

Breaking Down the Walls

This year our *teshuvah*, our turning/repentance, is a call for building bridges between groups and peoples -- in our communities, our nation and our world. Hostile rhetoric and violent spasms are gripping our world, wreaking havoc with our hearts and minds, and robbing us of opportunities to enjoy the *beauty of difference* -- different views, different beliefs, different lifestyles and cultures, and different individuals in our orbit of relationships. God made us *all* in the Divine image, and that includes all kinds of peoples and individuals. Diverse cultures, beliefs and languages are a sacred gift. In a troubled time filled with fear and hostility, too many people are unwilling to hear views different from our own, too frightened of difference to notice the human connections that could expand our hearts and minds.

In the midst of this, there is talk of walls -- walls that divide people from each other, effectively reinforcing misunderstanding, fear and mistrust. What we need is bridges, not walls.

You can't build a bridge until you break down walls; the walls of division, walls of fear, walls of anger, walls of suspicion, walls of ignorance. If we can ignite the spirit of the Torah's command to "love your neighbor as yourself," we will learn to understand each other's needs and fears. With open hearts and minds, we can unite in peace, as the prophet Isaiah taught, "God will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up Sword against nation; They shall never again know war."

I'd like to share some inspiring words from the great sages, Peter, Paul and Mary:
"Some Walls"

Peter, Paul & Mary

*Some walls are made of stone sometimes we build our own
some walls stand for years
and some wash away with tears
Some walls some walls
Some walls are lined with gold
where some hearts stay safe and cold
some walls are made of doubt holding in and keeping out
If there's any hope for love at all some walls must fall
some walls some walls
Some walls are built on pride
some keep the child inside
some walls are made in fear that love let go will disappear
If there's any hope for love at all some walls must fall
How will you ever know what might be found
until you let the walls come tumbling down
If there's any hope for love at all some walls,
some walls must fall if there's any hope for love at all
some wall, some walls, some walls must fall.*

It takes education and activism to achieve this goal. An example is the inspiring activist group: ***Nuns on the Bus***. *Nuns on the Bus* is a Catholic activist group in the United States. They took their name from their method: they have taken their activist missions across the country, traveling on their on a bus.

Led by the courageous leader Sister Simone Campbell, the *Nuns on the Bus* are devoted to pursuing social justice. These gutsy women have rebelled against Vatican directives, igniting controversy and rebuke for not investing in church priorities like opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage. They have tackled different themes each year. In their first year, their bus trip took them across nine states, visiting homeless shelters, pantries and education and health care facilities run by nuns. They succeeded in their goal of lending visibility to crucial efforts on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised and the most vulnerable in our society. In fact, their actions have led to changes within the church itself.

Their 2013 theme was *immigration reform*. Their bus stopped first at Liberty State Park, across from Ellis Island, to highlight the American history of immigration -- we are, after all, a nation of immigrants in addition to native Americans. The nuns traveled 6,800-mile across the country, from New York, eventually to California.

When Senate bill for *Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013* passed in 2013, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi noted the work of the *Nuns on the Bus*. During that campaign, the nuns met with immigrants, business leaders and public officials, urging them to call on Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform.

Just like the immigration activism promoted by the Jewish organization HIAS/Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the Nuns on the Bus advocated for:

Guaranteed family unity; protecting the rights of immigrant workers, acknowledge that U.S. borders are already secure, with only minor changes needed; accelerated processing of already-approved immigrants; enhancements to the current diversity visa program; a clear and direct pathway to citizenship for the 11 million people who are undocumented in the U.S.

The Torah repeatedly reminds us that we must not forget that we were strangers in a strange land-- we were once slaves in Egypt, and so we have a responsibility to support the needs of immigrants, to open our doors to those who are fleeing oppression and violence.

The Jewish community, in living our values, has been engaged in activism for immigration reform across the country. Nearly 200 congregations have signed on in partnership with HIAS to take action to support refugees, including Ohavi Zedek. We speak with the moral authority derived from our experience as refugees in the past and from the painful chapters of the 20th century. With a loud and clear voice, we must call

on our elected officials to do their part to ensure the basic safety and human rights of refugees worldwide, and to welcome victims of violence to a life of freedom in this country.

It is painful to hear the voices of fear who wish to close their eyes, ears, hearts, minds and borders to refugees from Syria. We here at Ohavi Zedek can be proud of the ways we have supported new immigrants, but we still have work to do. We must speak out against the voices of hatred that reject any responsibility for caring for those who are fleeing oppression, violence and dire poverty.

Just last week I heard a moving story on Public Radio that moved me to tears. On Morning Edition, Scott Simon, (10/1/16) featured this narrative:

“Jo Du was being helped into her gorgeous white wedding dress this week when a tooth on the zipper broke. It was Sunday in Guelph, Ontario, and no tailor shop was open.”

“Jo Du didn't want to walk down the aisle to marry Earl Lee with pins in the back of her dress. But no one in the wedding party knew how to make the repair.”

