

How Then Shall We Live? (Sermon - 7/28/2019)

Good morning. I've been asked to share some thoughts on "How Then Shall We Live?" -- specifically addressing it from a Jewish perspective. I say "a Jewish perspective" because there's a rule of thumb, "two Jews, three opinions."

So this is my take -- an overview of Jewish teachings, and other bits of Jewish culture along the way.

As the parent of adult children, I should have learned by now not to wear thin the patience of friends and family by talking about my kids' admirable and adorable exploits. But not so much.

A little lesson in Yiddish: To ***kvell*** is to brag, especially about the kids; ***naches*** is the special joy you get from being proud, especially of the kids.

Stephanie and I have used the cover of having raised a daughter with special needs as a license to ***kvell endlessly***.

A couple weeks ago, I visited our son Gabe in Boston where he's a student intern in a math research group, analyzing plans for setting up voting districts, as a member of the Metric Geometry Gerrymandering Group. Over seafood in Chinatown and fabulous pizza at a place just off the MIT campus, he shared endlessly about algorithms and Markov Chains and other math-y topics.

I'm not sure this is what you had in mind, Curran....

Well my point is that I've loved being a dad. And that's why, imagining the love I have for my kids, I could not imagine the pain those parents feel at being separated from their children at the border. Whether these families are asylum seekers or others looking for work or refuge in the US, separating kids from their moms and dads is wrong.

The family separations; deaths while in detention; unspeakable living conditions; I believe these to be intentional cruelty implemented as a deterrent to immigration. They cross a line for me beyond reasonable policy disagreements, to the point where action is, to use my daughter Maris's term, a "mandatory activity". And I've tried to keep alive the fire from my moment of activism a year ago, when I went to the border to protest child separation.

What's the Jewish context for this -- for knowing when and how to act? For better or worse there's a lot of guidance. Jews have been around for a while, and we write things down. Our teaching was delivered by God to Moses, according to tradition, in the form of the Ten Commandments, as told in the Torah. The Torah, those first five books of the Old Testament, is the source from which we draw all our teaching.

For thousands of years we've been instructed to study the Torah. Rabbis, known as

rebbe

in Yiddish -- meaning teachers -- interpret this stuff. It was codified into the Old Testament Bible, which includes the Torah, plus the Prophets and Writings. But that was only the beginning. For hundreds of years after, rabbis wrote and compiled a collection of teachings called the Talmud. The Talmud identifies 613 instructions in the Bible, a set of rules for how we should live our lives, from keeping Kosher to everything else.

So, for centuries, the highest praise for a kid (well, for a son -- Judaism had some growing to do) was to be called a

yeshiva bucher,

a good Talmud student -- that was *naches*, something to *kvell* about!

Fortunately, the message of all Jewish teaching has been boiled down for us, by Rabbi Hillel who lived about a hundred years before Jesus. Hillel had a summary which should sound familiar to you: "That which is hateful to you, do not unto another: This is the whole Torah.

The rest is commentary."

Rabbi Hillel is also famous for another pithy statement. "If I am not for myself who is for me? And being for my own self, what am I? And if not now, when?"

He had a knack for being concise.

Beyond some quick takes from great rabbis of the past, how do Jews access this broad body of religious teaching? A weekly Torah portion, read and studied on Shabbat, is the primary means, covering the Five Books of Moses each year.

This week's Torah portion takes us to the moment just before the Israelites, who'd been wandering in the desert for 40 years, are about to enter the land of Canaan. One sub-plot in the Parsha -- this section -- tells of the five daughters of the deceased Zelophehad, petitioning for their inheritance, in the absence of a male heir. Importantly, it represents one of the first examples documented in the Torah of women successfully making their voices heard. This story deserves its own deep reading, but I'll save that for another day.

Beyond the direct interpretation of the Torah, our history itself has been an additional source of teaching for the Jewish people. This has been most notable in these recent decades since the middle of the 20th century. The Holocaust -- which comprised the killing of a third of the Jewish population worldwide -- has been a potent source.

With that in mind, and looking at immigration which has animated my conscience especially over this past year, I am reminded of the story of a young Jewish man at the very start of Hitler's Germany, who, confronted with his children's exclusion from the preferred public school -- the "gymnasium" in Berlin -- chose to leave his comfortable home and move his family to the untamed desert of the Jewish homeland in Palestine -- now Israel. He wasn't a Zionist -- in fact he probably didn't much like Zionists. But in 1934, well before there were concentration camps or death camps, he made the extreme and important decision to leave.

