

Yom Kippur 5777  
They are Us. We are They  
Rabbi Elaine Zecher

There is a split screen. On one side is the story of devotion, kindness, and possibility. That is the Book of Ruth. It is a familiar story. Because of famine, a Biblical woman named Naomi travels out of the ancient land of Israel with her family and into the land of Moab. Historically, Moab has not been hospitable. Generations earlier, the Israelites had made their way through this territory, and they were refused any help on their journey.

On the other half of the screen are the words from Deuteronomy: No...Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Eternal; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation...because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey ...You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live.<sup>1</sup>

Naomi's two sons ignore the Biblical prohibition and marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. But then, the men in the family die, but Naomi and her daughters in law survive. She determines to return home and urges both women to return to their people.

Orpah does, but Ruth utters the famous lines: Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go: wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, your god, my god."

Now let's remember that Ruth was a Moabite.

The writers of Deuteronomy felt strongly about the Moabites:

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<sup>1</sup> Deut 23:4-7.

“You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live.”

Never is a very long time.

Naomi demonstrates that kindness can be the antidote to “never”. She brings Ruth back with her to Bethlehem. The text defines Ruth’s position by calling her Ruth, the Moabite; there is no question where she is from. She is viewed as “other” immediately and her otherness is emphasized as the story moves forward. Six times, she is called ‘Ruth the Moabite’, an obstacle to her communal inclusion.

But the Hebrew text uses the word *Tashov*, which comes from the same root as *Teshuvah*. Naomi and Ruth’s return opens a possibility for healing or perhaps, as commentary surmises, they altered the history of enmity between two peoples.<sup>2</sup>

We know the rest of the story. Naomi does not abandon Ruth. She helps her integrate. This woman who was originally viewed as the other—Ruth the Moabite-- not only becomes part of the community she also bears a child named Oved. This child would become the grandfather of King David. David is not only royalty, but Jewish tradition teaches that David, the ancient super human who could take on Goliath, also has a tie to the messianic lineage. His line is viewed as a redeemer for the Jewish people. “Ruth is the progenitor linchpin of continuity.”<sup>3</sup>

This story is a message of hope, prospect and optimism to bring out the best in all of us.

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<sup>2</sup> JPS Ruth, pg. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg. 26.

Now, we look again at a split screen, but this time, the locale is here. Our country. One side is a promise. The other side is a threat. When John F. Kennedy wrote his book, *A Nation of Immigrants*, he celebrated the diverse ethnic and social backgrounds coming to these shores. He also recognized, however, that each wave of new immigrants faced the challenge of hostility of the old toward the new. That piece of information is a threat to the fabric of our country. On the other side of the screen is Emma Lazarus, who called the Statue of Liberty in her poem, *The New Colossus* 'the Mother of Exiles.' How many of our grand or great grandparents saw her before touching foot on America's soil? "From her beacon hand glows world wide welcome, her mild eyes command....Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."<sup>4</sup>

It is a beautiful ideal and at the same time, a recognition of the trauma of immigration. What does it mean to be the outsider when famine or war causes such upheaval? To leave, to seek refuge, to journey to unknown places some of which carry hostile association?

Though our country was founded on the idea of an open door, xenophobia is an ironic by product in the annals of our history. Our record of the virus of nativism, the policy of keeping America pure or its close cousin, hatred of foreigners cannot be ignored. JFK recalled how "some alarmed Americans in the 1800s believed that every Catholic was a foreign agent dispatched by the Pope to subvert American society."<sup>5</sup> He knew all too well how it felt when he ran for President more than 100 years later. Those calumnies, those truth slurs, remained. The thread of bigotry, fear, and hatred wove itself through

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<sup>4</sup> Nation of Immigrants, John F. Kennedy from a picture of original manuscript

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 38

American history from the “Know Nothing party” in the 1850’s to the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1882 to the terrorism of the Klu Klux Klan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond to the heightened wave of isolationism that brought the first major law limiting immigration referred to simply as the Act of 1921. That law had dire consequences for the Jewish people.

In every generation there are those who traffic in myopia and fear of the other. The Irish, Italians, the Japanese, the Chinese and certainly the Jews were not exempt. Fear of foreign ideologies and subversion has energized hate and hostility in this country.

