

Vayelchu Sh'neihem Yachdav: Walking Together Toward a Land of Promise¹

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A repeated phrase in the section of Torah that we read this morning has been on my mind this year: *Vayelchu shneihem yachdav* – the two walked on together.² I am struck by the imagery of Abraham and Isaac walking together through the wilderness and imagine them hand in hand. It is a moment filled with tenderness and dramatic irony: Abraham, aware of the life challenges that lie ahead for his son Isaac—not the least of which is God’s command to sacrifice Isaac—somehow remains a calm and comforting presence. Isaac is filled with a sweet, youthful innocence, unaware of what the future holds, the peaks and valleys of life. And Abraham and Isaac walk on together, *vayelchu shneihem yachdav*.

I sometimes think about these words as a parent when I walk hand in hand with our four year old son on trails through the wilderness of Wilton or the Leon Levy Preserve. As we climb over rocks and tree trunks, Samson searches for secret fairy villages or the perfect leaf. I especially enjoy our walks together and I watch for dangers that may lie ahead -- poison ivy or tripping hazards. Even as I am filled with hope that Samson’s life path will be bright, I recognize that there may be stumbling blocks and inevitable rocky moments in the future, as we walk together, hand in hand.

When we read God’s command to Abraham, to offer Isaac as a sacrifice in *eretẓ haMoriah* – the land of Moriah – it is understandably difficult to look past the deeply troubling idea of God subjecting Abraham to such an epic test of faith, as well as Abraham’s unimaginable consent. In the shuffle of this dramatic moment, the location of the intended sacrifice – *eretẓ haMoriah* – is easily overlooked.

The great medieval commentator, Rashi, explained that *eretẓ haMoriah* is Jerusalem. Early rabbis explained that Abraham is leading Isaac to the place where the Temple would one day stand.³ Upon closer inspection, the words that God used to command Abraham stand out: “*lech l’cha*.” God used this same imperative at the very beginning of Abraham’s journey.⁴ With the words “*lech-l’cha*” God again commanded Abraham to the Promised Land, this time bringing Isaac.

An angel called out from above and intervened before Abraham sacrificed Isaac. Father and son walked on together, away from a familiar but difficult past, again seeking a better future in a land of promise and opportunity.

The two walked on together – *vayelchu shmeihem yachdav*.

This same phrase was on my mind this past March, as I visited the US/Mexican border with a delegation of rabbis from around our country, organized by HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and T’ruah. As I crossed Paso del Norte bridge from Juarez into the United States, I noticed a father and son walking hand in hand in a line of asylum seekers. The father tightly grasped the hand of his son, who was about the same age as our Samson. As they walked together amidst strange surroundings, the little boy yanked his father’s hand, waved his free arm, shook his head from side to side. The boy looked up at his father with questioning eyes, similar to how Samson looks up at me as we hike in the woods or how I imagine Isaac looking up at Abraham, unsure of what lay ahead.

As the father and son entered the United States, they were – like Abraham and Isaac – following the imperative of *lech-l’cha*. They were leaving the challenges and familiarity of their past for a land of promise and safety. Under the watchful eyes of armed border patrol agents, father and son walked hand in hand for processing. They were safe for the moment, though their fate was uncertain.

Watching from above on the bridge, witnessing father and son walk together, I thought of the angel who called out to Abraham and wanted to call out, to intervene and change their future.

Today, in recalling that moment at the border, a poem by Italian Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi comes to mind:

You who live secure
 in your warm houses,
 who return at evening to find
 hot food and friendly faces:
 Consider whether this is a man,
 who labors in the mud
 who knows no peace
 who fights for a crust of bread...

There are conflicting narratives about conditions at our southern border and the people seeking refuge in our country. What one source describes as “fact,” another source declares as “fake.” Conditions are constantly changing. What does not change, what is indisputable, is the humanity of the refugees and immigrants seeking asylum in our country. Let us remember that nearly all of our ancestors, if not we ourselves, were once strangers here. We were refugees and immigrants seeking freedom, safety, and a brighter future in this land of promise. Tweets and partisan spin cannot distract us from acknowledging that this is a human issue; this is a moral issue; this is a Jewish issue.

Thirty-six times we are commanded in Torah to care for the stranger and the oppressed in our midst, because *we* were strangers and *we* were oppressed. These words should be engraved in our hearts and echo in our minds when we are secure in our warm homes, as we lie down and awaken each day.⁵

My esteemed colleague, Rabbi Janet Marder wrote two years ago: “It is an act of hypocrisy for any Jew to adopt a hard-line, anti immigrant posture...”⁶ Our presence here today is an act of hypocrisy when we close our hearts to people like us, and our ancestors who came to this country as immigrants seeking refuge. HIAS explains: once we were refugees because we were Jewish; “today we help refugees because we are Jewish.”⁷ Our presence and prayers today should also lead us to fulfill our moral and Torah-commanded responsibility to support and keep faith with the immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who today sleep in the dust. Rabbi Hillel taught, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”⁸ If we do not care for the stranger and the oppressed, then we are unworthy of the blessings promised in Torah, the sweetness and hope that we seek in the New Year.