“An enterprising bridesmaid knocked on a neighbor's door to ask David Hobson if he might have a pair of pliers they could borrow. Mr. Hobson took in the situation — the bridesmaid, the lacy white dress, and a request for pliers — and said, “I've got better than tools. I've got a master tailor.”

“David Hobson had a family of Syrian refugees from Aleppo living in his home for a few days: a mother, father, and 3 children. A local businessman, Jim Estill, has helped 50 Syrian families enter Canada and settle in the Guelph area — people from one of the most hellish landscapes on earth, brought to live in one of the safest, tidiest, and most serene towns in Canada.”

“The father of the Syrian family is Ibrahim Halil Dudu. He was indeed a master tailor in Aleppo for 28 years, and as soon as he saw the dress, Ibrahim Dudu got out his sewing kit and set to work.”

“He literally sewed her wedding dress back onto her,” Lindsay Coulter, the wedding photographer, told CTV News.”

“Everyone was so grateful. They said thank you a million times.”

“As it turns out, both the Du and Lee families are immigrants to Canada, too. Many of the bridesmaids were from China and were bowing to say thanks,” said Lindsay Coulter, who posted photos and wrote on her Facebook page, “Every weekend I take photos of people on the happiest days of their lives, and today one man who has seen some of the worst things our world has to offer came to the rescue.”

“I was so excited and so happy,” Ibrahim Halil Dudu said through a translator. “I like to help Canadian people from my heart.”

“Earl Lee called the master tailor's masterly repair, an "incredible act of kindness" from a "complete stranger who had only stepped foot in this country days ago."

“The master tailor and his family, the wedding party and theirs: immigrants and families of immigrants, who came to Guelph from opposite ends of the world, and made new homes, and look after each other.”

Aleppo has known violence, terrorism and war for five long years. The human misery is unimaginable to us. The humanitarian challenge of the people lucky enough to be able to flee is massive.

For Jews, the images of refugees are painfully close and haunting reminders of our people fleeing tyranny and genocide during the Holocaust and before that the pogroms, and before that, the inquisition, and the crusades.

Where would we be if our families had not found a welcome refuge here, with freedom and opportunity? We have a unique *Jewish* responsibility to help those who are fleeing oppression to find safe homes and good lives here.

We cannot, we must not stand idly by while Syrian or other refugees fleeing are demonized and held in suspicion. We don't need walls, we need bridges. *“If there's any hope for love at all, some walls must fall.”*

Next week as we gather for the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, our prayers will feature the image of gates -- gates that are open for our entrance into repentance; open for our entrance to God's holy presence. When we pray the words *“Petach Lanu Sha'ar -- Open the Gates for Us,”* will our *kavannah*, our spiritual intention, include the huddled masses who desperately need our compassion and our open door? And if it does, as it should, what will we do about it the next day?

It is no coincidence that a Jewish women penned the great poem on the Statue of Liberty, the “New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-
tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” (Emma Lazarus, 1883)

We -- the Jewish community -- must speak with the voice of moral authority that flows from our people's experience and the commands of Torah. These holy days are a wake-up call to us that we demand that our leaders enact measures to ensure the safety and life-saving support of refugees, and to welcome victims of violence to America.

The Un'taneh Tokef speaks of reward and punishment: who shall live and who shall die? This is about the risks of godlessness; both to our souls and to the safety and security of those whose lives are at risk because of the walls constructed to keep them away.

Excerpt from *Un'taneh Tokef*:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed. ... who shall live

and who shall die; ... who shall perish by fire and who by water; who by sword and who by beast; who by hunger and who by thirst; who by earthquake and who by plague; who by strangling and who by stoning; who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled; who shall be poor and who shall be rich; who shall be humbled and who exalted. But repentance, prayer, and charity temper judgement's severe decree.

If we want to understand this frightful warning, all we have to do is notice the headlines. Here are a few recent ones¹, revealing lived experiences of the warnings of Unetaneh Tokef:

Who By Water? “The Young Girl and the Sea” – Another boat ferrying refugees to Europe has capsized between Turkey and Greece. Rescuers arrived too late to save them all.

Who By Hunger? “Hunger, and Hard Choices, for Africa’s Struggling Refugees” – Across the continent, funding shortfalls and insecurity are forcing steep cuts in food rations for many of the most vulnerable.

Who By Plague? “More than 1,200 Die of Starvation and Illness at Nigeria Refugee Camp” – Médecins Sans Frontières finds catastrophic humanitarian emergency at Bama camp for people fleeing Boko Haram.

Who By Stoning? “Sad End for Young Refugee” – Asho Duhulow was keen to escape the dismal Kenyan refugee camp for displaced Somalis. So the 13-year-old returned to her parents’ homeland. But there, she was raped and then stoned to death.

“The stories behind these headlines are incredibly devastating. ...For some refugees, ... there is hope ... because of steps we take to help them to establish new lives in safety and in freedom.”²

Our robust, continuing commitment to walk the path of godliness, to help victims of violence, oppression and devastating poverty, can literally change the world. *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah* and *Tzedakah* - repentance, prayer and charity-- will avert the evil decree. May that be our path and may it be so!

¹ Source: HIAS

² HIAS