

High Holy Days 5780
Lo Ta'amod- Standing up for the sacred value of every human life
Rabbi Mara S. Nathan

For as long as I can remember, my son Isaac has been in love with superheroes. He started with Spiderman, then went on to the Transformers, Superman and the Justice League, and then Batman. Recently it's been Iron Man and the rest of the Avengers team. Considering Avengers End Game grossed \$1.2 billion dollars in its opening weekend...he is not alone.

What is it about superheroes that captures our imagination? Super strength, super speed, super powers... are all appealing. But beyond their otherworldly abilities and the details of any given adventure, it is the superhero's origin story that draws us in.

All superheroes, each in their own way, are outsiders. Some are aliens from other planets. Some have acquired their super powers unwittingly-- and at a terrible price. They look different from the majority because they come from somewhere else. So, they are often lonely, misunderstood, and vilified.

The originators of the superhero comic books understood those feelings well, because they too, were aliens. not from other planets but from other countries. Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster who created Superman in 1938 were the children of Jewish immigrants. Their parents fled Eastern Europe at the turn of the century and they were part of a Jewish community that knew what was required to get to America.

Sometimes it involved buying fake papers or selling off their belongings, making a dangerous voyage across the ocean. There was a chance that upon landing at Ellis Island, they could be stuck in line for hours if not days waiting for a man who didn't speak their language to decide their fate. Would they be let in? Or would they be turned away?

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Most of my family left Eastern Europe and came through Ellis Island in the early 1900s too. My great-grandparents had little formal education and barely spoke English. They did piecework in garment factories on the Lower East Side. They were poor and not particularly keen to assimilate. But their chutzpah and their sacrifices are what enable me to stand here today.

I tell you their story with pride. Where I came from -- and who I am from-- is important to me. I imagine your family's origin story is important to you too.

At some point, someone in your family left home behind to settle in America. Some came with a sense of adventure, most came driven by fear.

It is important to look back. It is our obligation not to forget.

I often ask myself, " how did my great-grandparents have the courage?"
"They must have been desperate, and scared, and completely overwhelmed."
My mother recently told me and my siblings that the old country was a pretty grim place. Looking back it must have been terrible if they left everything they ever knew behind. All of them came to the U.S. with nothing.

I wonder how far I would go to save my family? Could I be that brave?

And I wonder, as people rush to see each installment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, do they realize they are watching a band of immigrants save the world?

How is it, that we are immensely proud of our own origin stories, and ambivalent when uninvited foreigners come to our shores? It was not so long ago that Jews were the unwelcome ones, seeking asylum--desperate to be let in.

In May 1939, 937 Jewish men, women and children boarded a ship from Hamburg, Germany. They had managed to acquire visas and written permission to enter Cuba with the hope of then immigrating to the United States.

When the St. Louis neared Cuba, the Cuban government suddenly canceled the landing permits of all Jewish passengers. As the ship sat in the harbor, two passengers tried to commit suicide, and one of them succeeded.

When news of the first suicide reached the United States, many Americans demanded that our government accept the passengers immediately. American officials refused. Then, every country in Latin America denied the Jews entry too.

On June 2nd, the ship was forced to leave Cuban waters and slowly headed north. But the Canadian government would not give the St. Louis passengers asylum either, saying, "If these Jews were to find a home [in Canada] they would likely be followed by other shiploads." The line, "must be drawn somewhere."

On June 7th, the captain returned to Germany with most of his passengers still on board.¹ Nearly three quarters of them died in concentration camps.

Imagine being that close to freedom only to be turned away?

In 2012, the US State Department formally apologized to the survivors of the MS St. Louis. Fifty years from now what apologies will our government need to make?²

People have faced dire poverty and unchecked gang violence in Central American and Mexico for decades. They fear for their lives. And this has led to a long-standing humanitarian crisis on our Southern border. But until now, I've been

¹ *The Voyage of the St. Louis*, FacingHistory.org

² Eppinger, Kammeral, State Department Apologizes to Jewish refugees, www.foundationwire.com, September 26, 2012

reluctant to speak about it publicly. Some of you have been frustrated by that. Others of you have been relieved ...I know.

As the rabbi of our politically diverse congregation, I want Temple to be a comfortable space for all our members. I want to be sensitive to the fact that we do not all see the world exactly the same way.

But the more I watch and listen and read, the longer I see: children being separated from their parents, an intense backlog in our immigration courts, American lawyers being detained in Mexico for assisting desperate people trying to make legal asylum claims,³ the more I feel we must publicly recognize our Jewish obligation to respond to this crisis together.

Last night, we spoke about anti-Semitism. I encouraged us to assume the best in people and answer anti-Semitic rhetoric with courage and compassion. I also emphasized that prejudice - whatever form it takes - ultimately leads to more prejudice.