During his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, Elie Wiesel⁹ acknowledged our inclination to respond first “to Jewish fears, Jewish needs, Jewish crises...It would be unnatural...[to] not to make Jewish priorities my [our] own...” Nevertheless, Wiesel taught, “[We must] never be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation...When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe.”

At a scenic overlook atop Mount Franklin, viewing El Paso and Juarez, witnessing how the region is a giant city divided by an international border, there is an historical marker, reading:

“Desperate for rain during a Texas drought in 1891, El Paso city leaders convinced the US Department of Agriculture to try a theory that explosives could cause rainfall because many battles were followed by rain. On September 18, some 370 charges of dynamite and other explosives were fired from the heights of Mt. Franklin, but no rain resulted. Only a heavy dew was reported.”¹⁰

There are many proposed solutions in response to immigration. Like the logic that led 19th Century Texans to try ending a drought with explosives, what seemed like a good, logical idea once, may become a punchline for future generations. Most of today’s solutions foment fear and focus on deterrence at the expense of our moral obligations as Jews and Americans. Torah commands us to pursue justice and peace and care for the stranger. Our nation’s Declaration of Independence reminds us that “all men are created equal...endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...”

We who have labored in the mud, we who have known violence and oppression, who now live secure in our homes may feel overwhelmed at the thought of the estimated 68 million displaced

people around the world around the fleeing violence, famine, racism and political persecution. As Elie Wiesel taught, "...there is much to be done, there is much that can be done...one person of integrity can make a difference..."

Where do we begin? There are so many righteous causes in our lives, causes that impact us more directly than families or individuals we will never know, seeking refuge hundreds or thousands of miles away. So we begin with an act of faith.

Our prayers and rituals inspire us daily to emulate God's attributes including mercy and compassion. In the *Amidah* prayer, we praise God for "keeping faith with those who sleep in the dust." We too can keep faith with those who sleep in the dust.

Beyond our prayers, Elie Wiesel taught us: "What we can do for these people is to let them know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them..."

The work we do for people and causes we know is important and worthwhile and should continue. And we need to remember the people who sleep in the dust beyond our realm of concern.

When you write a check to the Ridgefield Visiting Nurses Association or the American Cancer Society, remember the thousands of people seeking asylum, waiting in Mexico without adequate medical care.

Mothers, when you and your daughters volunteer with the National Charity League, take a moment to remember the mothers and daughters sitting behind barbed wire on our Southern Border fleeing violence and seeking the freedom and safety we enjoy.

When you help prepare or deliver food with Meals on Wheels to homebound seniors, remember the people around the world facing famine.

When you read news about our next election, remember that America is great because we are a nation of immigrants with a tradition of welcoming – what Emma Lazarus described (in words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty) as – the "tired...poor...huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse...the homeless, tempest-tost..."¹¹. It was the lifted "lamp beside our nation's golden door" that brought my family—most of our families—to these "teeming shores." The current restrictions on legal immigration and limits on refugees¹² lead me to wonder whether most of our families would have been permitted to enter this land of promise.¹³

When Jewish immigration to the United States was effectively stopped in 1924, the repercussions were catastrophic for our relatives and Jewish neighbors who were unable to escape the horrors of the Holocaust. The rationale of opposition today for limiting refugees is rooted in the same unfounded fears that immigrants pose a security threat.¹⁴ In truth, legal and illegal immigrants

commit crimes at significantly lower rates than US citizens¹⁵ and the vast majority of terrorist attacks in our country during the last fifteen years were committed by native-born United States Citizens.¹⁶

On our southern border I saw families and individuals fleeing danger and persecution, seeking safety and hope. Mothers nursed their babies behind barbed wire fences, waiting to be processed. Innocent people, neither convicted nor even charged with a crime were incarcerated in a prison. Parents and children walked hand in hand away from violence and famine towards a land of promise and safety. People bunked in tiny shelter rooms in Juarez and El Paso, yearning to breathe free, knowing that wherever they were was safer and better than the place where their journey began.

Letting refugees and asylum seekers know that they are neither alone nor forgotten becomes our sacred task. Walking through El Paso, playing foosball with children at Casa del Migrante in Juarez, nodding and waving at immigrants and asylum seekers was one of the most Jewish experiences of my life.¹⁷ It was an acknowledgement of their existence and value as people.

I hope to return to El Paso and Juarez in the months ahead, that people from our sacred community will join me to bear witness for yourself, to see what is really happening, to acknowledge the humanity of the people seeking asylum in our nation.

With all the challenges and contested conditions we see debated by politicians and pundits, I found inspiration in my visit to Casa Franklin, a facility in downtown El Paso for detained minors separated from parents before or after they crossed the US/Mexico border.¹⁸

On nearly every pillow or bed was a Spanish language Bible, opened to the section of the book of Psalms that we sing from every Friday night, as we prepare to welcome Shabbat. These Psalms help us to recall God's presence in the world around us and remind us of our hope for a brighter future, a time when everyone in the world will be able to enjoy the Sabbath and all it represents: a time of peace and a time with family; a foretaste of the world perfected.

