke the law to enter this country after 1924; evidence suggests a figure in the tens of thousands.” Tens of thousands, the ancestors to hundreds of thousands, all American citizens living legally in the country today thanks to our ancestor’s decision to break the law in order to provide an opportunity for their descendants they could never hope for back home.

Tonight we began the service with *Kol Nidre*. This prayer from the middle ages begins by asking us to declare our consent to pray with those who have transgressed. It then continues with a quote from Num. 15:26 “And all the congregation of the people Israel shall be forgiven, as well as the stranger who dwells among them, for all the people Israel acted in error.” Every single year, we begin our year by acknowledging that we are not only imperfect, but also that we are required to forgive all others who are also imperfect, including the stranger in our midst. This forgiveness is not the forgiveness of the movies. We forgive you and hope you rot in jail. This is the kind of forgiveness Isaiah will remind us of tomorrow that requires us to give people a second chance. Isaiah, close to 3000 years ago, will scream tomorrow through history to shake

us out of our complacency and demand that we answer his ancient and relevant question, “Is not the fast that I desire the unlocking of the chains of wickedness, the loosening of exploitation, the freeing of all those oppressed, the breaking of the yoke of servitude? Is it not the sharing of your bread with those who starve, the bringing of the wretched poor into your house, or clothing someone you see who is naked,...If you banish oppression from your midst, the menacing hand and tainted speech, if you give of yourself to the hungry, fulfilling the needs of the poor—then your light will shine in darkness.” Then later tomorrow afternoon we will read from the book of Leviticus where we are commanded to leave the corners of our fields unharvested for the poor and the stranger to eat from, where the author of Lev. demands that we never stand idly by our neighbor’s blood. This is a biblical way of saying there is no such thing as an innocent bystander. We are commanded to get involved. And where the very end of our afternoon torah portion ends –the last *pasuk*/verse we chant is from the verse in Lev. 19:18 where we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. And just as I would want my country to welcome my ancestors, my family, and my friends into this country regardless of how they got here as long as they are non-violent contributing members of society, I too must treat others that way. After all we are commanded in Dt. 15:7-8 “if there is a needy person among you...do not harden your heart nor shut your hands.”

Our *tikkun olam* committee has spent the last six months exploring different *tachlis*/concrete ways we can get involved. We have expanded our coalition to include other synagogues and churches. And in the end we found two projects we think we can make a difference in.

- 1) FIRN-the local agency that supports all foreign born residents of our county has created what they call an “angel network.” This is a network of community members who are willing to provide goods and services to FIRN’s clients at a lower cost or for free. Services might include specialized medical care, dental or vision care, mental health services, transportation, mechanics, home repairs and tutoring, to name a few

possibilities. Every single person in this room has talents that can help someone who cannot afford them and/or is not eligible for any government services because they are undocumented.

- 2) We know there is a need for lawyers and paralegals who are willing to donate one Sunday/month to help refugees fill out the papers for asylum. Did you know that a person who has a lawyer fill out the forms has a 75% chance of being granted a green card or citizenship? One does not need to be an immigration lawyer for someone to benefit from your help.

So what am I asking? I am asking for you all to think about what you have to offer, put it in an email to me, come to our next *tikkun olam* meeting, bring your own ideas and get involved. In a moment we will rise for the silent *amidah* which can be found on pp. 740, alternative readings begin on pp. 1. As we recite this *amidah*, beginning with our call to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah, let us remember that they too were strangers who wandered from land to land searching for a safe haven. How can we be the safe haven so many deserve? Please rise