YOM KIPPUR *5777*

WHY WE BUILD THE WALL[1]

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"Something there is that doesn't love a wall."[2]

So begins Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall."

It depicts the annual springtime ritual of repairing the stone walls that demarcate property lines throughout New England. Two men meet on either side of the wall between their farms to replace the stones that the frozen soil has dislodged, filling the gaps as they go, wearing their "fingers rough with handling them."

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[1] The title of this sermon is taken from Anaïs Mitchell's song, "Why We Build The Wall," from her concept album (and now Off-Broadway musical) *Hadestown* (Righteous Babe Records, 2010).

[2]Frost, Robert. *North of Boston.* Original publication: London: David Nutt, 1914. As published online at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3026/3026-h/3026-h.htm.

"'…Before I built a wall," the narrator thinks, "I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offense. Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down.""

His neighbor is of a different mind. He replies with a simple proverb. He says it twice and nothing more: "Good fences make good neighbors."[3]

Over the last year we have heard much about walls. Make no mistake: this is a spiritual issue as much as a political one, about the walls we build in our hearts and minds no less than the ones we build along our borders. Back in March, the Pope even went so far as to say: "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian."

But I wonder: Could such a person be *Jewish?* What does *our* spiritual tradition say about building walls?

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[3] *Ibid.*

It was a 34-year-old Jewish American poet, Emma Lazarus, who, in 1883, famously gave voice to the Statue of Liberty in her poem "The New Colossus":

> Give me your tired, your poor,
> Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
> The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
> Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
> I lift my lamp beside the golden door![4]

These words captured America's imagination, shaping our thinking about immigration. Lazarus understood that the Jewish story—like the American story—is the immigrant's story. Her father's family came from Germany in the early 19th century; her mother's, from Portugal, establishing themselves in New York long before the American Revolution. A string of pogroms in distant Russia moved Emma to study Jewish history and advocate on behalf of indigent Jewish refugees.

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[4] Lazarus, Emma. "The New Colossus," 1883, as engraved on a bronze plaque and mounted inside the Statue of Liberty in 1903.

Emma Lazarus was a microcosm of the Jewish experience: an Ashkenazic-Sephardic-American-woman-intellectual-social-justice-champion. She even argued for a Jewish homeland thirteen years before Theodore Herzl began to use the term Zionism.

The desire to establish a home in a distant land of promise resides at the core of the Jewish narrative. What is our story if not the story of the immigrant, the saga of the refugee? Abraham and Sarah fled their home by the Persian Gulf and then left their adoptive home, Canaan, when famine struck, taking in other refugees with them as they traveled. Jacob had to spend decades in a foreign country, fleeing the murderous rage of his twin, Esau. Later, Jacob and all of his children become homeless when famine ravaged Canaan once again. We would endure as slaves for centuries, only to become refugees in the wilderness upon our Exodus from Egypt.

Our sovereignty in the Promised Land would not last. We would become refugees among the empires of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Romans, enduring nearly 2,000 years of statelessness before the establishment of Israel in 1948.

A little over 100 years ago, my own great-grandparents found refuge in America alongside many of your relatives, fleeing from the brutal fate that awaited most Russian Jewish peasants conscripted to fight on the front lines in the Czar's army.

I still remember the rhyme we used to pay tribute to the pioneering spirit of my mom's oldest relatives at the candle-lighting ceremony at my Bar Mitzvah party, 30 years ago next week: *The Ginsburgs came from Russia/To settle the West/Made it far as Lakewood/And said, "This is best."*

To be a Jew is to "know the heart of a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt."[5] This verse from the Book of Exodus undergirds the Torah's oft-repeated de-

[5] Exodus 23:9.

mand to treat the most vulnerable in society with generous hearts and courageous spirits.

Building walls to block immigrants and halt refugees—whether we fashion them of bricks and mortar or biases and mindsets—breaks faith with core Jewish values.

Following the Paris massacre eleven months ago, a fear that ISIS could exploit the global refugee crisis to infiltrate our borders prompted many of our elected officials to propose that the government not only tighten border security but rescind its pledge to take in 10,000 approved refugees, war victims fleeing the living hell of what remains of Syria.

