



## “KNOW THE HEART OF THE STRANGER”

“Do not misbehave. Do not sit on the floor. Do not share your food. Do not use nicknames. Also, it is best not to cry. Doing so might hurt your case.

Lights out by 9 PM and lights on at dawn, after which make your bed according to the step-by-step instructions posted on the wall. Wash and mop the bathroom, scrubbing the sinks and toilets. Then it is time to form a line for the walk to breakfast.

“You had to get in line for everything,” recalled Leticia, a girl from Guatemala.

Small, slight and with long black hair, Leticia was separated from her mother after they illegally crossed the border in late May, 2018. She was sent to a shelter in South Texas – ...reserved for the likes of Leticia, 12, and her brother, Walter, 10.

...Do not touch another child, even if that child is your hermanito or hermanita – your little brother or sister. Leticia had hoped to give her little brother a reassuring hug. But “they told me I couldn’t touch him,” she recalled.” (NYT By Dan Barry, Miriam Jordan, Annie Correal and Manny Fernandez, July 14, 2018)

Haya wrote: I was born in the United States to Syrian parents, who sacrificed everything they had to ensure that I could live the life that they were not allowed to live. A life free from persecution and oppression. Now at 17, I am studying in the United States with privilege and in harmony, while Syria is facing a disastrous war that has torn my family to pieces. My Mom, Dad, and 14 year old sister are banned from entering the United States because of their nationality and religion. The country that I was born in not only betrayed me, but it betrayed my family as well. (ACLU. com stories of people impacted by the ban on travel from certain Muslim majority countries)

Marta Rodriguez is a grandmother who has lived in New Carrollton for ten years. She pays taxes, has a social security number, a work authorization card, and owns her home. “She basically taught us how to be parents,” said John Hughes, one of several DC families who entrusted their children to Marta’s care as a Nanny. And for 9 years, Marta has dutifully reported regularly to the ICE office in Baltimore.

On March 29th, Marta went to check in as scheduled, and was told: “This is not your country. Go back to your country.” She was told to return to ICE on May 10, with a one-way plane ticket to Honduras.

Marta left Honduras a decade ago to escape her abusive husband to whom she had been forcibly married at 15. Her son, Osman, now 33 years old, is severely disabled - both mentally and physically. He requires 24-hour in-home nursing care. Marta wasn’t able to make enough money in Honduras to give him the care he needed, so she made the decision to immigrate to the US for work. Every month she sent \$600 to pay for Osman’s medical care.

Members of Congress made calls to ICE on her behalf and members of her community showed up to protest her deportation. When our BHC immigration task force learned of her plight, some of our members showed up to protest as well. And she was deported anyway, leaving behind her youngest child -15 now left to grow up without his mother. (DMV Sanctuary Network, Baltimore Sun, and Baltimore Fishbowl.com)

*V’ger lo toneh v’lo tilchatzeinu, ki gerim heyitem b’eretz mitzrayim.* You shall not hate the stranger, nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:20)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the UK, wrote about this verse,

Why should you not hate the stranger? – asks the Torah. Because you once stood where he stands now. You know the heart of the stranger because you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt. If you are human, so is he. If he is less than human, so are you. You must fight the hatred in your heart as I once fought the greatest ruler and the strongest empire in the ancient world on your behalf. I made you into the world’s archetypal strangers so that you would fight for the rights of strangers – for your own and those of others, wherever they are, whoever they are, whatever the colour of their skin or the nature of their culture, because though they are not in your image – says G-d – they are nonetheless in Mine. There is only one reply strong enough to answer the question, “Why should I not hate the stranger?” Because the stranger is me. (Sermon on Mishpatim, 2008, adapted)

Rabbi Sacks is so insightful and so right, but we don’t even need to reach back to the Exodus from Egypt to know or perhaps to be reminded that the “stranger is me.” Would you mind standing up if you are an immigrant to America? Stay standing. If your parents were immigrants? Your grandparents? (nearly everyone in the room stood ~ 1500 people)

It is striking, isn’t it? Virtually every single one of us is only a generation or two removed from the fear and uncertainty of being the stranger, the immigrant. The struggles they endured, the genocide they fled called Pogrom or Holocaust, the economic hardships that drove them to the Goldene Medina – the country with streets paved in gold; this country the promise held out by THIS country, THIS nation. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

After college, before rabbinical school, I taught for the Close Up Foundation – a non-partisan organization whose mission is to “inform, inspire, and empower young people to exercise the rights and accept the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.” Toward the end of my time there, I got to teach in the New Americans program for teens who had been in the country fewer than 5 years. These kids were amazing – so eager to learn and so happy to be in this country.

Each week’s curriculum was different, but there were some constants. For the New Americans program, it was a Congressional process simulation on immigration policy. The

kids would draft legislation, pass it through committees and finally, vote on it. There were roles to play - Speaker of the House, Chair of the committee, lobbyist, expert witnesses. The students learned history, how a bill becomes a law and something about themselves. Every time we did the simulation, every time, 300 New American teens, so grateful to be here, passed legislation to limit or close off future immigration. They argued that resources are finite and jobs are scarce and these new people wouldn't add to the society, they would merely deplete it. And they didn't see the irony or the tragedy.

I learned that it's not surprising and it cuts across origin, race and religion - once safely in, the door gets shut behind.

It's not surprising, but it is also not acceptable and we Jews must do better.

We must. It is our imperative in Torah over and over and over.  
The Stranger shall be to you as a citizen (Leviticus 19:34)  
Do not subvert the rights of the stranger (Deuteronomy 24:17)  
You too must befriend the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:19)  
WHY? Because:  
You know the heart of the stranger (Exodus 23:9)

I learned from Rabbi Don Goor that Torah teaches us not about the legality or illegality of immigration. It doesn't teach us about walls or protection. It doesn't talk about the quality of our defenses. It talks about the quality of individual lives. Torah's imperatives don't begin with policy. They begin with humanity. Rabbi Goor writes:

"And that is where current debate goes wrong. When we talk about immigration, we talk about an issue...that affects our nation. When Jews talk about immigrants, we [must] talk about human beings, created in God's image. Judaism is very clear in its teachings. ...Only when we begin with the human being can we then create a policy that reflects our values." (from Rabbi Don Goor address 2006 on RAC.org)

So, tonight, I don't have a policy recommendation. I won't tell you to call this Senator or write a postcard to this Congressperson. It's truly not about policy. It is about human beings. Leticia and Walter and Haya and Marta. The ones who, though not created in our own image, are nonetheless created in God's. And those human beings should not have their children stripped from them because they don't have the right pieces of paper. And those human beings should not be banned from our soil because some people from their country would commit acts of terror. And those human beings should not be sent away from their homes, which they have worked for and paid taxes on so that people who came here a generation or two or even a dozen generations ago can feel like they have righteously shut the door behind themselves.

If you agree, please talk to Martha Weiman or Stuart Katzenberg who head our immigration task force, or Tracie Guy Decker who leads BHC Justice, or me about how we can do better because we are Jews. They can tell you about the Immigration taskforce and I can tell you about the National Immigrant Justice Leadership Team of the Reform Movement of which I am a member.

As one leading organization in immigrant justice, HIAS says, "We used to care about immigrants and refugees because they were Jewish. Now we care about immigrants and refugees because WE are Jewish."

Shana Tova u'metuka. May it be a sweet and healthy new year for all the human beings created in God's image. Amen.