

Rabbi Andrea London
Beth Emet The Free Synagogue
Kol Nidre 2017/5778
And I Will Dwell Among Them

A tale of four sanctuaries: Cristo Rey Lutheran Church in El Paso, TX, a hotel room in Montgomery, Alabama, Beth Emet The Free Synagogue in Evanston, Illinois and the Tabernacle, a portable sanctuary that traveled with the Israelites from the Sinai desert to the Land of Israel.

El Paso, Texas, is a sprawling border city situated in the western corner of the state across the Rio Grande from Juarez, Mexico, and on the border of New Mexico. There's a perpetual haze over the city owing to the dust that's kicked up from the desert-like mountains that surround it. It's not a place I ever gave much thought to until Abby Backer, our director of Youth Programs, suggested last year that we bring a group of teens there to learn about immigration issues. Given the debate over immigration that we are facing, Abby thought it was important to give our teens knowledge and tools to understand the issues. So last March, together, we and 15 Beth Emet teens who opted to forego the typical spring break trips ventured off to visit the district court in Las Cruces, New Mexico, where immigrant detainees are arraigned, to have conversations with border patrol officers, and to meet with immigrant and refugee services professionals, among others. Abby, who has a degree in Latin American Studies and Spanish from Barnard, was the ideal guide. Her impeccable Spanish, deep knowledge of the issues, and passion for teaching our youth were a gift to all of us.

Had our week in El Paso been entirely focused on the meetings with the diverse assortment of on-the-ground "experts" that filled our days, the trip would have enriched our teens and given them a wealth of issues to contemplate.

But there were also the evenings and the mornings, and those we spent at the Cristo Rey Lutheran Church, a humble, hospitable church near downtown El Paso where we slept each night. The main room of the church has a tile floor, white walls, and tables that were configured and reconfigured a dozen times during our week there for the myriad purposes for which the room is used. This simple space quickly became sacred to all of us. In it, we shared meals, heard stories from newly arrived refugees from Central America, did homework, played games with refugee children, and learned about the challenges their families faced in their home countries and on their trip to the U.S. In this room, we even participated in Lenten worship with the church. My sleeping quarters for the week was the room where sacramental objects and the pastor's robes were kept. Pastor Rose Mary Sanchez-Guzman, the pastor of the church, whom we called "Pastora," thought it appropriate that the rabbi should sleep with the props for ritual and make sure the teens didn't discover the supply of sacramental wine!

The only decorative element in the church is a stained-glass window that portrays a lamb alongside Jesus, and a few people sitting at his feet. As the light changes during the day, the skin tone of the people in the scene changes. Caucasian figures become people of color. A fitting message: all are welcome here.

During our stay, we benefitted from the church's gracious hospitality and saw how this modest house of worship extends itself lovingly and selflessly to a constant stream of refugees that come

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to its doors. Every morning church volunteers show up to make breakfast for them. Others come later to cook dinner or clean the bathrooms.

Among the things we learned during our week in the El Paso area is just how badly broken our immigration system is and how few avenues, if any, there are for many who are fleeing violence, oppression, and poverty.

Each evening we'd listen to those stories. One night we heard from a man who told us, in Spanish, how he and his family were in personal danger in his native country because of his work as a policeman. He described a harrowing journey, much of it on foot, from Central America, across multiple national borders before arriving in the U.S. The man also spoke of what it meant, after several weeks without a full night's sleep in a warm bed, to experience the hospitality of the church.

Another man, himself a pastor from Central America, had been smuggled to the US with his son just in time to attend Cristo Rey's Lenten service. He shared how his teenage daughter had been raped and then harassed by gangs. An increasingly common occurrence, we learned. After an arduous journey and deplorable conditions in detention in El Paso, the man and his son were granted an asylum hearing date and released. During our visit, Cristo Rey helped them board a plane so they could be reunited with family in another U.S. city.

For these families, there was no luxury of time to apply to immigrate legally. Moreover, even with the luxury of time, it's next to impossible for people from Central America who lack professional skills or advanced degrees to come to this country legally. This is why immigration reform is necessary, and why so many people are living in our country without documentation.

Since immigration reform doesn't seem to be on the horizon, cities across the U.S. are trying to figure out how to deal, in a compassionate and sensible manner, with the many undocumented immigrants who work, go to school, shop, and live in our communities. In contrast to the rhetoric coming from the White House and some quarters of the Congress, undocumented immigrants, for the most part, are productive members of our society. It should surprise no one that some of them commit crimes, just as native-born Americans do. But, statistically, they do so at a lower rate than American citizens.

For four consecutive years, El Paso, which is right on the border with Mexico and has a huge immigrant community, has been ranked the safest large city in the U.S.

Deporting everyone who lacks proper documentation is not a practical or humane solution to our broken immigration system. It would be a costly endeavor, and it would tear families apart. In most households where undocumented immigrants reside, they are living with family members who are citizens.

