

ONE NATION UNDER GODS

Kol Nidrei, 2015

Imagine the following scenario. An unprecedented confluence of military, political and religious turmoil leads to upheaval in country after country. Thousands, then tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands, try to flee – to escape from the vortex that threatens to consume them all. Whole villages empty out as the refugees head to the border, only to be turned back because no one wants them. Newspapers show grim, nightmarish photos of the refugees, carrying what little they think they can save, including their children and babies. Their situation is impossible – if they stay, their chances of survival are small, but their chances of getting out seem smaller still.

What happens next? The president of the United States, together with his counterpart in Great Britain, call an international conference to address together the growing refugee problem. They all agree that the neighboring nations cannot handle this problem alone. Dozens of nations are invited, along with more dozens of representatives from non-governmental agencies and hundreds of reporters, all agreeing that something must be done, some system created to take in the refugees – even as the estimates of their potential numbers grow into the millions.

The conference, watched by the world, meets for more than a week. The result? The Dominican Republic takes in 10,000, while the rest of the world – all agreeing that *somebody* must do *something*, wind up doing nothing. The year is 1938, the refugees are Jews trying to escape from Nazi Germany and Austria. President Roosevelt called the conference that summer, which took place in a luxurious setting in Evian, France. Even Golda Meir was there, but since she wasn't representing a country she wasn't permitted to speak or participate in a single meeting, except to observe. The Jews of Hitler's growing empire, filled with hope when the conference was called, had to watch their hope crash when the powerful forces of xenophobia, anti-Semitism and political pressure tied the hands of the assembled dignitaries.

They had their excuses: Take the United States: The Great Depression was only just beginning to abate. We were afraid that immigrants would take American jobs. They would never be self-supporting. We didn't want to get involved in the mess unfolding in Europe. Maybe Hitler could still be appeased. And anyway, we already had more than our share of Jews; why didn't they all just go to Palestine (where Britain was about to install an almost complete blockade against more Jews coming in), or anywhere but here? Maybe Africa would take them.

Anti-Semitism certainly had a role to play in leading the world to turn a deaf ear, but there was more to it than that. What simply could not be overcome in so many countries was the notion that foreigners bringing in alien customs – and foods and dress and rituals and religions and languages – would somehow sully a mythic national purity. By the 1930's, remember, German scientists had been teaching for generations about national purity and national character, part and parcel with a growing nationalism that often had little or nothing to do with actual history. Many Americans bought into the stereotypical American image of Dick and Jane, and their dog Spot – all white, of course, except for the dog, and all Christian, of course (probably including the dog), and they couldn't abide a scenario that might change this mythic, stereotypical American ethos by allowing all those Jews or (you fill in the blank) into our country.

Even God was on their side. Then as now politicians across the spectrum took pride in our Christian national character, Christian values, Christian notions of Manifest Destiny that had carried the word of God – and I don't mean *Hakadosh baruch hu*, I mean “God” as in “Our Lord” – to our farthest shores. Then as now our politicians often cited John Winthrop's 1630 sermon to the Massachusetts Bay colonists about America being a “city upon a hill” – a new Jerusalem that would recreate God's kingdom in the New World, so long as everyone lived exactly how the Pilgrims believed God would want. This vision of America as God's country – God's Christian country – has been cited by every president for many decades, and by many of today's presidential candidates. It does not brook other points of view. As often as not, the Garden of Eden welcome mat seems to read: “Go away.”

I have come to believe that the mythic symbol of this country as a “city on the hill” contradicts everything I believe we should stand for, but that it also contradicts our history.

I've just read a fascinating and incredibly important book, *One Nation, Under Gods: A New American History*, by Peter Manseau. Tracing the influence of non-Christians at major turning points in our history, all the way back to Columbus and the secret Jews who traveled with him, Manseau describes a far more diverse history than we might imagine. Who knew, for example, that a high percentage of African slaves brought here during the colonial period were Moslems? Or how influential native American and African folk religions were in shaping our national psyche, not to mention the tremendous influence of early Jewish leaders during the revolutionary era? Americans who think that America is and always was fundamentally Christian are buying into a myth; the reality is much more complex.

I wish I had time to detail the influence of Hinduism or Buddhism on who we are; even Mormonism is based on a Native American revival movement and the mythology of the Iroquois nation.

