

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF OWNERSHIP

Shana tova! It is truly wonderful to see all of you.

When the rabbis of the Talmud wanted to tell a story to illustrate a point, they often began by saying, “this is a *Ma-aseh sh’haya* – a story that once happened.” I often use story illustrations, but this morning I want to tell you a *ma-aseh sh’lo haya* - a story that didn’t happen. It was one of our rabbi emeritus, Rabbi Siegel’s favorite stories, but since he last told it here more than 23 years ago, I’m pretty sure that most of you haven’t heard it.

Once upon a time in the old country (where all the best stories took place), there was a small town in a wine-producing region. The townspeople heard that a famous rabbi was going to be on a grand tour early the following year and would be passing through. This was a rare event, so they called a town meeting to decide what kind of celebration they could hold.

One said, “Isn’t it obvious? We’re winemakers. We’ll have a wine festival. And to make it fair, each family in town will contribute some of their wine.”

Everyone loved that plan. They put a large oak barrel in the town square and every week, just before *Shabbat*, every household was to bring a pitcher of their wine and pour it into the barrel. By the time of the rabbi’s visit, they would have a full barrel of wine.

But in one of the families, the husband said to his wife, “listen, you know that we’re not rich. We really need to sell every drop of wine we make. And there is going to be so much wine in that barrel that our contribution would certainly not make any difference.” His wife replied, “but everyone is going to be bringing their pitcher on Friday afternoon. Everyone will see if we don’t participate.” “All right,” he said. “How about this? I’ll fill our pitcher with water and every Friday afternoon I’ll take it to the center of town. When it’s my turn to pour in our contribution, I’ll dip the pitcher below the rim of the barrel and no one will see that I’m pouring water.” They agreed and that’s what he did every week.

Six months later the big day arrived. The townspeople set up a stage in the town square, put a sturdy table on the stage and put the now full cask on top of the table. Right on schedule, the Rabbi and his entourage arrived. The proud townspeople presented him with a crystal goblet with which to taste their wine and begin the celebration. He held the goblet and turned the spigot and out flowed beautiful clear water.

Just in case you missed it, there was no wine at all, only water. Every family had the same idea: I can keep mine for myself and it won’t make any difference.

And why do I say that this was a *ma-aseh sh’lo haya* - a story that didn’t happen? Because this was precisely the fear that many had when we eliminated our dues system and turned instead only to donations. Would everyone do their part? One of the main concerns in our year-long listening campaign in which so many of you participated was that some-perhaps more than some-might take advantage. But that is precisely what did not happen. We trusted in one another’s generosity and that trust was born out.

Membership is up; pledges match and may even exceed the number in our budget; we are the envy of every congregation in Westchester. Though everyone knows that the dues model is doomed, the members of not one of the other 40+ synagogues in Westchester County have yet found enough faith in each other to make this change. You, the members of this Temple did. Your leaders – our leaders – saw what was needed, came up with a plan, listened to all of us and then revised the plan. At the congregational meeting we agreed overwhelmingly to forge ahead. We sent out pledge sheets in April, and you responded as I knew in my heart of hearts that you would. You did not say, “My contribution will not be missed. Someone else will do it.” You

said “this synagogue is important to me, to my family and friends, to my community and to the Jewish future.” Before you looked into your checkbooks you looked into your hearts and then you opened both and the result is that what many viewed as a risky experiment is clearly a resounding success. I could not be prouder than I am right now to be the rabbi of this forward-looking, generous congregation. It is a wonderful way to start the New Year.

One of the only remaining questions about this new system is what to call it. The working title was “dues to donations.” Well, that may have been appropriate for the first year but since we no longer have dues we need a different way to refer to it in the future. I’d like to make a suggestion. For many years we have talked about membership in a synagogue. We eliminated dues in part because paying dues for membership may the synagogue feel like a gym or a country club. But perhaps the problem was not just with the word “dues” but also with the word “membership.” So I’d like to suggest that, rather than speaking about synagogue membership, we should begin speaking about synagogue ownership. The fact is that members of a synagogue do actually have some legal ownership rights, but that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about the difference in attitude we feel depending on whether we are members or owners.

Members of a gym pay a certain amount and expect a certain level of service to be provided to them. Owners of that gym do everything they can to make sure that it meets everyone’s needs. Members expect that the gym will be a place to which they feel comfortable. Owners do everything they can to make it a comfortable place. Members are often most concerned with what they get; owners must be concerned with what they give.