A recent article in the New York Times cited an example that the newspaper itself had published in 1941 about the risks of Jewish refugees becoming Nazi spies.<sup>6</sup>

We know the dire consequences of these defamations. When fear rises a narrative of self-protection accompanies it.

We have, and have always had the choice of how to view new Americans.

Some might be threats;  
 Some might give birth to them;  
 Some might turn into them.  
 Some might win the Nobel prize, be a MacArthur Genius,  
 cure cancer, write beautiful literature, create a loving  
 home, volunteer at their school.

The list goes on.

They are us. We are them. Unless your entire family on both sides is part of a Native American tribe, we are the nation of

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<sup>6</sup> New York Times, August 25, 2016 Nicolas Kristof

immigrants. Our ancestral genetic code is comprised of a diversity of countries, heritages, and locales. There are no thoroughbreds among us.

For centuries we could rely on family history to attest to our intimate connection to a region, or relatives, or even religion. Because of the genome project, we now know that those family facts were actually legends or truths passed down through the generations, but they were not correct. The pathway to our existence is one of a great intermingling of those who “intermingled” before us. Those degrees are links in a chain of our humanity binding our destiny with others.

The Hebrew prophets admonished, cajoled, and urged the people to return to lives connected to God and justice so that their lives thrived because of ethical living tying our destiny with others. They reminded us to share our bread with the hungry, to lift up the fallen, to seek repentance no matter what community they were part of. The still small voice that Elijah evoked of the Divine speaking through us and with us was a projection of the internalization of the moral compass.

David Brooks wrote that a healthy nation “isn’t just an atomized mass of individual economic and legal units. A nation is a web of giving and getting. You give to your job, and your employer gives to you. You give to your neighborhood, and your neighborhood gives to you. You give to your government, and your government gives to you...If you orient everything around individual self-interest, you end up ripping the web of giving and receiving.”<sup>7</sup>

So, we need to confront a central question about our present and our future.

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<sup>7</sup> New York Times, October 4, 2016 David Brooks

What kind of world shall we craft when we are in the midst of the biggest refugee crisis since World War II?

In the 1930's, children of Jewish Lithuanian immigrants created a fantasy story about a refugee from another planet. We know him as Superman. They captured our imaginations as we considered what must it feel like to be sent off to the unknown by worried parents. They made us see that there could be no other choice when the world you are living in is failing and falling to pieces. You have to clutch the hope and prayers of those you leave behind propelled forward by the possibility of what the future might bring. Will you survive? Will you be received with grace? Kindness? Or perhaps fear? Will those who find you be willing to raise you up with love?

It is a reoccurring story through the ages to leave behind devastation for a new world. Isn't this the narrative of the waves of immigrants and refugees who have arrived at the shores of our own country who fled famine, oppression, violence, and hatred to seek a new life for themselves? Isn't this the story of the Jewish people fleeing a ravaged Europe set on our destruction? Those faces we see now are the same ones our people had just decades earlier. Now we can act as we wished many more would have responded for us.

As we tell this story yet again, this time with Syrian refugees in mind, we recall those Lithuanian immigrant children's creation. That tale of that helpless child cast into space to seek refuge on earth takes on new meaning. Though he came from a place farther than any place on earth, as his planet, Krypton, exploded behind him, it's worthwhile to recall his story. He lands in a cornfield, is adopted by a benevolent couple who raise him and by their example and help him discover his super

powers to promote “Truth, Justice, and the American Way!” The brilliance and poignancy of the tale is that Superman disguises himself; perhaps ever watchful to return the favor of rescue he received as a child. There are too many babies, children, young and old who are watching their past lives explode behind them.

Moses, too, was a refugee, a Biblical super man, empowered through the divine relationship. His mother sets him in a vessel of redemption and the Pharaoh’s daughter receives him. His story becomes our story and a summoning for compassion and goodness.

And when our people become slaves, the Torah reminds us 36 times to remember that crucial part of our mythic past as an ultimate religious act of empathy.

