

The Dignity of the Immigrant
B'tzelem Elohim
Yom Kippur Morning 5780

Before I begin – I want to make clear that this morning's sermon is not a political sermon. I am not giving a sermon that anyone should ascribe to any political movement – be it Democrats or Republicans or Independents. My Republican friends, this sermon is not an attack on the president or any member of the current Republican party. My Democrat friends, this sermon is not a vilification of a political party or a politician.

I am here this morning to offer you a moral perspective on an issue that we Jews know something about.

It is my hope that all of you can be open minded enough to not close off your hearts or minds to what I am about to say. I beseech you not to hear this sermon through the lens of MSNBC or Fox News.

I am your rabbi and this sermon is offered to you through the lens of Judaism and Jewish history.

I want to open by speaking of a little girl – I want you to imagine her, scared and nervous – standing next to her mother. Her mother is riddled with anxiety about the days and the weeks ahead but does not show it publicly. This girl, her mother and her twin sisters are about to begin a tortuous journey— leaving everything they have known behind—

In the days before they leave, she listens as her father pleads with her mother to stay. But her mother is resolute –

“I have to take my girls away to safety”

Getting to the United States is difficult and ultimately—well, ultimately, the journey is for naught – they are first detained outside Cuba and then, this little child, her mother and her twin sisters are told they cannot enter.

It is not surprising for their trip comes at a time of great fear amongst the American public about immigrants and jobs and the potential changes to the makeup of the country.

Now, importantly, this little girl does not speak Spanish—she does not speak Arabic. She speaks Yiddish and her name is Gisela Feldman.

Gisela was a German Jew who tried to come to the United States aboard the MS St. Louis in May of 1939. She and 927 other refugees were denied entry and sent back to Germany, where at-least thirty percent were murdered in the Holocaust. Their trip across the Atlantic has come to be known as the Voyage of the Damned.

History books often blame Franklin Roosevelt for the deportation of this boat of refugees back to Germany, but the story is actually a bit more complicated.

The MS St. Louis was denied entry to the United States because of a law; one that was passed by Congress in 1924. That law, which set stringent quotas on the number of immigrants allowed from certain countries, effectively closed American borders to Jews from Europe. The law's passage was the result of a decades long advocacy campaign led by the supporters of an attorney and eugenicist named Madison Grant.

Have you ever heard of Madison Grant? He's not in too many of the history books we read in our schools. But, these days, we should start remembering him – because his work and his beliefs are re-surfacing.

In 1916, Grant wrote a book entitled *The Passing of the Great Race*, which argued that the Nordic race – a loosely defined biological-cultural group from Scandinavia, Grant argued that this race was at the top of the human food chain and was worthy of genetic protection.

Grant recommended to the American public a national breeding campaign, the segregation of unfavorable races into ghettos and the sterilization of those with inferior genetic make-ups.

Grant also advocated for the restriction of immigration from parts of the world with what he deemed undesirable races – including those lands from where which Eastern European Jews were living.

His book and his ideas were embraced by a variety of prominent scientists and American institutions and ultimately, they became the main argument for the passage of the restrictive, racist and anti-Semitic Immigration Act of 1924 that led to the MS St. Louis and Gisela Feldman aboard it being sent back to Nazi Germany.

This past summer, I travelled to Jerusalem where I spent eight days learning at a special rabbinic seminar run by *Yad Va'shem*, the Israeli Holocaust museum. The seminar was an intensive study of the Holocaust – and its aim was to help rabbis teach the Holocaust more effectively. I was one of three non-Orthodox rabbis on the trip and for the most part, we all came to respect and understand one another.

But during a few sessions, there was a rift that formed between some of the more traditional rabbis and the others.

The traditional rabbis felt strongly that the primary Jewish response to the Holocaust is an increase in Jewish observance and practice. If only Jews would come back to an observant Jewish life, that would be the ultimate defeat of Hitler – who wanted nothing more than to destroy us.