I’m not sure if we’ll be able to do it, but I’d love for us to start thinking of our membership list as an owners list. Owners invest in the future of their organization. Your magnificent response to our new system makes it clear that you already feel ownership of this synagogue. So let’s put that feeling into words.

There’s something else that successful owners do; they see the big picture. They understand that while the needs of different groups within the organization may occasionally be in conflict with each other, it’s important to remember what the point of the organization is. So now I’d like to shift gears completely and address a totally different place in our lives in which I think we should start thinking of ourselves less as members and more as owners, and that is as Americans.

We are a country made up of many, many groups and factions, united, in theory, by the overarching ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Our history has been a continuing pendulum swing between unity and acting together on our ideals, and factionalism when each group acts in its own self-interest. More broadly, it is a swing between periods when Americans see themselves as joint owners of an ever-expanding proud tradition, and periods when factions within America see themselves as members struggling with each other for a piece of the pie. In general, the times of factionalism have also coincided with some of America’s least-proud moments of fear, selfishness, isolationism and anti-Semitism.

I’ve been thinking about this American pendulum a lot during the past month, and particularly the past week, as we’ve watched the refugee crisis unfold in Europe and listened to the variety of responses both from world leaders and from everyday citizens. Indulge me for a moment by participating in a thought experiment:

You are hurrying to work in Manhattan one morning. You dressed in a suit or perhaps a skirt and blouse, wearing a dress shoes and carrying a briefcase. You cut through Central Park and by chance find yourself near one of the large fountains. As you approach the fountain you see a toddler no more than three years old climb over the edge of the fountain jump into the water and immediately disappear. What do you do? Perhaps you look to see if anyone else is reacting. If

they are not, I'm going to bet that you drop your briefcase, step over the edge of the fountain, and wade in and save the child. (If that's not your answer, make an appointment to come see me.)

I'm going to bet that you would do that instinctively. I'm going to bet that your first thought is going to be to save a life. And if that's your first thought, then here's the flip side: your first thought was not, "I'm going to ruin my clothing," or "I'm going to be late for work." It also wasn't, "where is this child's parent?" Although it might have been your second thought. And I'm quite sure that you wouldn't stop to ask yourself, "if I save this child what kind of person will he grow up to be? Will he be an asset or detriment to American society?"

In the 1930s however, that last question, the one I hope you did not ask yourself, was in fact one of the things that Americans said about allowing Jewish children into the United States. Anti-immigrant and specifically anti-Jewish sentiment and legislation had been growing throughout the first part of the 20th century. By the 1940's several surveys found that the average American saw Jews as a greater threat to the welfare of the United States than any other national, religious, or racial group. And so when push came to shove, when in 1939 Hitler reiterated to the rest of the world what he would do to the Jews and opened Germany's borders for the Jews to go elsewhere, America would not take them. You all know the story of the SS St. Louis, the ship that left Germany packed with Jews and headed toward Cuba. When they were unexpectedly denied entry there, the captain turned toward Florida. Despite lobbying by national Jewish groups, Pres. Roosevelt refused to allow the St. Louis to dock. The Coast Guard sent two cruisers to prevent the St. Louis from running aground off the Florida coast. The ship returned to Europe and many of the 908 Jewish souls perished in the concentration camps.

One of the stunning things about this event is it was not a secret as it was occurring. Newspapers and radio followed the journey, later known as "the voyage of the damned," as front-page news. Everyone knew what would happen to those refugees if they were returned to Europe. And yet America - Americans refused entry to these doomed men women and children.

One more thought experiment: if tomorrow the SS Aleppo or SS Damascus arrived in New York Harbor full of Syrian refugees, would you be among those lobbying to let them in or among those lobbying to send them back to Syria?

Just a few years ago I thought I knew how every Jew would answer that question. Even before the horrors of the Holocaust with stateless Jews banging on the doors of every country to let them in, even before the displaced persons camps and the Jewish pride at the plucky refugees boarding leaky boats to attempt to run the British blockade and illegally reach the shores of Palestine, even before all of that we knew what it means to be a stranger, to be a wanderer. Anticipating 2000 years of exile the Torah commands us time and again that we should open our arms and welcome the stranger because we were once strangers in a foreign land. Just a few years ago I thought that I knew what every Jew would say faced with today's refugee crisis. I thought it would be a no-brainer to admit families and especially children fleeing a war in which 9 million people have already been displaced. And to be fair there are many who are responding that way.