And the story of Ruth is ours as well. Viewed as other, she cast her lot with the Jewish people and became the progenitor of the messianic possibility through the line of David. Hope, goodness and righteous behavior turn our focus from ourselves outward.

Have we not all seen the difficult march of humanity across the world? Have we not glimpsed the horrendous devastation in the recent pictures of Aleppo or the shores of Lesbo or the back seats of ambulances with bloodied children?

But there are also the pictures first from Canada of refugees arriving into the loving arms of communities waiting to receive them. And now there are images of American communities, lovingly receiving these souls, too.

You need only to look at the pictures.<sup>8</sup> It's their eyes that tell the whole story. They are filled with light and hope.

The airport and train station are the new Ellis Island but instead of standing in line to be inspected, given a new name and treated like a cog in the immigrant wheel, they are being received human to human.<sup>9</sup>

The opportunity to welcome the stranger is bringing out the best in us not the worst. We can put the human back into humanitarian. Martin Luther King taught us: Darkness cannot put out darkness; only light can do that.

This is our moment to create connection and relationship, to shine a beautiful light of hopefulness. Bryon Stevenson, a modern day prophet who has worked tirelessly for racial justice says that to really understand is to be up close. Proximity breeds understanding.

There is a mathematical calculation brewing in our country and its solution will be up to us. It is made up of a moral calculus multiplied by urgency divided by fear and bias but how can we make it add up to goodness and justice?

This is why when Jewish Family Service of Metrowest called this summer and invited us to join with other area synagogues to each receive two Syrian refugee families we did not hesitate. It is our duty as American citizens and our sacred obligation as Jews. The leadership of this congregation and many members have responded enthusiastically. Such a response is part of our Temple Israel legacy whether for Vietnamese boat people or our Soviet brothers and sisters decades ago.

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<sup>8</sup> [Providencejournal.com/news/20160211/first-syrian-refugees-arrive-in-ri](http://Providencejournal.com/news/20160211/first-syrian-refugees-arrive-in-ri)

<sup>9</sup> New York Times, September 25, 2016 Scott Arbeiter

It is not a simple task but one that requires great energy. It will take a communal effort and that is why we have placed “Support” cards on your chairs. There are many resources needed and many different ways to help. Fill out the cards and hand them to an usher or place them in the box on Tzedakah Row.

This is a prophetic moment for each of us. We can create goodness for others. Instead of passively viewing a cataclysmic disaster we can become catalysts for righteousness.

Superman may be a fantasy and perhaps the messianic idea of a future of perfection may be distant. But we live in the present as real people of flesh and blood living our lives and trying to do what is right.

To redeem a soul and in this instance, a whole family of souls: that’s the sacred work we have the privilege of doing.

*Teshuvah* is about transformation of the world and us. Like Ruth and Naomi who return to open possibility and to turn history around. Though Deuteronomy presents one part of the story with its specific regard for Moab, the Book of Ruth finishes it in a different direction. Our own nation of immigrants has been rife with isolationism and fear mongering but we have the power, super human and divinely inspired to rewrite the story to assert moral courage and to foster a moral economy with intrinsic incentive to do what is right.

*Teshuvah* is about finding the best in ourselves. It is about reconciling and reconsidering our great potential.

Seventy years ago too many of our people were turned away from these golden shores, let us, instead, now open our arms to those yearning to be free. Let us fulfill our sacred Jewish mission.

Let's get going. We have lots of soul saving work to do.

Books and Resources that have helped inform my thinking on this topic:

*The New York Times* articles on refugees, particularly  
 Nicholas Kristoff August 25, 2016 *Today, Anne Frank is a Syrian Girl*  
 Scott Arbeiter, September 26, 2016 *America's Duty to Take In Refugees*  
 David Brooks October 4, 2016 *Trump, Taxes, and Citizenship*  
*Times of Israel.com, Kindertransport survivor Fights at UN to Bring Syrian Refugees to the US.*  
On Toleration by Michael Walzer  
Democracy in America by Alexis de Tocqueville  
Nation of Immigrants, by John F. Kennedy  
Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity by Abraham Joshua Heschel  
The Moral Economy: Why Good Incentives are No Substitute for Good Citizens by Samuel Bowles