

“To Know the Heart of the Stranger”

This November, we will mark the 75th Anniversary of one of the darkest days in Jewish history – Kristalnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. If there is a definable moment at which the Holocaust began, it was November 9th and 10th of 1938, when terror was unleashed against the Jews.

In 24 hours, 1,000 Jews were murdered, 30,000 were taken from their homes and deported to concentration camps, 7,500 Jewish storefronts and businesses and more than 200 synagogues were smashed, burned, or destroyed. It was a night of shattered glass, and shattered hope for German Jewry.

And, even though the traditionally pro-appeasement Times of London declared it, “a black day for Germany,” the West, including the United States, still refused to expand its restrictive immigration quotas. They essentially played right into the hands of Germany. Because German officials were then able to declare that no one wants the Jews, and free reign was given to Germany to do with the Jews as they saw fit. And we know what that was.

Thankfully, there were some Jews who had the foresight and the means to flee Germany before the borders were permanently sealed in 1939. And those who scraped together their passage to freedom were among the 937 passengers who boarded the S.S. St. Louis, bound for safe haven in Cuba. But tragically, when the St. Louis steamed into Cuban port, Cuban officials had a change of heart and, after a dramatic and lengthy negotiation, only 22 Jewish passengers left the ship. The St. Louis was forced back to sea. It then sailed slowly toward Miami, hoping for mercy from the United States, passing so closely, in fact, that those aboard could see the lights flickering ashore. Passengers were sending desperate telegrams from the ship to President Roosevelt, begging for entry to the United States, but he never answered them.

In 1939, only a total of 27,000 German-Austrian immigrants were allowed to enter the United States each year. That quota had long been filled and a just-elected isolationist and xenophobic Congress had no intention of increasing immigration, nor was President Roosevelt willing to expend his political capital to overrule them with an executive order. So, the S.S. St Louis sailed past Miami, back to Europe, where the refugees met their fate. And the rest is history.

Well, not just history, but our history – yours and mine. For, in fact, we are all immigrants, fortunate to have ancestors who *did* secure passage to America. Our grandparents or great grandparents fled distant lands to escape persecution, anti-Semitism, pogroms, nights of broken glass. From slavery in Egypt, to the

Spanish Inquisition, to the Holocaust – this is our historical and our spiritual narrative. And our hearts and flesh are etched with the tattooed numbers of enslavement and persecution.

And what does our experience teach us? It teaches us to cherish freedom and to insure justice for every member of our society, especially the downtrodden and the outcast. In the words of Torah, to love the stranger, because we know the heart of the stranger.

Today, perhaps more than any other time in our entire Jewish history, we are safe and secure here in America. We have risen from that Night of Broken Glass to break the glass ceilings of finance, academia, politics, science, entertainment and every other imaginable barrier of American society. The dreams of our ancestors are truly being lived by us here today. And this precious gift has given us a voice and a vital role to play in shaping the American dream for future generations.

As it happens, even though much of my own family comes from Lithuania, my California lineage actually dates back to 1876, when my great, great grandfather moved west from New York. My American roots run over 150 years deep. So, when I received a phone call from a rabbinic colleague last summer, asking me if I ever thought about the California of my dreams and what that might look like, I was intrigued.

Last summer, a few Reform rabbis in California were asking just that question. What is our vision for this state? And if all 500 Reform rabbis and 96 Reform congregations throughout California worked together on one single issue, how much of an impact could we have?

A lot has happened since that phone call. A year ago, I was invited to join a small think tank of Reform rabbis for a day-long retreat in Northern California, where we began to discuss the issues we were passionate about. We divided up research responsibilities and outreach calls to our California Reform colleagues, and over the course of this year have built a statewide campaign around our first project – hopefully the first of many to come. We now have a name – Reform California – and a Facebook page, of course. We are officially staffed by our national Union for Reform Judaism. And as of this Rosh Hashanah morning, we are well into our statewide campaign for immigration reform.

Reform rabbis and congregations throughout California are actively pushing for immigration reform within our state (you may have seen my periodic Facebook posts this year). While at the same time our greater Reform movement is engaging at the national level.

So, why, we might ask, was immigration reform chosen for our first statewide campaign? Firstly, because just treatment of the stranger in our midst is very close to home. It is our story and, had but one significant group spoken up for the Jews in 1939, perhaps the St. Louis would have found safe harbor in America. But not only is it our story, it is also our biblical mandate, repeated 36 times throughout the Torah, more than any other single commandment: "The strangers who live with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself." We know the heart of the stranger, the Torah tells us. We are not too removed from being social outcasts to forget the pain of wandering and homelessness.

And secondly, because right now there is a bill that could hugely impact treatment of our California immigrant population. There are currently some 2.5 - 3 million undocumented immigrants living right here in the state of California. They come not just from Mexico, but from around the world, in search of the same American dream that our ancestors sought. They are fleeing political persecution, crime, poverty, hopelessness. They constitute 10% of our California work force, and many are sacrificing their own well-being, in order to send money home to their families, just as we did when our first relatives came to the Goldene Medina and hoped that one day their families could all be secure. Nearly half of them are parents of children who are U.S. citizens. And they live in daily fear.

They are afraid to report neighborhood crime; they are afraid to report family violence; they are afraid of any kind of contact with law enforcement because of our country's indiscriminant mass deportation program. This is why a clear distinction needs to be made in the state of California between traffic offenders or those merely reporting crimes, and serious criminals who must and rightly should be deported.