It's important to remember that we bear considerable responsibility for the instability in Central America that has led so many to seek sanctuary here. "Since the 1950s, the US has sown violence and instability in Central America. Decades of Cold War gamesmanship, together with

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the relentless global war on drugs, have left a legacy of chaos and brutality in these countries. In many parts of the region, civil society has given way to lawlessness.” Today, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are horrifyingly dangerous places. Ironically, Nicaragua, where the US tried and failed to unseat the Sandinista regime, is among the safest countries in the region. (Huffington Post, “Here’s how the US Sparked a Refugee Crisis on the Border, in 8 Simple Steps,” 7/18/14)

Is it not then the height of arrogance to declare now that we are not responsible for the failures of Central American societies to care for their own and to manage their own affairs?

Thankfully, the city of Chicago, as well as Evanston and a few other municipalities in the area have declared that our police will not turn undocumented immigrants over to federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (or ICE) agents. Cities across the country are choosing the same path not only because it’s humane, but because they acknowledge what our administration tries to obscure: that protecting our immigrant populations makes our communities safer. Undocumented immigrants who feel threatened are less likely to report a crime or cooperate with the police.

By the way, the US cities I’m talking about are not all in blue Northern states: Houston, Austin, San Antonio and Dallas have filed legal challenge to a Texas law that would ban sanctuary cities.

Here in Evanston, our local Clergy Association, of which I am a leader, formed a Solidarity Response Team this year to support immigrants in our community. Additionally, Evanston congregations are seeking to become a network of Sanctuary congregations.

We are following in the footsteps of an earlier Sanctuary Movement that began in the 1980s in response to a Guatemalan refugee crisis spurred by that country’s bloody civil war. Long-time Beth Emet member, Kalman Resnick recalled recently how Beth Emet’s board passed its sanctuary resolution in 1987. Following months of debate, board member Ruth Caro asserted at one board meeting that if the people who had helped her family escape the Holocaust and come to the U.S. had debated the merits of their actions, her family would have died in Europe. The resolution passed, and the congregation found housing and supported two Guatemalan families in Evanston.

Congregations across our community are now updating, or declaring for the first time, their sanctuary status. At Beth Emet, a sub-committee of the social action committee has been working on drafting a sanctuary resolution to present to our board. We are researching and discussing what kinds of actions we are willing and able to take on behalf of undocumented immigrants. Some of the actions we are considering are accompanying people to court dates, helping them understand their legal rights, and supporting the passage by the U.S. Congress of legislation to protect DACA recipients from deportation.

What does sanctuary mean for us as Jews? Most of us don’t need to look too far back in our own family histories to know how important the sanctuaries of the U.S. and Israel were to relatives

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fleeing the Holocaust, pogroms, and anti-Semitism. Let us consider the Israelites in the desert for a moment. Their first communal task after they leave Egypt and receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai is to build a sanctuary, a *Mikdash*—a holy place where they can serve God. This first sanctuary they build is portable, it's called the Mishkan or Tabernacle in English. God tells them that its purpose is so God may dwell among them. We learn from the Tabernacle that a sanctuary is more than a place to worship God; it's also a place where God dwells within us.

As Beth Emet moves toward refurbishing our sanctuary, we have decided to make “sanctuary” our theme for the year and to look at its multiple meanings—as a physical space to gather as a community for prayer, as spiritual space where we feel safe and whole, as an attitude and ethos of welcoming and acceptance, and as a way to support undocumented immigrants in our community.

There is a Christian hymn that begins with the words, “O Lord prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy tried and true”. The first time I heard it in a Jewish setting was at Romemu Synagogue in New York. I was there with the KT class. The congregation started singing it after the Amidah, and it moved me to tears. Yes, I thought, this is exactly what prayer is supposed to do—make us into a sanctuary so that God may dwell within us. In the version they sang at Romemu, they added the words from Exodus 25 when God tells Moses to have the Israelites build the first sanctuary. *V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham* – create for me a sanctuary where I can dwell among them. Malbim, a 19th century commentator, interprets *b'tocham* to mean “in them, the people, not in it, the sanctuary. We all must build a Tabernacle in our own heart for God to dwell in.” A physical sanctuary and prayer help us build a sanctuary in our hearts. And from these sanctuaries, we can create sanctuaries of care and compassion.

There are some who ask me why spiritual practice is important. Can't we just circumvent prayer and go right to action? What does prayer do for us?

The next time I heard “Sanctuary” sung was in a hotel room in Montgomery, Alabama when Beth Emet and Second Baptist Church took our teens on a civil rights trip in 2013. It was the night before Good Friday. We had had a long day that was emotionally and intellectually draining. We had walked over the Pettus Bridge after reading from John Lewis' memoir about his experiences being beaten there on Bloody Sunday in 1965. We had learned about the march from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights, and we had talked about white privilege. We were wrestling with what we had seen and trying to figure out how racism played out in our lives and in our community.