The other Rabbis—which included me—certainly agreed that being more Jewish is an important way of defeating Hitler posthumously – BUT, we felt that the primary obligation for Jews in the wake of the Holocaust is a whole lot bigger...

From our perspective, the obligation for Jews in the wake of the Shoah is the necessity of **speaking up for those in our world who today face hatred, intolerance, persecution and belittlement.**

The primary obligation is to **look beyond just ourselves, to look beyond just our own challenges and problems, and to listen to the cries and the anguish of those who suffer all around us....**

Our own Jewish pain should not isolate us from others but rather, it should heighten our awareness of others' pain. We SHOULD have more empathy for those dealing with horror in our world because of what WE HAVE gone through.

In the Torah, our text states very clearly—

Va'yivra Elohim et ha-adam ... God created the human being

Note that everything else that is living – whether plant or animal – the rest of living creation is brought forth with variety and number. But the human being, the human being is at first created as one – Our text does not say, God created different kinds of man, men of different colors and races; it proclaims, God created one single man. From one single man all men are descended.

But that is not it. There is more. The text goes on...

Va'yivra Elohim et ha-Adam....B'TZALMO.

God created that single human being IN GOD’S LIKENESS.

The human being – the one from which we all descend – is god-like.

This idea takes on great significance within Judaism as our tradition goes to great lengths to describe the ways in which the seemingly most disadvantaged and disempowered are endowed with divine sparks. Throughout our texts, we learn time and again how the outwardly weak and powerless are actually infused with godliness. From the younger and weaker son Jacob who faces Esau to the lowly enslaved Hebrews who face the Egyptians to the young and small David who faces Goliath—our tradition always favors the underdog—the one least likely to move ahead....

Such stories present a certain Jewish worldview – one which posits that all human beings—no matter race, nationality, social class—all human beings are deserving of an equal dignity and honor.

Now, Madison Grant and Adolf Hitler were no fans of such a view. Their entire worldview was based on a Darwinian understanding of nature in which the strong and the powerful survive and the weak die off. Grant and Hitler argued that Judaism’s moral failure was encapsulated by its emphasis on equality.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler explains this clearly. He writes;

“Judaism rejects the aristocratic principle of Nature and replaces the eternal privilege of power and strength by the mass of numbers and their dead weight. Thus Judaism...contests the significance of nationality and race....”

What Grant, Hitler and men like them hated most about us was our belief in *b’tzelem elohim*, the belief that man was made with God’s likeness and therefore deserving of respect, dignity, compassion and care.

Every human being.

Our public conversation today has too often forgotten this Jewish view of humanity. We have become obsessed with differences; and have sought ways to define who we are against who they are. We have too often belittled one another in an attempt to strengthen our own identity and place.

And yes, no-where is this more profound than in the conversation on immigration.

The world right now is facing a major migration crisis. With wars and poverty afflicting millions, human beings are on the move. They are seeking places to give their families basic security, food and shelter.

The United Nations has estimated that this past year, there were 258 million international migrants travelling the globe – almost 4% of the entire world’s population. Since 2000, the number of migrants has increased by 49%. Such change has led not only to demographic changes, but also to fear. People are scared that this population shift will somehow have a deleterious effect on who they are and their ability to live.

Countries need borders. That much is clear. In order to live up to the obligations that they set for their populations, in order to ensure there is security and order, in order to support their economies, countries need borders and they need effective and meaningful immigration policies to defend and protect those borders.

Judaism emphasizes the need for borders as well. In the poetic song of *Parashat Ha'azinu*, Moses proclaims: “When the Most High gave nations their lot, when He separated the sons of man, He set up the boundaries of peoples according to the number of the children of Israel.” Even metaphorically, borders are seen as vital means of protecting what

matters most. Our rabbis in *Pirkei Avot* tell us to put a fence around the Torah as a way of maintaining the Torah's most sacred decrees.

But today, the immigration conversation has become too often focused not simply on common-sense policy, but rather on the demonization of whole groups of people – very often, people with brown skin who speak either Arabic or Spanish.

