

The Beginning of a Leadership Journey

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What happens when two rabbis from two different congregations in the Detroit area gather in Jerusalem with a diverse group of 23 other Orthodox, Conservative and Reform North American rabbis and three Israeli rabbis to study Jewish sacred scripture in one of the most prestigious leadership programs for rabbis in the field? “*Ki mitzion teitzei Torah u’dvar HaShem meYerushalayim*” — For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem (*Isaiah 2:3*).

With profound gratitude to the William Davidson Foundation and with deep appreciation to our respective synagogue families, we are honored to be part of the seventh cohort of the Rabbinic Leadership Initiative (RLI) of the Shalom Hartman Institute. “Hartman,” as it is warmly called, is a leading center of Jewish thought and education, serving Israel and North America. Its mission, founded on rigorous text study and collaborative peer learning, “is to strengthen Jewish peoplehood, identity and pluralism, enhance the Jewish and democratic character of Israel, and ensure that Judaism is a compelling force for good in the 21st century.”

Over the next three years, we will spend 17 weeks at the Hartman Campus in Israel as well as countless hours of online distance learning state-side, exploring issues of peoplehood, faith and spirituality, ethics and morality in order to provide visionary leadership to our synagogues, our Detroit Jewish community and the Jewish people.

We write this from Jerusalem, preparing to return to Detroit after completing our nearly four-week summer unit of learning with scholars such as Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman, Dr. Yehudah Kurtzer, Dr. Elana Stein Hain and Rabbi Lauren Berkun.

EXPANDING AND SETTING BOUNDARIES

We wrestled with that which will guide our studies for the next year: issues of peoplehood, including a special emphasis on the relationship between Israel and world Jewry. We are immersed in traditional and contemporary texts that



Rabbis Ariana Silverman and Aaron Starr at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem

explore ancient, medieval and modern definitions of the boundaries of Judaism and the Jewish people — who was and who is “in” and “out.” Perhaps more importantly, we are discussing in our diverse group the implications of inclusion and exclusion with an eye toward the 21st-century American Jewish community and the implications for our relationship with Israeli Jews.

Our own synagogue families are case studies of the expanding boundaries of modern Judaism. The Downtown Synagogue and Congregation Shaarey Zedek warmly welcome many who previously may have experienced rejection by the mainstream Jewish community, including Jews of color, Jews who are LGBTQ+, non-Jews interested in Judaism and the non-Jewish partners of Jews, among others. In addition, we firmly believe in partnering with and building bridges among Jews of all streams and with our Israeli brothers and sisters, as well as our non-Jewish friends with whom we share the goals of pursuing peace in the world and in offering compassion and support to those in need.

At the same time, the boundaries of the Jewish people cannot be completely open. Lines must be drawn. In some communities, they continue to exclude in one way or another those whom we now welcome. In other communities, they may draw their lines, for example,

to exclude those identifying as Jews but who have not (yet) begun conversion, those who want to sit among the congregation but are practicing Christians or those who reject the right of Israel to exist in peace and security as a democratic Jewish state. There is an endpoint to a community’s level of tolerance, and communities are challenged in how they draw that line.

IS EXCLUSION NECESSARY?

Moreover, while questions of boundaries about those with whom we would associate religiously and those with whom we would not associate religiously naturally occupy our conversations, the learning expands to address the current state of discourse in the United States. That is to say, might someone’s political beliefs or how they express those beliefs justify their exclusion from our lives? For many in our area and around the country, the answer is a resounding “yes.”

In addition, at what point is one justified or unjustified in calling another “traitorous,” “unwelcome” or “apostate” — whether with regard to that person’s religious beliefs or political beliefs? We believe there are moments when exclusion is justified, but that the lines are being drawn way too often and way too narrowly so that our society is quite literally breaking down before our eyes.

There is no question that our *Tanach*

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Those of us from Michigan who have been part of the inSIGHT fundraising process in Florida were gratified when our state mandated instruction about the Armenian genocide along with the Holocaust. Clearly it has never been more important to teach that such horrific events happened, considering the huge number of Americans who have never heard of Auschwitz or even know the unimaginable horrors of the Jewish people’s mass extermination.

The Florida principal was removed from the school and reassigned, which brought some satisfaction. Members of the community had stated his remarks were offensive and incomprehensible in view of his administrative position, and the survivors, many of whom we know, expressed anguish and disbelief.

In response to this obvious need for more attention to Holocaust education, inSIGHT has joined with Federation, the JCRC and numerous other organizations. Along with its purpose to teach about the Holocaust, it recognizes the importance of opposing hatred and bigotry and encouraging tolerance and respect.

As two of the original founders of inSIGHT, we believe it offers a model for Michigan and other states to follow. Educators need tools and training if we expect them to teach the lessons of the Holocaust. The dramatic event in Florida verifies ignorance that must be addressed.

Edith Broida
Anita Naftaly

InSIGHT Through Education
Co-presidents

Correction:

In the story “Shutterbugs” (July 4, page 23), Jonah Rifkin was misidentified. Aaron Rudman is going to be attending Michigan State University, not U-M as published.

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Is Support for Open Borders Really in Tune with Jewish Values?

American Jews have a long and understandable tradition of advocacy for immigrants. That's due in part to the fact that most Jews were the children and grandchildren of immigrants as the community first began to assert itself into the political life of the country in the 20th century. It's also because the plight of those who were denied entry to the United States and other potential sources of refuge for those Jews seeking to flee Nazi Germany and occupied Europe during



Jonathan Tobin

the Holocaust is imprinted upon the political memory of most Jews.