Anti-Semitism hits us hard because it is unfounded prejudice against us. But we must remember that Judaism teaches that every single life is precious to God. Our modern-day prophet Elie Wiesel (z'l) calls upon us to take responsibility. These are his words: "To be human is to share a common origin. And if we share a common origin, our destinies are entwined. What happens to me will eventually happen to you...The most important biblical commandment is *Lo tamod al dam reacha*⁴ - *you are not to stand by the blood of your neighbor*. The word "reacha" [actually means] 'a fellow human being'it is universal. Anyone who is suffering, anyone who is threatened becomes your responsibility.'⁵

³ Jonathan Ryan, Executive Director RAICES, Texas Public Radio Dare To Listen Event: The Migrant Journey panel 8/13/2019

⁴ Leviticus 19:16

⁵ Buerger, Ariel, *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom*, p.147-8

Wiesel understood that in Judaism *pikuach nefesh* -the preservation of human life- takes precedence over every other commandment. Therefore, it is our obligation to do what we can to help those whose lives are in danger.

But it is also human nature to try and turn away from the challenge. It can feel overwhelming to try and fix the problems of total strangers. But we must find a way, not to stand by, but to stand up instead.

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Today, I don't want to talk about immigration quotas, or our overworked, underfunded immigration courts. I don't think that we as individuals can do much to fix those. Because, from the founding of our Nation, all political parties, all people, have had a hand in building what has become an untenable and inhumane immigration system. And the constant political bickering and grandstanding get us absolutely nowhere.

We should protest the subhuman conditions of detention centers! But not to the extent that it actually harms the people staying there. What happens when a place like Tornillo in El Paso gets shut down? The asylum seekers are sent back to Mexico.

We should fight for strong and secure borders! But not with words that sound eerily familiar to the rhetoric used against the Jews in the 1930s. When we refer to mothers, fathers and children not only as invaders but vermin we dehumanize them in order to distance ourselves from their suffering. As Jews it is our obligation to do what we can to ease the suffering of those in need. No matter what their circumstances. Our Torah, our tradition...requires it.

Lo tamod al dam reacha....*You are not to stand by the blood of your neighbor.*

I'm proud our Temple has donated to Catholic Charities and other organizations to assist their humanitarian work through our Landsman Family Relief Fund. And members of our congregation have engaged in hands-on relief work and political

advocacy. And while things have slowed down considerably there is still so much more to be done.

Money is always helpful. Food, supplies, air conditioning they all cost money.

Time is invaluable too. Since March, the City has been operating a welcome center across from the Greyhound bus station. Sign up for a shift to help out. You are needed to calm fears- explain bus tickets and itineraries to serve food.

The Interfaith Welcome Coalition distributes backpacks for the long bus rides ahead. You can donate supplies or come and put the care packages together. (We have a list of what's needed on our website).

Travis Park Church has provided over 20,000 people with a place to shower and sleep. Ross Halfant our Social Justice Fellow is recruiting Temple members to help in the evenings from 7-10pm on the 4th Tuesday of every month. But there are morning and overnight shifts as well. I spent the early morning hours there last Wednesday. I walked a group of Haitian families-many holding babies in their arms, to the Welcome Center and helped to escort two young women to the bus station- one from Cuba on her way to meet family in Florida, the other from Honduras traveling to Virginia.

As volunteers we were doing all we could to help in the moment. Bus Station personnel and city workers show patience and kindness to these people every day. I thanked a security guard for making sure our two young women got on the bus to Houston safely. "They have a long trip ahead of them," I said. He replied, "As long as they get there safely...that's what matters."

During these days of Awe we are called upon to look hard at ourselves. From the beginning of Elul until the Gates of Repentance close at Nilah we must each ask ourselves:

Have I honored my parents and my family history?

Have I fulfilled the ethical commandments of Torah?

Have I protected the stranger in my midst?

No matter where we stand on the political spectrum we are each called upon to live our Jewish values in a tangible way. And we must ensure that the people who come through our city are housed and fed and taken care of because they are human beings.

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My favorite superhero, maybe not surprisingly, is Wonder Woman. Her origin story is different from the rest. Wonder woman *chooses* to leave her homeland to help others. She brings people together- and her attitude and bravery inspire others to join her as she uses her powers to protect those most in need.

The Jewish creators of our most beloved superheroes understood that while we fear the unknown, we also desire peace and justice for all. They knew what it was like to feel like outsiders so, they created a universe of 'strangers' whose differences became their greatest assets.

Now, we might not have the ability to fly, have super strength or a lasso of truth, But the Jewish ideal of *pikuach nefesh*- to save another's life-- remains at the core of the superhero's quest and at the core of what it means to be a Jew.

AMEN