Undocumented immigrants who threaten public safety certainly cannot remain in our midst. But, at the same time, we have to realize that they are a relatively small percentage of our undocumented immigrant population and, realistically, the vast majority of otherwise law-abiding residents cannot be simply deported or wished away. Yes, it is true that, until we achieve national immigration reform, they are here illegally. But, in the words of Senator John McCain: "There's no way you're going to round up everyone and send them across the border." And in answer to those who would argue that immigration reform is just another form of amnesty, McCain reminds us that just doing nothing also amounts to *de facto* amnesty!

And here I have to add that, as Jews, we certainly can't hold ourselves above their plight. I would remind us of another famous ship called, the Exodus, and the many like it that ran the British blockade in Palestine. Filled with refugees from the Holocaust, the Palmach recruited brave sea captains who would pilot

these rickety ships across the ocean and then run through the British blockade of Palestine, to settle them illegally in Palestine. And we American Jews might have done the same for the St. Louis, if we thought we had any chance of breaching American security in 1939. Today's undocumented immigrants in America are just as illegal and just as deserving of hope as we were.

The California Trust Act is our opportunity to bring dignity to honest, hard working immigrants whose one crime is being just like us – yearning for a better, more secure life in America. The Trust Act insures that only serious offenders will be handed over to Federal authorities for deportation, and local law enforcement will no longer have to overtax its jails and personnel by holding every undocumented immigrant with whom it comes into contact, which is why San Diego Chief of Police Lansdowne has gone on record in support of the Trust Act. In the words of Chief Lansdowne, “The Trust Act sets reasonable limits on government ‘detainer’ requests and allows for local control to be established. I am in support of AB 4 (The California Trust Act).”

The California Trust Act is on its way to the Governor's desk, to receive his signature. He has vetoed it before, and we cannot take his signature for granted this time around.

It is imperative that we join Reform California and call Governor Brown during these ten days of High Holidays to urge him to sign the Trust Act. Call-in instructions are right on the flyer you received on your way in. I am one of over 100 Reform rabbis who have already called, and I can tell you that I got right through to the Governor's assistant, who was very pleasant. Remember the question we started with? What would happen if all 37,000 Reform Jews throughout California acted with one voice, the prophetic voice of social justice? What kind of impact could we have on the culture of our state? Well we are joining together right now, and we will soon find out what kind of change we can help affect.

But clearly, we also know this is only a piece of a larger issue. While nearly 25% of our country's undocumented immigrants live in California, there are 11 million nationwide – 11 million men, women, children, families living simultaneously in desperate fear and desperate hope.

Our United States Senate has passed a bi-partisan comprehensive immigration reform bill. It significantly increases border security. It provides a legal verification mechanism for employers. And, most importantly, it provides a pathway to citizenship for law-abiding immigrants, and temporary legal status so they can live and work without fear. The bill may not be perfect – I'm sure it isn't – but eight of our brightest Republican and Democratic senators gave it their best effort. And our Senate is to be commended.

Unfortunately, our House of Representatives is not nearly as commendable. Before going on August recess, Speaker Boehner made clear that their only area of consensus is increased border security. The House so far is refusing to even consider the Senate bill. This is egregious and our House of Representatives seems utterly dysfunctional!

I'm sure that, right now, they're out enjoying the last of summer, back in their districts. But I hope they are also hearing the frustration of voters, who are fed up with their inability to act. Yes, it's true that immigration reform on a national level is a huge challenge to tackle but, as Sen. McCain reminds us, 11 million undocumented immigrants are not going to go away and can't just be ignored. Without reform, they will continued to be slaves in Egypt – with no legal protections from crime or family violence or unfettered employer abuse, and with no hope of achieving the dream of a dignified life.

And this is why our Reform Movement, along with the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, are all united on immigration reform. And I'm here to let you know that we're each being asked to call or write our local Congressperson, to let him or her know that we do not accept a paralyzed House of Representatives and we insist on comprehensive immigration reform. Return to Washington and get something done!

On the same handout I mentioned a moment ago, you'll find contact information for your congressperson, who needs to hear from you that inaction is unacceptable. As Elie Wiesel once said: "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.

In just a few moments, we will turn to our Torah reading for this Rosh Hashanah morning. As I have said in years past, it is an extremely painful and problematic story. God calls on Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Honestly, the older I get, the more I dislike this story. I am deeply troubled by an Abraham who, as a man of conscience stood up to God and argued to save Sodom and Gomorrah, yet was later willing and eager to accept God's immoral command to kill his innocent son. Where was Abraham's conscience when it really counted?

Perhaps he had become too jaded, with everything he had been through, to stand up to God again. Maybe he was just worn out and followed the path of least resistance. Perhaps he forgot what it meant to be a man of conscience. It took the ram, its horn caught in the thicket, to call Abraham back to his conscience – the shofar, that sounds throughout history, and even this day as a call to action.

I hope this is only Abraham's story, and not ours. For we American Jews have been at the forefront of civil rights since coming to America. Our great rabbis marched with Dr. Martin Luther King – Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who once wrote in a letter to Dr. King that, "When I marched in Selma, my feet were praying," and Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, our 30 year Union for Reform Judaism president, who marched beside Dr. King carrying a Torah in his arms and was our voice of social justice. I hope that conscience, etched in Egypt and tattooed in Nazi Germany, has not left us. I hope we are not jaded, or too comfortable to care. I hope the shofar's call reaches us and awakens us from our slumber, if we're in one, and stirs our great historic conscience to action.

When our grandparents and great grandparents sailed into New York harbor, they were met by the shining beacon of the Statue of Liberty, engraved with the words of Jewish-American poet, Emma Lazarus: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

That statue has stood proudly in New York harbor for over 100 years, as those words defined and built our nation – a melting pot of immigrants. Now, her torch shines for a new generation and the light of liberty should not be denied – the St. Louis must not, cannot not be turned away again. "The strangers who live 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."