**No One Leaves Home Unless Home is the Mouth of Shark:**

**Kol Nidrei 5779**

**Rabbi Josh Jacobs-Velde**

Take a moment to think about how your family came to this country. Why did they leave their home? How did they come here? Who helped them? Did they have to tell any lies to get in? Were there challenges in getting here?

On July 20, one day before Tisha B’av, as I was driving to pick my kids at summer camp, I heard this story on NPR:

This past May, a woman named Lourdes walked across the bridge from Mexico to El Paso, Texas, and requested asylum. The first step is an interview with an asylum officer.

"I told him that I have the evidence on me," Lourdes said, through an interpreter. She told the asylum officer about the scar on her arm, and the four missing fingers on her left hand — all evidence, she says, of a brutal attack by a gang in her native Honduras.

Back in 2012, Lourdes says, she owned a small clothing store in Honduras. A local gang tried to extort money from her — money she didn't have.

"Four people came into my store, with their faces covered," Lourdes said. They beat her, and burned her arm with acid, she said, and damaged her left hand so severely that four fingers had to be amputated.

Lourdes says she reported the incident to the police in Honduras, but they never followed up. She went into hiding for five years, she says. But when she went home to visit her mother the gang found her and threatened to kill her. That's when she decided to flee to the U.S. But the asylum officer rejected her claim.

"I don't know what happened," Lourdes said. "I don't know how I failed."

https://www.npr.org/2018/07/20/630877498/denied-asylum-but-terrified-to-return-home

One other story:

Marta Rodriguez first left Honduras in 1994 and entered the U.S. without papers to escape an abusive relationship she was forced into when she was 15.

On March 29, she went to a regular Immigration and Customs Enforcement/ICE check-in (as she has done for the past nine years) on March 29. She was told to return to the Baltimore ICE office on May 10 with a plane ticket to Honduras, because "this is not your country."

Marta also left Honduras because her son Osman is severely disabled, both mentally and physically. He requires substantial medical assistance, including 24-hour in-home nursing care. Marta - who has lived for over ten years in a home she owns in New Carrollton, and who is legally employed with a work authorization card - sends $600 home to pay for Osman's medical care every month.

The DMV Sanctuary Congregation Network organized around Marta for many months.  At her ICE check-in on July 9, surrounded by family, friends and supporters, Marta went into her check-in at the Baltimore ICE office and was detained.  Unfortunately, even with calls from elected officials and the community, ICE did not budge and deported her.

Marta leaves behind five other children in the DC area.

(Marta’s story compiled from Sanctuary DMV emails and http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-woman-detained-ice-20180709-story.html)

I’m sure many of us know similar, heartbreaking stories.

According to the way I understand Jewish values and Jewish teachings, this is not the way to treat people. This is not the way to respond to those in a desperate situation.

When I think about the Jewish values and teachings that push us to look caringly and compassionately toward the refugee, the stranger, it’s an embarrassment of riches. This is something our tradition does well. My mind literally stumbles over itself in trying to choose just one relevant teaching.

Is it that the Torah “warns against the wronging of the stranger in thirty-six places; some say, in forty-six places.” (Baba Metzia 59b)

Is it the teaching that we are all created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of the Divine, and so in a midrash two thousand years ago, Rabbi Tanchuma said that if we disparage or mistreat another person, we must remember who we are mistreating--the likeness of God. (Bereishit Rabba 24:7)

Is it the powerful words of Isaiah who we will read in tomorrow’s *haftorah*: “Is not this the fast I desire...the loosening of exploitation, the freeing of all those oppressed...Is it not the sharing of your bread with those who starve, the bringing of the wretched poor into your house…” (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Is it the story of the Book of Ruth? A story of migration from a bad situation but one that ends well--Ruth is allowed to glean in the fields and finds a toehold in society to make a life.

It is all these and many more.

In the case of Lordes, our first story, one famous phrase from Mishnah Sanhedrin (4:5) returns to me over and over:  “Whosoever destroys a life is considered [by Scripture] to have destroyed an entire world; and whosoever who saves a life is as if she saved an entire world.”

In June, Attorney General Sessions made a policy change from the understanding of asylum law under the Obama administration, and so now if you are threatened by local gangs or your abusive husband, you do not generally qualify for asylum. We send you back to your country of origin.

What does it mean to send someone back in a situation like Lordes? Do we send them back to their death?

With this administration’s decision to narrow the definition of asylum, it is impossible not to think of Jewish history, to think of the times when we needed to escape desperate, lethal situations, and the doors were closed to us. The infamous story of the SS St. Louis, turned away from ports in Cuba and the US with 900 Jewish refugees on board and sent back to Nazi Germany is the first that comes to mind.

Whosoever who saves a life is as if he saved an entire world.

In the case of Marta, the teaching that most comes to mind is from Exodus (23:9), parshat Mishpatim: You shall not oppress the stranger (the *ger*, in Hebrew), because you know the feelings, the *nefesh*/the inner being of the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

You must see *yourselves* in the person of the stranger, the Torah tells us. You are connected to them through your foundational story--leaving Mitzrayim/Egypt--even if you did not personally experience it. We are forbidden from saying, “that vulnerable person who has left their homeland and joined ours--that person is not like me.”

While in rabbinic Judaism, the *ger* is understood as a convert to Judaism, in the Torah the *ger* is a resident alien. In the words of Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom, [the *ger*] “has uprooted himself (or has been uprooted) from his homeland and has taken permanent residence in the land of Israel...Having severed his ties with his original home, he has no family to turn to for support.