Meanwhile, not even five days after the rampage in his capital city, French president François Hollande reaffirmed his promise to take in 30,000 Syrian refugees. In so doing he showed the world how a broken heart can still feel the suffering of others.

Other hearts have hardened. Growing fear of the dangers purportedly posed by immigrants and refugees has emboldened populist ideologies all over the Western World, directly pushing the Brexit movement to victory, leading to a radical break in European unity.

These isolationist ideologies—ones that look upon the stranger with suspicion, the victim with vindictiveness—betray the best in Jewish tradition.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall." Walls divide, isolate, and differentiate. Walls force us to choose sides, to see the world in binary terms: There's Us and Them, Ourselves and the Other, Mexicans and Americans, or Muslims and Americans, or immigrants and Americans—as if you can't be both at the same time.

Some of the most emblematic structures in Jewish tradition reveal a deep-seated discomfort with the project of wall-building.

Consider the *sukkah*. In order to meet the requirements of Jewish law, a *sukkah* needs only three walls and a ceiling.[6] The whole point is not sturdiness but flimsiness, exposure, openness, so that, inside, we are sheltered but not shielded from the outside world.

The *chuppah*, the wedding canopy, takes the idea even further: there are *no* walls, so as to suggest that a Jewish home will be open to all, like Abraham and Sarah's tent.

And when we built this beautiful sanctuary, we insisted that no opaque walls, no stained glass, would keep us from seeing the world outside. Rather, the ceiling is interrupted at intervals by skylights and the holy ark is suspended in panes of glass, as if to say, this community acknowledges no separation between ourselves and God's world.

On the other hand, a *sukkah* lasts a week; a *chuppah* lasts an hour; a sanctuary is not a home. Can we honestly say that all

[6] *Mishnah, Sukkah* 1:1.

of Judaism is about tearing down walls? How does Judaism assess the saying, "Good fences make good neighbors?"

Tisha B'Av, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, marks when enemies destroyed the holy temple in Jerusalem: first, in 586 BCE at the hands of the Babylonians, and again, in the year 70 of the Common Era, at the hands of the Romans. As we do today, we observe Tisha B'Av with fasting and other customs of self-deprivation. But Tisha B'Av is preceded by *another* fast day three weeks earlier, the 17th of Tammuz, which marks when the Romans breached Jerusalem's outer walls and began their siege of the city. Jerusalem's celebrated walls have provided protection from enemies without and preserved the unique Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Armenian heritage of the four distinct quarters within.

Seventy years after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, the Persians, having conquered the Near East, allowed the Jews to return to and rebuild the temple. The Jewish governor who undertook the project was named Nehemiah; a Book

of the Bible bears his name. In the first chapter, Nehemiah hears this report: "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."[7] The first *six chapters* of the Book describe the 52-day project of rebuilding the wall, a necessary precondition before Nehemiah will allow exiles to return to Jerusalem.

Walls save lives. For the same reason that we legislate barriers for residential swimming pools, the Book of Deuteronomy instructs: "When you build a new house, you must build a parapet [a small wall] for your roof, so that you not bring blood-guilt upon your house if anyone should fall from it."[8]

The Rabbis explained that walls can establish two different kinds of relationships. The Babylonian Talmud makes it clear that walls can be projects between enemies, in which case they function to mitigate danger and damage, or between neighbors, in which case they function to regulate neighborly rela-

[7] Nehemiah 1:3.

[8] Deuteronomy 22:8.

tions—to help neighbors live together.[9] In addition to protection, walls provide weight-bearing support, privacy, and can prevent arguments over ambiguous property lines.

So: "Good fences make good neighbors."

Of course, that statement requires that we understand what makes for a "good fence" and also the difference between "neighbor" and "enemy." And here's where we've gotten stuck.

So, first: what makes for a "good fence?" In both the Bible and Talmud, the passages that speak at length about building walls emphasize the importance of the *doors* or *gates*. You can't just build a wall without considering its apertures, those features that regulate passage from one side to the other, the parts of the wall that open and close.