Anti-Latino and anti-Muslim sentiments are at record-highs in this country. And these sentiments are affecting the ways we speak about immigration and the ways we speak about immigrants.

This summer, we all watched in horror the carnage from El Paso – a gunman ran into a Walmart and murdered 22 people. His manifesto made it quite clear that he was inspired by his deep hatred and his fear of Latino immigrants. He claimed they were invading the country, they were spreading crime and disease. And although his rants read like crazy banter, we know that they are based on common assumptions held by many all over the country. Indeed, hate crimes against Latinos and Muslims have risen in this country over the past three years by over 60%.

There is a rise in xenophobia in our country, a rise in a fear about the other and what they are coming to do to us – and by the way, this xenophobia is not limited to Latinos and Muslims. As Jews, we know quite well that anytime xenophobia and hate are on the rise, Jews are vulnerable.

The march in Charlottesville where neo-Nazis yelled Jews will not replace us, the shootings in Poway and Pittsburgh at synagogues – we do not need to be reminded that any rise in hate leads to a rise in anti-Semitism.

Look around this room. Look at the faces of the people sitting down around you. Every person in this room is the child of immigrants – immigrants who came to this country seeking a new kind of life. And for most of those immigrants, life was incredibly hard – they faced discrimination and terrible oppression when they got here.

But they got here – they got here because most of them came before 1924. That’s right – pretty much everyone in this room is the child of immigrants who came here before 1924.

Now, I want you to look around this room for the people who are missing. There are adults and children who should have been born – but their grandparents and parents were murdered in Europe as a result of the Shoah—many of those people would have come to this nation were it not for restrictive laws that kept them out and restrictive mindsets that were inspired by people like Madison Grant.

It was in 1924 when our world faced the kind of crisis it faces today. With people on the move after World War I, with political borders changing after World War I, with unrest all over, there was an immigrant and refugee crisis. At that time, Americans allowed themselves to become over-ridden with xenophobic fervor.

In that year, many believed Madison Grant. They believed that there was some intrinsic difference between nativists who had long been here, and the Eastern European immigrants who wanted to come here. The result – the gates of this nation were closed for forty years – with countless Jews being forced to live and to perish elsewhere.

I am not here this morning asking for us to agree on every piece of immigration policy. We can and we should have differences of opinion on what the proper balance is between how many to let in and how to deal with the many challenges that immigration creates including economic and social factors.

What I am asking is for us to have a view of this whole conversation through the lens of our people and our history, to not simply ignore what happened to us, but to see the many parallels between our story and the reality for others.

And of course, I am asking us to understand that ultimately, we as Jews remain vulnerable as long as xenophobia is alive. We speak out against stereotyping and the belittlement of anyone because we are and always have been next on the list...

My friends, no matter which side of the aisle we might be on, no matter what politicians we support, we are all American Jews who believe in what this country offered to our families and what it offers to so many today.

We all believe that.

We believe that because our tradition recognizes the dignity of every human being. We believe that because we believe that every human being—no matter the color of their skin, no matter where they were born or no matter what language they speak—we believe that we were created in God's image – *b'tzelem Elohim*. And we are thus obligated to each and every one of them just as we would be obligated to God.

In 1973, Paul Simon wrote a song about his Hungarian grandparents who came to this country as immigrants. Simon imagined what it would have been like, were they to arrive only to see those gates closed. He imagines them dreaming of the Statue of Liberty sailing away.

Ultimately, his song speaks of the hopes and dreams, the hard work and also the many challenges that America presents. It dreams of the tired and the poor who still seek refuge, and it dreams of the hope that America still represents...He called it American Tune...

(guitar is brought out to Rabbi as Cantor stands next to him)

May we come to see the day when redemption can truly be found for all who are enslaved by poverty, by war, by famine, by violence and may we always seek to welcome the stranger and to build havens for the most vulnerable....recogning that each and every human being was made b'tzelem Elohim.

Shanah Tovah to you and your families...