My point is this: Our tradition on Yom Kippur is usually to look inward, into our soul, and see if we can pull ourselves, after intense reflection and struggle, in new and better directions for the coming year. We spoke on Rosh Hashanah on how that might play out in terms of personal guilt, our relationship with God and how we handle religious doubt. But now, on Yom Kippur, I would ask that we turn our reflections to include how we stand in the world at large – what values we hold most dear, and whether our actions reflect our deep sense of what is moral and ethical as we relate to the world around us. The world is in deep crisis, and if we turn our backs on those whose needs are great but whose religion or color or nationality are not our own, we are not doing justice to the themes of these holy days.

Does Judaism have anything to teach us about these issues? Is there anything we can learn from our sacred texts that might help in our thinking about the complex issues on the subject of welcoming the stranger?

It turns out that our Jewish tradition has a good deal to say on this subject. The Torah teaches us to reach out to and care for vulnerable populations, including non-citizens and resident aliens. In Leviticus (ch. 25) we read, “If your brother, being in straits, comes under your authority, and you hold him as though a resident alien, let him live by your side.” We are repeatedly commanded to care for the needy within our extended human family: “If there is a needy person among you, “we read in Deuteronomy 15, “in any of your settlements...do not harden your heart and shut your hand. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.” Rabbinic Judaism also entitled non-Jewish individuals to financial and emotional support from the Jewish community in order to create a harmonious society: “Our rabbis have taught,” reads a text in the Talmud, “we support the poor of the non-Jew along with the poor of Israel, and visit the sick of the non-Jew along with the sic of Israel, and bury the poor of the non-Jew along with the dead of Israel, in the interests of peace.”

We Jews know what it is to be forced across a border, whether in search of food, or a safe haven from persecution, or to flee for our lives when expelled from a country we thought was home.

In the Middle Ages we were expelled from England in 1290; from France in 1394; from Spain in 1492; from Portugal in 1506 and from countless small towns and cities in Italy over the course of hundreds of years. In every case we were somehow able to find a safe haven, welcomed by a king or prince or sultan who didn't worry about visas and quotas. Later, America itself proved to be that haven – until the door was shut about 90 years ago – for millions of impoverished Jews from the Pale of Settlement in Eastern Europe or Ukraine or Russia, arriving like my great-grandparents destitute and hungry on our shores. *In each and every case, for centuries on end, the new arrivals took care of their own, and within a generation were adding immeasurably to the wealth and vitality of the country that took them in.*

I understand that this issue has been deeply polarizing in American politics and public life, and that there are valid and sincere arguments on both sides. What bothers me more than anything, however, is the language of hate that has taken over the discussion. Much of talk radio these days, listened to by millions, is filled with extremist rhetoric and the use of stereotypes and outright bigotry to target immigrants and hold them responsible for most of our societal ills. Immigrants and foreigners are demonized and dehumanized by racial slander; many hate groups have succeeded in fomenting fear and spreading unfounded propaganda. Just listen to hate radio for ten minutes, and here's what you'll hear:

Immigrants are described as “third world invaders,” who come to colonize America and destroy our way of life. Immigrants, especially Hispanics, Asians and other people of color are described as “hordes” that “swarm” over the border. They are portrayed as carriers of leprosy, tuberculosis, dengue fever, polio and malaria, and they are depicted as criminals, murderers, rapists, terrorists, and a danger to children and families. That even one of them – that even one child – could be a decent human being is such a radical thought that anyone who voices that possibility is ripe for tarring and feathering. We hear of conspiracy theories about an alleged secret “reconquista” plot by Mexican immigrants to create a “greater Mexico” by seizing seven states in the American Southwest that once belonged to Mexico.

What nonsense!

In his book *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, author Bryan Caplan which analyzes in meticulous detail how voters are often swayed by fear and hate to vote for policies that by any objective standard run counter to their own best interest. We Jews must not let this happen to us. We must not succumb to this hate, or this

racism. We should know better. “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” “Kol Nidrei” means “all our vows.” Let us vow to be voices of moderation, of reason and enlightenment in keeping with the finest impulses and traditions of our people. I do believe that the very character of our Nation is at stake in the way we respond to the crises of the world, and that in this New Year we can make a difference.