If the young people at Casa Franklin can keep hope for a brighter future, as they remain confined and separated from their families, then we can keep hope for a brighter future, and remind them that they are not alone or forgotten.

When I walk with my son Samson, I cannot help but think about the children I witnessed at the Border, walking hand in hand with their parents towards a land of freedom and safety, away from famine and violence.

You and I can be the intervening angel in the story of Abraham and Isaac, so that the journey towards *Eretz haMoriah*—a promised land of hope and opportunity—can become a reality for all who yearn to be breathe free.

May we, who live secure in our warm homes, remember those who sleep in the dust and know not peace.

May we remember our sacred obligation as Jews to care for the stranger, for we too were strangers.

And may we remember Elie Wiesel's words: "One person of integrity can make a difference" as we all *vayelchu yachdav* – walk together – in the New Year. *Amen*.

¹ I am grateful for the editorial insights and support of Aron Hirt-Manheimer as well as the thoughtful input of Rabbi Fred N. Reiner, Susan Liss, Jane Emmer, and my wife, Ashley Heller. I delivered a version of this sermon at the 9AM and 11:30AM Rosh Hashanah Morning Worship Services on Monday, September 30, 2019 at Congregation Shir Shalom of Westchester and Fairfield Counties in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

² Genesis 22:6 and 22:8

³ Rashi also cites II Chronicles 3:1 "Solomon began to build the House of the Eternal in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah..."

⁴ See Genesis 12:1. *Bereishit Rabbah* 55:7 includes commentary on the use of identical words. The phrase "*Lech L'cha*" appears only twice in Tanakh, Genesis 12:1 and 22:2. The similarity between the two verses is remarkable as well for their use of superfluous descriptive words.

⁵ An adaptation of the Primo Levi poem, which continues: "Consider that this has been: I commend these words to you. Engrave them on your hearts when you are in your house, when you walk on your way, when you go to bed, when you rise. Repeat them to your children or may your house crumble...your offspring avert their faces from you."

⁶ Rabbi Janet Marder. "*Life Isn't Fair*." September 29, 2017. <https://www.betham.org/sermon/life-isnt-fair>

⁷ HIAS Welcome the Stranger Campaign

⁸ *Pirkei Avot* 1:14

⁹ Teacher and mentor of our Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray

¹⁰ The full text of the scenic marker: "Working on the theory that explosives could cause rainfall because many war battles had been followed by rain, the US Department of Agriculture conducted experiments in rainmaking. During a west Texas drought in 1891 the agency brought the experiment to Midland, with some success. Desperate for rain, El Paso city leaders convinced the Department to come here and try the same procedure. On September 18, some 370 charges of dynamite and other explosives were fired from the heights of Mt. Franklin, but no rain resulted. Only a heavy dew was reported."

¹¹ Emma Lazarus. *The New Colossus*. 1883.

¹² Michael D. Shear and Zolan Kanno-Youngs. "Trump Slashes Refugee Cap to 18,000, Curtailing U.S. Role as Haven" New York Times. September 26, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/us/politics/trump-refugees.html>

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/04/opinion/ignorant-immigration-reform.html>; <https://www.cato.org/blog/why-legal-immigration-system-broken-short-list-problems>

¹⁴ See Shear and Kanno-Youngs above. "'President Trump is prioritizing the safety and security of the American people by making sure we do not admit more people than we can vet,' the administration said Thursday evening.

¹⁵ According to a 2017 study by the Cato Institute of incarceration rates in Texas.”

<https://www.cato.org/publications/immigration-research-policy-brief/criminal-immigrants-texas-2017-illegal-immigrant>

¹⁶ New America Foundation. “Terrorism in America After 9/11” <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/> 336 of 479 (70%) “Jihadi Terrorists” (people charged with planning or committing a terrorist act in the name of Jihad) since September 11, 2001 were born or naturalized United States Citizens. When the number of attacks perpetrated by extreme right wing terrorists are considered, the percentage of terrorists who are United States Citizens increases. “America's terrorism problem today is homegrown and is not the province of any one group or ideological perspective.”

¹⁷ I am reminded of the teaching by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “When we marched in Selma, it was like we were praying with our feet”

¹⁸ After the first delivery of this sermon, I removed the following details about Casa Franklin: Casa Franklin has operated for nearly twenty years, supervised by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, under the auspices of the Department of Health and Human Services. Conditions were in stark contrast to the prison-like ICE/DHS Otero County Processing Facility we visited. At the time of our visit, Casa Franklin was over capacity with nearly sixty children, ages 5-17, technically “awaiting reunification” with family. Children live in a dormitory and spend their days with caring adults, in classrooms learning English, Math, and Science—material that will help whether they are permitted to remain in the United States or “repatriated” with family in their country of origin. The bedrooms at Casa Franklin were spotless; every bed was made. The young people arrive with little more than the clothes on their backs and each day they are provided a clean uniform to wear.