

ADL Seder celebrates immigrants' stories



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Rabbi Matthew V. Soffer was the officiant at Sunday's event, which included Jewish stories and immigrant experiences.

By [Lisa Wangsness](#) | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 06, 2017

The boy was 11 years old when his family in Massachusetts sent for him in El Salvador, paying a smuggler to spirit him through Guatemala and Mexico, and over the border.

As he told hundreds of spellbound people gathered at UMass Boston on Sunday, it was a harrowing journey: He walked over mountains; swam across a wide river; stood naked and terrified as armed men seized his few belongings; begged in the

streets when he was abandoned by his guide; hid in a dark, foul-smelling safehouse.

His first stop in America was a detention center where the lights were so bright all the time the children inside didn't know whether it was day or night. He gave his jacket away to a 3-year-old who was shivering with cold.

"I just want you to know," said the boy, who is now 15 and has been reunited with his family in Chelsea, "we're not all here to commit crimes, or to do violence. We're here to be somebody in life."

The Anti-Defamation League's 10th annual "A Nation of Immigrants" Community Seder had "added urgency" this year, said Robert Trestan, regional director of the New England office of the Anti-Defamation League, a leading civil rights agency fighting anti-Semitism and bigotry of all kinds.

Several executive orders and rule changes by the Trump administration have left millions living in the country illegally terrified of deportation, and people from a number of Muslim-majority countries are uncertain about whether they will be able to travel freely. New restrictions on refugee resettlement have left families fleeing war and violence enduring separation from their loved ones back home.

Bomb threats targeting Jewish community centers and day schools, the desecration of four Jewish cemeteries, and anti-Semitic attacks on social media have rattled the Jewish community. At least four mosques have been burned in recent weeks, and a

number of recent shootings, including one that left an Indian immigrant dead in a Kansas bar and another that injured a Sikh man in Washington over the weekend, have left many Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities living in fear.

“This is a critical moment in our history,” Boston City Councilor Andrea Campbell told the crowd. “It is imperative that we not only share our stories and experiences, but that we do so in spaces that are unfamiliar and uncomfortable. And vice versa — that we put ourselves in spaces that are uncomfortable in order to listen, and truly listen, to the experiences and stories of those who are different from us. Because this is the only way . . . we will continue to grow in our empathy and compassion.”

Mayor Martin J. Walsh reaffirmed — as he has done repeatedly in recent weeks — the city’s commitment to welcoming immigrants. He noted that 48 percent of Bostonians have at least one parent who is foreign-born — “Like myself,” said the mayor, whose parents came from Ireland.

The service, led by Rabbi Matt Soffer of Temple Israel in Boston, retold the Passover story of the Jewish exodus from bondage in Egypt, mixing in the stories and voices of immigrants of a variety of faiths. Anita Adams spoke of her Cuban Jewish family’s resettlement in America after the Cuban Missile Crisis, and how her family tried to preserve their unique cultural heritage despite intense pressure to leave it behind.

Abdirahman A. Yusuf of the Somali Development Center recalled how he gazed skyward, terrified, all night long in his Boston University dorm room after meeting his Jewish roommate for the first time. He had never met a Jew before, but he had been told in his native Somalia that curses rained down on Jews every night.

“The point I’m making is that if we have not exposed ourselves to other people who are different from ourselves . . . we have ideas about them that are not true,” he said.

The Seder was also a celebration of Boston's diversity. Participants read the "Four Questions" — traditionally asked by the youngest child at the Seder table to begin the telling of the Passover story — in more than 20 different languages. And the Gund Kwok Asian Women's Lion and Dragon Dance Troupe performed a traditional lunar New Year's lion dance, to drum and cymbal accompaniment, a tradition believed to scare away evil.

Noting that Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Great Britain, has called Jews "the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind," Soffer said: "I think everyone in this room is the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind."

The young immigrant from El Salvador enjoyed the Seder. But as he left, he said he still feels "really scared." His family, said Dinanyili Paulino of the Chelsea Collaborative, where the boy is a youth leader, fled political violence back home.

"I don't want them to go back," he said quietly. "We have worked really hard to be here."

Lisa Wangsness can be reached at lisa.wangsness@globe.com.

“

'If we have not exposed ourselves to other people who are different . . . we have ideas about them that are not true.'

Abdirahman A. Yusuf, Somali Development Center