Nehemiah, as we have said, oversees the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed generations earlier by the ma-

[9] *Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra,* 2a ff.

rauding Babylonian armies. But first the workmen repair the gates. The Book lavishes attention on this detail, dedicating a full fifteen verses to who restored which gate and how.[10] Once the gates are finished, only then does work on the wall commence in earnest.

The Talmud also expatiates on the subject of walls and gates. One passage relates that the Prophet Elijah used to appear regularly to speak with a devout man in his courtyard. After the man built a fence, however, which prevented poor people from entering his courtyard, Elijah—more or less the Jewish patron saint of the poor and needy—stopped appearing. Why? The problem, the Talmud says, is that if a gate opens only from the inside, "this is not good."[11] Good gates have to open from the outside, it says. So good fences make good neighbors because good fences have good gates.

And, second: how do we know our neighbors from our enemies?

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[10] Nehemiah 3:1-15.

[11] *Bavli, Bava Batra,* 7b.

Israel wrestles with this question every single day.

This summer, as part of a weeklong AIPAC-sponsored mission to Israel and the West Bank, I joined twenty other American rabbis at the Rachel border crossing south of Jerusalem.

We rose before sunrise to observe the estimated 6,600 Palestinian laborers who would cross from the West Bank into Jerusalem by 7AM, the same way they do every working day of their lives, the same way tens of thousands of other Palestinians do at the other military checkpoints—and those are just the ones who are crossing the border legally.

Let me back up. Palestinian laborers can travel to work in Israel in one of two ways: legally or illegally. Those who have permits can cross through a military checkpoint like the one we visited. Those who have none sneak past the barrier that runs along the West Bank. Both ways are time-consuming, and the penalties for being caught entering illegally can be

harsh. But the far higher pay that can be earned in Israel compared to the West Bank is an incentive for many to make the crossing, even illegally.

Most of the security barrier between Israel and the West Bank is a fence. In fact, only a tiny fraction of the total length of the barrier—less than 4%, or about 10 miles—is a 30 foot high concrete wall designed primarily to prevent Palestinian snipers from shooting at cars along the Trans-Israel Highway, one of the country's main roads.

The Rachel Border Crossing is a door in the wall.

On July 14th, at 6:00 AM, twenty-one American rabbis walked through the wall.

We clambered up to a metal catwalk and stood as, beneath our feet, thousands of Palestinian workers, mostly men but some women, heads down, voices low, shuffled in a line that snaked about 100 feet through a concrete room. Most came empty-

handed, save, perhaps, for a plastic lunch-bag, so as to expedite the screening process. Israeli police and military officials as well as human rights monitors had stationed themselves at every point along the crossing. For half an hour we watched the daily routine unfold. At no point did we see a heated exchange, a deliberate humiliation of another human being or a security breach. The soldiers addressed the workers politely and without incident. It was, on the one hand, mind-numbing, like interminable lines everywhere. Most West Bank workers will endure pedestrian lines of upwards of 45 minutes, every day, in order to work in Jerusalem.

And it was, on the other hand, hair-raising. We experienced more than a little voyeuristic discomfort staring down at the human columns beneath our feet. We left the wall awakened to a reality from which we had, up until then, been shielded. The vast majority of Israelis will never see what we saw. It is not visible to the public. We left pledging as a group to share this experience with our congregations, so that we all understand together the both the prize and the price of protection.

The Israeli barrier does what a good fence should do: first and foremost, it saves lives. Since construction began after the second intifada at the turn of the millennium, Palestinian terror in Israel has dropped by about 90 percent. It may be the case that, for now, subjecting West Bank residents to long waits at military checkpoints—and, in so doing, ensuring that thousands of hard-working laborers will spend every working day of their lives viewed as suspects—is simply the price we all have to pay for Israelis to live in safety. At the same time, we left wondering about the psychological and spiritual toll a project like this exacts on the human beings on *both* sides of the wall, where, in order to ensure safety, neighbors are of necessity impelled to view one another as enemies.

As you can tell by now, I believe that both "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" and "Good fences make good neighbors" contain elements of truth. The key, I think, is to pay special attention to our doors and gates, and to differentiate with acute sensitivity between "neighbor" and "enemy."