That evening, my colleague and fellow chaperone Rev. Velda Love taught about the foot washing ceremony that Jesus began on the night before Good Friday as a sign of servant leadership. She asked for volunteers to be foot washers and invited people who wanted to have their feet washed to come forward. Picture what happened next: 40 teenagers, black and white, Jewish and Christian, stepping forward in a hotel in Montgomery, Alabama, and tenderly and joyfully washing one another's feet as one of our chaperones began singing “O Lord prepare me

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to be a sanctuary...” She sang it over and over again until everyone of us chimed in. This moment was overwhelming. We had struggled all day trying to wrap our minds and hearts around the cruelty and racism of Alabama in 1965 and in what ways racism is still alive in our society today. Ritualizing this act of kindness said to all us: we don’t need to understand everything right away. We’re on a journey of growth and discovery; we need to be patient with ourselves and others. Singing and washing each other’s feet soothed us and reminded us that extending small acts of kindness can shift our mood and create a more caring and safe environment.

Performing that ritual brought us together as a community, and strengthened us to ask the hard questions and visit places where so much cruelty and hatred had been unleashed.

Thus, this year, in addition to our regular worship and spiritual offerings at Beth Emet, we will expand our spiritual repertoire to include the Jewish spiritual practice of *middot*—working on our character traits. Rabbi Marc Margolius from the Institute of Jewish Spirituality, our scholar in residence this year, will join us in February to introduce the practice to the Beth Emet community. And those who are interested will have an opportunity to join a *middot* group.

How else can we practice being a sanctuary? We can work to be an inclusive place for everyone who enters, regardless of our abilities, race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or anything else about us that might make us different and not feel welcome. For example, our Special Needs Inclusion committee is helping us think about how we can become a more inclusive community to people with a variety of physical, emotional, and learning issues. What we’ve learned from the committee’s work thus far is that we need to think comprehensively about the barriers people face when trying to access our community.

Having ramps and bathroom stalls that are accessible to those with mobility impairments is necessary, but not sufficient. If we want our congregation to truly be a sanctuary for all, we need to think about how we engage with others. Do we really welcome people as opposed to merely tolerating them? A young man with autism used to come to Beth Emet with his family. One Friday night, some congregants expressed their displeasure when he made noise during services. After that, his family felt unwelcome and stopped coming to Beth Emet. Becoming a sanctuary is not just a task for our building committee or for those who lead our community, but for all of us. The small and large ways we welcome and embrace people, the language we use, and the attitudes we express with our words and actions make a difference in whether or not our congregation is truly a sanctuary.

We are also going to explore the multiple ways we can think about and live the values of sanctuary through a weekly reflection from a Beth Emet member. Ellen Blum Barish and David Barish are collecting writings—prose and poetry, photographs, and other artistic expressions of what sanctuary means to us. If you’d like to share your thoughts on what the sanctuary at Beth Emet means to you, a time in which you felt like a sanctuary dwelled within you, or how we can extend sanctuary to those who need it, please be in touch with Ellen and David.

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A sanctuary is not something we build once and then we're done; it requires our attention and care. The wilderness sanctuary our ancestors built was portable. Every time they moved to a new place on their journey from Egypt to Israel, they had to take it down and rebuild it. Without care a sanctuary will deteriorate. As we look at our physical sanctuary that was built in 1964, we can't help but notice that it doesn't have the same luster it did over 50 years ago, and the seats certainly don't have the same support they once did. Without rejuvenation, without intention, things decay, things fall apart. Ongoing vigilance and attention is needed to build and maintain a sanctuary that is a place of safety, love, and compassion whether that's a physical space, a spiritual place, or an attitude of welcome and caring.

We live in a society in which we are made to feel like we never have enough and never *are* enough. We don't have enough time, enough money, enough patience, enough Facebook likes. If we feel like we don't have enough in our abundant society, can you imagine how the Israelites who built the first sanctuary shortly after they had been freed from Egyptian bondage must have felt? Yet, they somehow managed to scrounge up all that was needed to construct the Tabernacle—all the hardware and fabrics and precious metals needed to build the sanctuary. As the Book of Exodus ends, an accounting is taken of all the materials used in the construction of the sanctuary. And lo and behold, according to a Hasidic commentator, (Hiddush Harim) they not only had enough to build the sanctuary, they had a surplus and Moses had to tell them to stop bringing gifts. How do we account for the tremendous generosity of the Israelites? I suggest to you that in the process of building the physical sanctuary, they learned generosity of spirit. God began to dwell *b'tocham* in their hearts and the giving came naturally and easily. Sanctuary is a way of being and a place for cultivating and living generously. May this be the sanctuary we construct together this year for ourselves, for each other, and for those in need of our care and compassion.