Thus deprived of both land and family, he was generally poor, listed together with the Levite, the orphan, and the widow among the wards of society (Deut. 26:12), and exposed to exploitation and oppression. (Ezek.22:7)” Jacob Milgrom, “Reflections on the Biblical Ger,” *Leviticus 17-22* (Anchor Bible, 2000).

The biblical ger is a rather striking parallel to the undocumented person in our country today.

Perhaps it is even stronger than knowing the feelings of the *ger*. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “to be a Jew is to be a stranger. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this is why Abraham is commanded to leave land, home and father’s house; why, long before Joseph was born, Abraham was already told that his descendants would be “strangers in a land not their own”; why Moses had to suffer personal exile before assuming leadership of the people...and why the Torah is so insistent that this experience – the retelling of the story on Pesach, along with the never-forgotten taste of the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery – should become a permanent part of [our] collective memory.”

http://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-mishpatim-loving-the-stranger/

On this day where we take deep stock of ourselves, we also take stock of our country’s actions, actions that we as democratic citizens are all implicated in.

I acknowledge that these issues of immigration have some complexity to them, more than I can address in this talk. I don’t know what a just and compassionate immigration policy would look like. It is true that we cannot take in every asylum seeker fleeing a desperate situation. But I know we can take so many more. And it is certainly true that although she was a New Carrollton homeowner and a taxpayer, Marta Rodriguez was not in this country legally. But to then deport someone who is a parent of five local children, who is sending home money every month to a severely disabled son?

Sometimes we act as though those who are immigrants should just play by the rules and go through the immigration system--but we don’t have a functional immigration system in our country. We are not devoting the resources to deal with the staggering number of backlogged cases, or the fact that most asylum seekers must navigate the system without a lawyer.

For those of us who do want to act to address these injustices, what can we do? What might we do?

One thing that I think is so important is that whatever we do, we can choose to respond with love. We can choose to respond with compassion and empathy. In bringing the kinds of difficult issues I am bringing up here, I am very mindful that I do not want to add another voice in angry denunciation of the current administration’s policies. There is already so much anger and division circulating through our country. Let us try our best not add to it.

Let us speak of what we are for, instead of denouncing what we are against. We are FOR treating all those in our country with compassion. We are FOR keeping families together. We are FOR protecting the vulnerable and powerless.

This is one of the many ways I am so glad Oseh is strongly affiliated with the Reconstructionist movement. Our national body, Reconstructing Judaism, has been very outspoken about these issues in compassionate and eloquent terms.

I remind us that mid-terms are coming up, and I’m sure all of us here vote, it’s likely that we may have a few friends or family who could use a nudge to do so.

More specifically, one thing some of us as Oseh community members might do is to join our sister congregation, Columbia Jewish Congregation, in accompanying the undocumented to their ICE hearings, which can help provide support and keep someone from being detained. CJC has been partnering with the local community organizing group Faith in Action to do this, and will be offering a training about how to do it in a couple months.

On a larger scale, we could join with Jews United for Justice who are quite active on the immigrant justice issue. JUFJ as they are know are working with others in coalition right now to pass the Montgomery County Trust Act.

Let me explain a little more about this, because it’s an important local initiative that we should all know about;

In light of all the anti-immigrant rhetoric and action by federal law enforcement, many immigrants don’t trust the government or legal system. They worry that if they interact with the police at all, they might be reported or physically handed over to (ICE). Even if they have legal status, ICE may find a way to deport them anyway.

The policy of local law enforcement in Montgomery County is not to coordinate with ICE without a judicial warrant, but the policy isn’t clear. Because of this, the police sometimes disregard the policy. Even immigrants with legal status are afraid to interact with the police, which makes the police less able to do their jobs and puts the entire community at risk. It also causes documented and undocumented people to pull away from services-- People don’t get SNAP benefits, talk to teachers or administration at school, or report crimes, because of the fear that if you engage in with any govt person, it could hurt you.

So, the Trust Act Ordinance would clarify that the police may not:

1. coordinate with ICE unless a judicial warrant is presented,
2. ask people about their immigration status in order to intimidate them,
3. threaten to deport anyone,
4. discriminate against anyone in any way based on their immigration status

Even if you don’t live in Montgomery County, you can organize with JUFJ on this issue. The strategy is that by passing this ordinance in MoCo, it would have a strong effect on the other counties in MD and at the state level as well.

If these action possibilities interest you, come speak to me or email me and let’s organize a meeting to explore these possibilities and others further.  I’m hoping to be more active with JUFJ this year, and they are already renting Oseh Shalom for 2 regional gatherings.

I would like to close with some of the words of British Somali poet Warsan Shire’s searing poem “Home.”  They help us to fulfill the Torah’s teaching to know the feelings of the stranger in our times, in case we might ever be in danger of forgetting:

no one leaves home unless

home is the mouth of a shark

you only run for the border

when you see the whole city running as well…

no one leaves home unless home chases you

fire under feet

hot blood in your belly

it’s not something you ever thought of doing

until the blade burnt threats into

your neck

and even then you carried the anthem under

your breath

only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet

sobbing as each mouthful of paper

made it clear that you wouldn’t be going back.

you have to understand,

that no one puts their children in a boat

unless the water is safer than the land

no one burns their palms

under trains

beneath carriages

no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck

feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled

means something more than journey.

no one crawls under fences

no one wants to be beaten

pitied…

no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear

saying-

leave,

run away from me now

i dont know what i’ve become

but i know that anywhere

is safer than here