So, it's hardly surprising that much of the organized Jewish community has little sympathy for President Donald Trump's positions on illegal immigration. That includes distaste for his desire to build a wall on America's southern border, as well as contempt for controversial policies that led to the separation of families of those who entered the country illegally. And it now extends to revulsion toward the deplorable conditions at detention camps as the resources of the federal government have been overwhelmed by a surge of migrants and often dubious asylum claims by economic migrants in the last several months.

But there is a difference between supporting more liberal immigration laws and empathy for those who came here illegally and the more radical stands on these issues that are increasingly become mainstream on the left.

The left-wing Jewish groups that are organizing the growing number of demonstrations against the work of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency and essentially opposing any enforcement of laws against illegal immigration think they are representing the views of most Jews these days. And they might be right.

The Democratic presidential candidates were nearly unanimous during their recent debates about supporting the decriminalization of illegal entry into the United States. They are similarly united behind measures like providing free government health care for illegals.

And while most mainstream Jewish groups have pushed back against anal-

ogies to the plight of illegal immigrants and asylum-seekers to the Holocaust, many are continuing to do just that. Indeed, the coalition of left-wing organizations organizing the protests against federal law enforcement aren't just applauding Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's labeling of detention centers as "concentration camps," they've named their group "Never Again Action."

The support they have garnered is indicative of two things: genuine horror about the conditions at federal facilities and partisanship.

Claims that all those who are flooding across the border are in some ways analogous to Jews fleeing for their lives from a Nazi death sentence are as absurd as they are false. Still, the hardships faced by those in custody were bound to generate outrage from Jews, who are naturally sympathetic to downtrodden underdogs.

It's also true that many of those leading these protests are guilty of blatant hypocrisy.

It was, after all, only six months ago that the same people now denouncing the conditions at the border today were just as adamant in claiming that Trump's arguments about there being a crisis there were false. Whether you agree with the president about the need for a wall, in retrospect, the position taken by his critics, which generated a lengthy government shutdown, was disingenuous.

Their hypocrisy is also compounded by the fact that the same Democrats decrying Trump voiced no protests when families were separated, immigrants imprisoned and millions deported on President Barack Obama's watch.

To note this hypocrisy is not to gainsay the need for the government to improve conditions at the detention centers.

But in assessing this debate, we also have to acknowledge that Trump's critics and the Democratic candidates have departed from traditional Jewish positions on immigration. That means the notion that the community is obligated to follow along and echo some of these radical Democratic stands doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

The organized Jewish community has always supported more liberal immigration laws, family reunification, and an orderly and generous asylum process. But what leading Democrats are now

proposing in terms of decriminalization and entitlements for illegals goes beyond even the granting of amnesty for those who are already in the country without legal permission. Their stands are now indistinguishable from open borders. The idea that open borders, as opposed to compassionate treatment of immigrants, is somehow consonant with Jewish values or history is pure fiction.

The accusations that the crisis at the border is the result of Trump's moral failings are also bogus. Whatever you may think of the president, every mass movement across the border has been preceded by liberal promises that those who come here without following the rules don't have to worry about being held accountable for breaking the law. The only way to curtail this flood of migrants — and thereby relieve the crisis — is to make it clear that all those who try will be caught and deported. Democratic pledges of free health care, college tuition and driver's licenses are a neon welcome sign that led directly to the unfolding calamity at the border.

But there's another point that needs to be emphasized. Sovereignty and the rule of law — the values that are being trashed by those making inappropriate Holocaust analogies and calling for tearing down the border — are actually good for the Jews.

The basic problem Jews faced in the 1930s was partly the result of restrictive U.S. immigration legislation, coupled with the anti-Semitic refusal of some officials to let in refugees that did qualify under the law. But it was also rooted in the plain fact that the rule of law had broken down in Europe, and Nazi aggression was aimed at destroying the sovereign rights of all nations not named Germany.

If generations of Jews have found a haven in the United States, it is because it remains a nation of laws. Destroy the rule of law — and that is exactly what Never Again Action and others who share their desire to strip the United States of its sovereign right to determine who may pass through its border are advocating — and no one, least of all religious minorities like Jews, will be safe. □

For a related story, please see page 12.

Jonathan S. Tobin is editor in chief of JNS—Jewish News Syndicate.

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(Hebrew Bible) and our rabbis' perceived boundaries decide who is a Jew and who is not a Jew; who is behaving "properly" and who is not; and who is a danger to our people and who isn't, whether Jewish or non-Jewish. Nevertheless, our rabbis made clear that, while they were willing and proud to judge the behavior of other Jews, they were for the most part profoundly reluctant to cut them out of the community. There is a lesson there.

The founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute, Rabbi Dr. David Hartman, often quoted a text (Tosefta Sotah) in which the schools of Hillel and Shammai were debating matters of Jewish law. The text then asks, "If the Torah is given by a single God, provided by a single Shepherd, how is it the case that there exist such differing interpretations (of Jewish Law)?"

The Tosefta answers the question by teaching, "Make yourself a heart of many rooms and bring into it the words of the house of Shammai and the words of the house of Hillel."

In other words, Hartman explained, a Jew must strive to be a "person in whom different opinions can reside together ... who can feel religious conviction and passion without the need for simplicity and absolute certainty" (*A Heart of Many Rooms*, p. 21).

We live in difficult and complicated times, where the answers to our local, national and international problems — strategically and religiously — require deep conversations and intricate nuanced approaches, as well as a tremendous amount of humility and generous listening. We look forward to continuing this dialogue and this learning with each other and with our fellow rabbis; we also look forward to continuing this learning and to beginning this dialogue with you.

May we strive to make for ourselves a heart of many rooms so that we can better learn and work together, celebrate and mourn together and, when appropriate, tear down and build up again ... together. Amen. □

Rabbi Ariana Silverman serves the Downtown Synagogue in Detroit. Rabbi Aaron Starr serves Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Southfield.