This is nowhere more applicable than in our response to the Syrian refugee crisis which has become the largest in history, surpassing the mass global displacement following World War II. Over 65 million have been forced to flee, a majority of them women and children.

Let us state unequivocally: refugees are not our enemies.[12]

How we treat them will reflect our commitment to the values that define us as Jewish Americans. We believe that families should stick together. We believe in education. We believe in mutual responsibility. We believe that hard work should be rewarded. We believe in self-determination. We believe that our choices, our actions here and now, define us more than our ethnicity, our past circumstances. We believe that all are created equal. We believe in the freedom of religion.

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[12] http://www.factcheck.org/2015/11/facts-about-the-syrian-refugees/

Refugees who pass rigorous screening protocols in order to come here—on average, a two-year process—embody these Jewish-American values.

They have defied the odds to leave behind discrimination, threats, emotional trauma and violence surpassing our worst nightmares. We can help them to establish a new home here, the same way we Jewish Americans received assistance generations ago.

We know it will not be easy. We too endured all manner of hostility to our arrival on these shores, including the utter failure of the United States government to pursue an organized rescue policy for Jewish victims of Nazi Germany until 1944.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl recently drew my attention to a Gallup poll that asked whether or not America should open its doors to 10,000 refugee children caught in the crossfire of war. More than two-thirds of Americans surveyed said "No."

This Gallup poll was taken in 1939, after the highly publicized events of *Kristallnacht,* the infamous Nazi program against Jewish businesses and synagogues. Those 10,000 children seeking refuge on our shores? Most were Jews.[13]

Make no mistake: they said the same things about us back then that many Americans are saying about refugees and immigrants today. They said we would foment anarchy and violence. They said we would pledge fealty to a dangerous ideology (in our case, Communism). They said our devotion to Judaism or Zionism would eclipse our loyalty to America. They said we would harm American economic and business interests.

Through it all, one organization stood out in its efforts to surmount the obstacles to Jewish immigration to America: the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Association, or HIAS. Originally established to assist Jewish emigrants from Russia, for 125

[13] Newport, Frank. "Historical Review: Americans' Views on Refugees Coming to U.S., as published online at http://www.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/186716/historical-review-americans-views-refugees-coming.aspx.

years, HIAS has helped to relocate 4.5 million Jews and at-risk groups from all over the world.

I am proud to announce that, this summer, WRT officially joined the Westchester Refugee Task Force. Working with HIAS, the State Department, and faith communities throughout the Hudson Valley, we will do our part, over the course of this new Jewish year—to resettle, in Westchester County, ten families displaced by the Syrian refugee crisis—about fifty men, women, and children.

Now we need you to get involved. We are looking for volunteers to assist with: Airport Welcome, Housing Arrangements, Interpretation, Transportation, Health Screening, School Enrollment, Medical Benefits, Social Security Card Application, Employment Preparation, Cultural Orientation, Community Connections, and English Language Training. If you have experience or interest in any of these fields, please let us know. A handout in the lobby provides contact information for volunteering or learning more, a fact sheet about the world's

refugees provided by the Pew Research Center, and HIAS's own resources.

And on Sunday morning, October 23rd, at 9:00 AM, during the festival of Sukkot—which commemorates our own people's dwelling in temporary shelters in the wilderness—we will convene our first meeting for anyone interested in helping out. We need you. Because, in the end, it comes down to this: "We used to take refugees because they were Jewish. Now we take them because we're Jewish," the new byword of HIAS.[14]

Among the last words we will recite on Yom Kippur, at the *Ne'ilah* service, are these: *Pitchu li sha'arei tzedek, avo vam, odeh Yah.* "Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them and give thanks to God."[15]

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[14] As cited by Dara Lind on www.vox.com, as published online at http://www.vox.com/2015/9/25/9392151/hias-jewish-refugees.

[15] Psalms 118:19.

How dare we ask God to open gates for us if we won't open gates for some of God's most vulnerable children? For them, we can open a gate that separates life from death.

For them, Emma Lazarus' words are not a poem but a promise:

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand.
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor;
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Open the gates, this new year, and she will lift her lamp beside the golden door once more.