I admire him and his wife tremendously for making that tough decision. It had been less than a year into the unthinkable rise of a political unknown to the most senior position in government, and it was clear that Jews were targets of

the rabble inspired by the new regime. But his friends thought he was crazy to leave their beloved Berlin, which they saw as the cultural center of the world.

They landed, the two parents and four children, in a dusty outpost just beyond the little city of Tel Aviv -- Ramat Gan, now a thriving suburb. At the time it was hot, dirty, dangerous, and uncivilized by the standards they had recently left behind. As a family, they did their best -- with varying degrees of success -- to accommodate the radically different situation they found themselves in. But in the end, after illness and a failed business, they decided to uproot again, and made their way to America where, over time, they flourished. The powerful memoir that documents their migration from Germany to Palestine to New York City is worthy of a screenplay.

The author of that memoir was my grandmother, and it was she and my grandfather who led that displaced family to America.

One moment is particularly cinematic: In 1937, after Palestine, with my grandfather having gone ahead to arrange passage to New York, my grandmother led the four children from a "vacation" in Yugoslavia to meet up with him in Amsterdam. The train took them through Switzerland, and -- in retrospect a bad choice -- they crossed through Germany. On the train, the kids struck up a conversation with a friendly couple -- a woman and her husband, known in the memoir as 'the Gentleman in Green'. At the German border crossing, my grandmother was confronted by a Nazi officer demanding that they get off the train. The Gentleman in Green, non-Jewish, extended himself, not without some risk, to disapprove. And his wife asserted that "These are nice, decent people; they are unaware that they should not pass--." Despite their brave intervention, my family was taken off the train momentarily, and my grandmother was told the Nazi officers would decide whether they would be sent to a concentration camp.

After this and some other hair-raising turns, the adventure ended happily, of course, or I wouldn't be here to tell the tale.

The outcome -- the attitude of the Nazi officers in letting them back on the train -- may have been effected by the stand taken by the Gentleman in Green and his wife. In any case, their actions were certainly a model of what someone with

chutzpah

does when another person is threatened.

That story of migration is just one, one about my people, my family. There are too many opportunities for us to act as the Gentleman in Green and his wife.

Before wrapping up, I'd like to share a letter I got a week ago, from Tom Ikeda, a friend and former colleague, director of a Japanese-American human rights organization, Densho, in Seattle. It's a few long paragraphs, but I think it's worth the read.

Tom
writes:

*Dear
Friends,*

A couple of weeks ago, during a quiet moment with my wife Sara, I wept uncontrollably as I told her about a protest I took part in at Fort Sill.

My wife of 35 years had never seen me show such grief, and I know from the look on her face it startled her and then moved her to know how much I cared about what I just experienced. I had just returned from a Tsuru For Solidarity protest at the Fort Sill Oklahoma Army Base, a site being prepared to detain 1,400 refugee children separated from family at the southern border. Fort Sill is also a former WWII detention facility that held 700 Japanese immigrants. One of those inmates was Kanesaburo Oshima, who was shot and killed when he mentally snapped and tried to come home by climbing a fence. I interviewed Mr. Oshima's son nine years ago in Kona, Hawaii, and I still remember how that eighty year old man went back to being an 11 year old boy when he told me this story about his father.

My tears started flowing when I talked about the refugee children being separated from loved ones and placed in cruel and inhumane conditions by our government. I knew my heartache came from the pain of my grandparents, parents, and Japanese American community who were held in American concentration camps during WWII.

Protesting at Fort Sill was not easy for me. It was especially difficult when a Military Police Officer started yelling at us to stop protesting and to leave immediately. I had to fight the urge to leave and was comforted by the words of Dr. Satsuki Ina:

"We've been removed too many times," Satsuki said, "we want to make a stand. We want to say that we are protesting the fact that 1,400 children are going to be brought to this military site. We're here because we do not want to have that happen. And as former children of prison camps, of concentration camps in America, we are saying, 'No more. Never again.'"

Tom
ends his letter with this. He says:

I share this story to remind us all that we can be the allies for these children, and other vulnerable communities, that Japanese Americans did not have during WWII. The knowledge that "Never Again" is happening right now is hard to carry—but together we can make a difference.

At Fort Sill, my old friend Tom was a Gentleman in Green for children separated from their families at the border, as I have tried, in a small way, to be. From my personal Jewish perspective, there is no more urgent issue than that today.

Here in Sonoma, members of the First Congregational Church have consistently been the Gentlemen -- and Women -- in Green, for the Jewish community, the Latino community, and others in need. And for that I thank you.

-David Schoenbach