

SECOND DAY ROSH HASHANA 5787 (5787.3)

The first time I attended a second day of Rosh Hashana service was the first time I led a second day of Rosh Hashana service. Growing up in the Midwest, second-day services were very rare in Reform congregations, though they have always been the norm in Conservative and Orthodox synagogues.

Of course, every Jewish holiday features a Torah reading. On the first day of Rosh Hashana, Conservative and Orthodox synagogues read the disturbing story that we read today, on the second day of Rosh Hashana. My first thought upon encountering this story many years ago was “we can do better than this!”

After all, this chapter of Genesis tells of how Abraham obeyed Sarah’s command to expel their maidservant Hagar and Ishmael, the son Hagar bore with Abraham when Sarah was unable to conceive. Once Sarah miraculously gave birth to Isaac (at the age of 90), she had no need for Hagar and Ishmael and had Abraham kick them out of the home they all shared. Not the most exalted Torah narrative, to be sure.

For close to forty years, Beth Am Temple and most American Reform temples used “Gates of Repentance” as our High Holy Day prayerbook, our makhzor. For decades, our second day Torah reading was the Biblical story of creation. It made a lot of sense, seeing that rabbinic tradition views Rosh Hashana as the anniversary of the world’s creation.

About a decade ago, most Reform temples adopted our new High Holy Day prayerbook, *Mishkan HaNefesh*. The Torah portion for the first day remains the *Akayda*, the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac. However, on the second day, instead of the story of creation we now have this bizarre story of Abraham expelling Hagar and Ishmael.

It is a tale which ignores fundamental Jewish values of kindness, compassion and caring for the most vulnerable members of society. We are taught to view all people as created in the image of God, to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, love our neighbors as ourselves and more.

So, why on earth would we move from an inspiring tale of the world's creation to a cruel expulsion of a woman and her child from their home? Perhaps it is to get us to look in the mirror.

After all, the story of creation takes us back to a kinder and gentler time and place. It is a kind of religious reboot to our default status, which should be to see the best in others. As we gather in temple for the High Holy Days, the constant repetition of our traditional values is intended to sink in and get us to upgrade our actions.

Like all people, we cannot help but be influenced by the constant torrent of messages and information. On the High Holy Days, we get to block much of that

out. We are able to focus less on what our national leaders are saying and more on what our Jewish values are saying. We are reminded of what our heritage is teaching, rather than what our political leaders are preaching.

For at least two hundred years, Americans have worried about immigration. German Jews in the mid-19th century fought to halt the influx of (what they considered to be) the wretched refuse of Eastern European Jews. After twenty million immigrants arrived in America between 1881-1924, three million of them Jews from Eastern Europe, America finally shut the door, dooming hundreds of thousands or even millions of European Jews to extinction.

The ethnicities our leaders tell us to fear change over time. However, while America is a nation of immigrants, we often forget our origins and view newcomers with suspicion or even contempt. We are fed false and hysterical propaganda about immigrant crime and behavior by leaders at the highest levels in order to justify these feelings. This is certainly not new, but the current campaign against immigrants in our country is more intense than at any time in recent history.

Regardless of our views on immigration, many of us felt that the presidential promise to rid America of immigrants who committed serious crimes was a good thing. We had little sympathy for immigrants who came to America and brought increased violence into our communities.

We quickly learned, however, that the promise to rid the country of violent, illegal immigrants was merely a ruse. ICE agents and other immigration authorities regularly round up large numbers of immigrants who are neither violent nor a threat. The overwhelming majority are hard workers who pay their taxes, care for their families and build positive relationships in the community.

Yes, many entered the country illegally or overstayed their visas. Yet others have followed every step required by the government as they went through the legal procedures leading to citizenship.

We all know how slowly the government bureaucracy can operate. While this may be annoying to us, it has led these immigrants to live in fear, as family members and friends are regularly pulled from their cars, arrested at their jobs and elsewhere in the community. This is not about enforcing laws or ridding America of “the worst of the worst.”

Instead, we are witnessing a cruel campaign of terror against the immigrant community in America. How else to explain families being torn apart and immigrants being jailed hundreds or thousands of miles from their loved ones? Some are even exiled to countries where they have never lived and have no connections.

