

REMEMBERING THE *DORCHESTER*

February 3, 2017

Shabbat shalom!

And once again welcome to our guests from the Chicago area – teens from North Shore Congregation, Sukkat Shalom and BJBE (B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim (accompanied by Rabbis Ryan Daniels and Carli Daniels, and Cantor Rayna Green), and adults from Am Shalom in Glencoe, with their rabbi Steven Lowenstein and Cantor Andrea Rae Marcowicz. Wow! What a wonderful spirit you bring to us, and we are truly blessed by your presence and your joining with us to celebrate Shabbat.

I wonder how many of you know that today is a special day, by act of the United States Congress. Not this Congress, of course, but the Congress that sat back in 1948, and designated February 3 to honor (any guesses?)... Well, this day is known as the Four Chaplains Day, in honor of the four chaplains who went down with the troop ship *Dorchester* on this date in 1943, sunk by a U-Boat in frigid waters in the North Atlantic. Hundreds died, as the sinking only took about 18 minutes, but hundreds were also saved, helped into life boats and life jackets. In the chaos and panic, the four chaplains on board – a Catholic priest, two Protestant ministers and a Reform rabbi, Alexander Goode – were instrumental in organizing the inadequate boats and life jackets, in the end calmly removing their own life jackets, linking arms and praying together as those in the water watched in horror and awe.

Those were days when Catholics and Protestants rarely had anything to do with each other, let alone with a rabbi, but these four had become fast friends, transcending their religious differences. It's an amazing story. Rabbi Goode's story is itself inspiring: He went beyond his rabbinic training to earn a doctorate in Arabic and Islamic studies, and despite still being in his early 30's he had already developed warm relationships with Moslem colleagues and in the larger Arab world – a rare achievement for a rabbi in those days, especially in the midst of the Holocaust. These chaplains knew what it was to overcome prejudice and establish relationships with those who were undoubtedly very different in their religious and political views. Though only four of millions lost during the war, it is worth remembering these heroes.

Standing up against prejudice and not just tolerating, but opening our arms to those who are “different,” whatever that means, seems so rare today as to merit news coverage when it happens. I don't know how many of you caught the article last week in the *New York Times* of one of the last American groups to welcome Syrian refugees. Apparently President Trump was already in his limousine on his way to sign the order banning refugees from certain countries or following certain religious expressions from entry, when a family arrived from Syria at O'Hare Airport, welcomed by members of Congregation Am Shalom, one of the groups here this evening. It was a moving and inspiring story, but it shouldn't have been a story at all – welcoming strangers from diverse and troubled backgrounds should just be what we do, because this is what America stands for – or at least should stand for – and this is what Judaism

stands for. That welcoming the stranger into our midst qualifies as national news is really, when you think about it, pretty sad.

I also went to the airport this week (the Montgomery Airport) – to stand with nearly 200 others (including several of our members), and as I watched Jews, Christians and Moslems; blacks and whites in equal measure, I thought about my own family – my immigrant family. Who among us, ultimately, is not descended from a family of immigrants?

Ours arrived with millions of others a century ago, before America mostly closed its doors.

American immigration policy has long reflected the tension between those who seek to welcome new immigrants and those who seek to keep them out or limit their entry into the United States. And Judaism, it turns out, 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 family: “If there is a needy person among you,” we read in Deuteronomy 15, “one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements...do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. 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 sick 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. During a period of drought and famine in Israel, Joseph was welcomed by the king of Egypt, from where he was able to save his family by bringing them down to a new land. Later, the Torah recalls the lesson of slavery in Egypt with these words (Leviticus 19): “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.” The Book of Ruth personalizes the required response of the Jewish community toward the immigrant; impoverished upon arrival in her new land, she gleaned alongside full Israelite citizens who are also in need.

We Jews have seen every side of the immigration question: In the Middle Ages we were expelled from one country after another 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 visa quotas. Later, America itself proved to be that haven – until the door was

mostly shut in 1924 – 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.* Who knows how many died in the Holocaust because other countries would not take them in?

I have to share with you how troubled and saddened I am to speak on this topic; I thought I could avoid it, but feel compelled to do so. My fear is that all this xenophobia, religious profiling, prejudice and hatred, based on no evidence whatsoever, will do nothing to make us safer, but will accomplish quite the opposite. This executive order will give credence to those stoking the flames of religious hatred, making citizens of every nation less safe for years to come.

And isn't it ironic that with all the vetting we already have in place, and now this new ban, none of the countries that produced the terrorists of 9/11 are on the ban list, and virtually all of the incidents we've experienced in this country were perpetrated by terrorists who were home grown?

I therefore support calls, issued this week by every major national body of American Reform Judaism and many other groups besides, on President Trump to rescind this abhorrent executive order. I would love to see every member of Congress denounce its provisions, including the imposition of a religious test for entry, and urge its immediate repeal. And I would love to see every one of us taking every possible action to oppose this violation of America's greatness.

Judaism is not just or even primarily about worship or ritual, holidays and life-cycle events. To me the very essence of Judaism is a call to action, and above all not to be silent. We have known all too many times in our past that silence and compliance and trying to keep a low profile have consequences. We have seen with our own eyes how the diminution of some leads to the diminution of all. Our tradition teaches that the one who saves a single person, it is as if that one has saved the entire world.

Four chaplains stood together, while the world around them went down. They lived their faith in a way that few are called upon to do. If we are truly to honor these four chaplains, I submit that the way to do so is to stand firm against prejudice, and reach out to those who are suffering around us – and speak out, forcefully, to those who would undermine the values we profess.