Consider Sir Eric Arieih Reich. 70 years ago, he was one of the 10,000 German-Jewish children taken in by Great Britain to save them from the Nazis. Now chairman of the Association of Jewish Refugees' Kindertransport Group, he just last week sent an impassioned plea to Prime Minister David Cameron, recalling how Great Britain's compassion 70 years ago saved the lives of ten thousand Jewish children. He wrote: "Without the intervention and determination of many people who are of many faiths, I - along with some 10,000 others -

would have perished. I strongly believe that we must not stand by, while the oppressed need our help. We cannot ignore the sight of desperate people and in such a crisis we must act to save the most vulnerable refugees: the children, and provide them with the same sanctuary I, along with others, was fortunate to receive.”

And, responding to one of the loudly voiced objections to accepting these refugees, he added, “Many of my fellow Kinder turned adversity into triumph and went on to leave a rich legacy in their adopted homeland. Given the same opportunity, some of the refugees we help today could equally make invaluable contributions to British society.”

Other responders include members of the Alyth synagogue in London. Founded in the 1930s it quickly attracted a large number of German and Austrian refugees. Last week Rabbi Mark Goldsmith traveled with many of those refugees to Parliament, to lobby the government and to meet with Syrian teens who had reached London. Rabbi Goldsmith said that these men in their 80s and 90s absolutely recognized themselves in these young men who had just arrived from Syria, when they were themselves teenagers. He also said that in listening to their stories it was quite remarkable to realize the lucky chances by which a refugee actually gets to be in a safe place. Some Jews made it while many did not—a lucky chance. “Why,” he asks “can’t we stop having it be about lucky chances, about a question of whether your family actually manages to get you on a boat or not?” And to the question of whether we would be better served with a Syrian kinder transport—just bringing children over he replied, “No, it’s much healthier if it can be about families and that’s what it really should be. A family that moves together has a basis to build together. The kindertransport was a desperate moment in which 10,000 children were permanently separated from their parents; thank God for the survivors that it happened, but it’s not a model for us going forward. There are thousands of boroughs in England, and if we can settle 50 people in each borough we begin to get somewhere. What it’s really about is local people saying “yes in our backyard.”

This should be our response as well. “Yes, in our backyard” Yes there are potential concerns. Yes there will be some percentage of refugees who are fleeing not for safety but merely seeking a better standard of living. Yes these refugees are different in language, appearance, faith and customs. Yes, their arrival will present a challenge for their host countries. And yes these are the very same objections raised at the Evian conference when the world met and decided not to admit Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe. If we as Jews decried the callous cynicism of those excuses which led to the deaths of so many, how dare we utter those same canards today?!

Rather, we must respond as we wish America had responded 70 years ago: “we cannot know what the impact of Muslim immigration will be. We cannot know whether a refugee child will grow up to be good or bad, filled with love or hate. What we do know is that we have been called to answer the cry of the oppressed where they are at this moment. We must see them as they are now: as fathers, mothers, children trying to survive, seeking to escape the ravages of terror oppression and war.”

I am proud that Jewish organizations around the world are leading the way when it comes to speaking out for these refugees and providing them assistance. Both the Conservative and the Reform movements are part of this coalition. You know that we are members of these movements; this morning I’d like to suggest that we behave as owners. I’d like to suggest that we consider not how this might potentially impact us, but rather how we can insist that the organizations we own live up to the highest values of the Jewish tradition. And that we live up to those values ourselves. How do we do that?

There are flyers that were available on the way in and that will be available on the way out. They asked each of us to do three things: first call the White House and our representatives in Congress-there is a suggested script provided; second log on to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society website and sign the petition; and third, donate as generously as you can space-space the flyer provides suggested organizations.

The former chief rabbi of England, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: “A strong humanitarian response on the part of Europe and the international community ... would constitute the clearest evidence that the European experience of two world wars and the Holocaust have taught that free societies, where people of all faiths and ethnicities make space for one another, are the only way to honour our shared humanity... Fail this and we will have failed one of the fundamental tests of humanity.”

I am proud that Jewish organizations are leading the way. And as I said at the very beginning of my sermon, I am incredibly proud of the leadership and generosity that all of you, the owners of Temple Beth Abraham have shown in recent months. Among my prayers for the New Year is this: in honor of the memory of the Jewish refugees who 70 years ago found no place to go, may we each do everything we can to help this generation of refugees reach safety. And may those sitting in these seats 70 years from now look back with pride at what we today accomplished. Amen