America has long debated what should be done with good people who work hard, pay their taxes, but are not here legally. Treating them as if they were violent felons is a perversion of justice and an abuse of power.

On this second day of Rosh Hashana, it is appropriate to read the story of creation to remind us that we are all part of one ecosystem. Humanity, animals and nature are all connected; how we relate to one another will determine how we will be judged by God and by history.

Yet on this second day of Rosh Hashana, it is also appropriate to read of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. It is, after all, a story which reminds us of unacceptable behavior directed at the most vulnerable. Reading this story is a wake-up call for us to reflect and repent.

When we allow the powerful to abuse the vulnerable . . . when we stand by and watch the values America has promoted for over two hundred years be trampled on by our government . . . when we fail to act, we fail to live up to the values we have focused on during our services. This is not what God expects of us. This is not what we should expect of ourselves. America can do better; we can do better!

So many of us, myself included, have allowed threats and intimidation to keep us from getting involved. On this anniversary of the world's creation, I urge us all,

regardless of political affiliation, to recommit to the values that made America great, to rise up against the injustice we see growing like a noxious weed.

We can support whatever laws we wish, but there is no need to treat people with cruelty because they missed an expiration date, made a procedural error or are waiting for the government to respond to an application. We have all had it happen to us. All of us are created in the image of God and we all deserve to be treated with respect, unless we have abused that trust.

A rabbinic colleague of mine near Boston makes it her mission to provide food for immigrant families and toys for their kids, as they wait for hours outside of a local ICE office. It is a small, yet deeply appreciated measure of humanity for these people who show up for their hearings, only to be separated from their families. Many of them are put in detention or sent far away. The lucky ones who get released are sent out on the street with no food, no funds, no transportation and no information.

Were it not for the amazing volunteers of what is called Compassion Corner, waiting outside the ICE offices, these immigrants would be left out on their own to fend for themselves by a government more intent on bringing pain to the vulnerable than helping them.

Our leaders have forgotten that a nation demonstrates its character not by how it treats its wealthiest and most powerful, but rather by how it treats its most needy. As we look at America on this Rosh Hashana, we see a nation seriously in need of repentance.

Many of you have been asked, during this holiday, to provide financial support to our Temple community. On Yom Kippur, many of you will be asked to provide financial support for the larger Jewish community. Today, I am asking those of you who are here (I'll get to the others later) to provide support for an immigrant community which is suffering more than most of us can possibly realize.

Of course, talk is cheap and it is important to put one's money where one's mouth is. So, for the next month, the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund (like the charities you see on TV or in the mail) will match every donation that is made to help these suffering souls. Simply send or bring in a check made out to the Temple, with a notation that it is for immigrant assistance. You can also donate on our website or designate your donation for other immigrant organizations if you wish.

We have already sent hundreds of dollars in support and I would love to send hundreds or even thousands more. No donation is too small and every single one will be matched.

If you want to donate your time, our Social Action committee, under the past leadership of Jeff Shalom and now Anny Ellis, has done remarkable work for immigrants through our association with Proyecto Faro. Please speak with Jeff, Anny, me or any members of our Social Action committee. Even those of you who are not members of our congregation are welcome to participate, for we are all either part of the solution or we are part of the problem.

Prayers are intended to lead to action. On this Rosh Hashana weekend, we have done a lot of praying. The time has now come for action, not only to protest, but to do something about it. These people are not the worst of the worst; they are simply the easiest to pick on. There is a better way.

Our sages teach that God created the world with one person so that no one could claim superior ancestry over another. On this Rosh Hashana, may our common ancestry and the remembrance of our own immigrant ancestry give us a renewed sensitivity for how other people are treated. May we remember that words are praiseworthy, but it is actions that truly matter.

May we recommit to fulfilling our traditional mandate to raise up the needy, for in so doing we also uplift ourselves. As God said to Abraham, in the words which stare at us from above the Ark “Veheyay v’rakha,” and you shall be a blessing.

AMEN

(final edits made on 09/19/2026)