

Teshuva, Tefilah, Tsedukah
By Noam Lerman

Shana Tova! Welcome to JP locals, and those of you who travelled from other towns or cities to enter our new year in this room together! It has been truly wonderful praying and bringing in the year **5780** with you. Who knew that we'd get another chance to experience the 80's again?

I'd like to start out by sharing a story that comes from the Balkans about a young person named Shlomo, who lived on the Spanish island of Mallorca hundreds of years ago. Shlomo loved visiting the harbor. He would sit on the dock and sketch all the intricate details of the crashing waves, the ships, and the sailors who came from all over the world.

This was, of course, a big source of tension between Shlomo and his father, Rabbi Shimon Tsemach Duran, who really just wanted his artistic child to learn in Yeshiva like the rest of the young people his age! But we all know how it is with these rebellious creative types who defy their parents anyways. Shlomo always found a way to make it back to the dock to sketch.

One day, he overheard two merchants talking with each other at the harbor. "Did you hear? The king and queen decreed that all the Jews of Spain must convert to Christianity-- and if they refuse they either need to leave immediately or face the death penalty!"

Terrified, Shlomo ran to his father to tell him what he heard. Rabbi Shimon Tsemach Duran was an important leader in the Jewish community, and called for all of the Jews to gather in the great synagogue.

Once most of the community was present, Rabbi Shimon told them of the terrible decree.

“Por Favor Ayúdanos! The people cried out in Ladino. Please G-d, save us!

Rabbi Shimon said, “You and your families have only three choices: You can escape by sailing to Algiers, where you can still hold fast to our tradition, you can stay and pretend to convert, but secretly remain Jewish, or you can defy the king and queen.”

In the days that followed, many families crowded on to ships heading to Algiers, with women and children sometimes going ahead of the fathers. Rabbi Shimon urged Shlomo to go ahead of him with the other families, but Shlomo refused to leave, and stayed to help his father support their beloved Jewish community as they escaped the only home they knew.

Some Jews became *conversos*-- they converted to Christianity and refused to leave Mallorca, but continued practicing their tradition secretly, and their descendants are still living in Mallorca today.

And some Jews refused to convert, such as Shlomo and Rabbi Shimon and a small group of people who were working to help others escape, before escaping Mallorca themselves.

Although this story took place hundreds of years ago, it is an experience that is still sadly so familiar to all of us in this room. Some of us might carry similar stories with us, or in our own families-- just one or two generations ago. We might have friends or loved ones, or friends of friends, or neighbors who needed to escape their homes and emigrate in order to survive.

We know that currently, our own government is at war with immigrants. Our government is Imprisoning, deporting, and oppressing both people who come here to escape persecution, who leave their homes so that they can survive; in addition to immigrants who have lived in this country for many years and have built lives here.

The Torah teaches to be careful and not to cheat immigrants, to pay them on time for their work, and also to not subvert the judgement of an immigrant, which is so often the case for immigrants and undocumented people here.

36 times, the Torah reminds us again and again that we are to remember and protect the *ger*, the immigrant, or convert, or sojourner in our midst. Usually the Hebrew word *ger* is not translated as 'immigrant', but I believe that this translation is the most fitting. When the Torah reminds us that we were *gerim* in the land of Egypt, I'm pretty sure the Torah isn't saying that we converted to the Egyptian religion! Right? I think this reminder is there to say that at any moment, we too can become *gerim*. And that our communities, and all communities are incomplete without immigrants.

About a year ago, 27- year- old Elena was an activist and organizer with a student group that was organizing as part of a national movement against the actions of the Nicaraguan government. It became increasingly dangerous to participate in protests because pro-government forces were arresting and disappearing protesters, she continued organizing with the movement because she would not keep silent. One day, 12 paramilitaries showed up at Elena's work searching for her-- yet she was thankfully at a different location that day. Elena thinks that if they had arrested her, she would have been tortured or killed. Her employer told her that the authorities were looking for her, so she had to choose what to do next.

Should she go into hiding, risk her life as well as those hiding her, and then not be able to provide for her children? She decided to escape Nicaragua, and made the extremely long journey north by hitch-hiking and walking by foot through difficult terrain, miraculously making it past traffickers and immense danger. Once she reached the southern border, Elena was detained by ICE, and was sent to a Western Michigan county jail along with 60 other asylum seekers, where they all awaited hearings.

Our Torah directs us by teaching, "You shall have one standard for immigrant and citizen alike: for I am Hashem your G-d."

Elena came seeking safety from the government in her country, only to be put in jail by the U.S. government. Undocumented immigrants who are detained are often sent to remote county jails or detention centers. People in immigration proceedings do not have the same right to a free attorney as people in criminal proceedings, so the majority of

people who are detained do not have legal representation in immigration court. Elena saw that most of the people she was detained with went to court, unfortunately lost their cases, and were then deported. Denial rates in immigration courts differ from city to city, and 81% of asylum cases that are brought to the Detroit immigration court are denied. Still, Elena would not let go of hope or faith. She wrote a letter to G-d, detailing her journey to the southern border, and explaining her will to live. She held tightly to this letter, and to her connection with G-d in every way possible.

After months of incarceration in Michigan, Elena was connected with my sister Rachel, who was the pro-bono student lawyer that represented her last Spring. Rachel told me that Elena's deep connection to G-d and will to survive reminded her of our grandfather, who survived six concentration camps as a teenager, and who credited G-d as saving his life.

With a mixture of Elena's conviction, and many serendipitous events, Elena's case surprisingly turned from a bond hearing to an asylum hearing that lasted over the course of two months. Against so many odds, Elena won her case against ICE and was granted asylum!

An email went out on the Michigan sanctuary listserve to see if someone would welcome Elena into their home, and a retired Jewish person in Ann Arbor answered the call. Elena was released from jail the day before Passover, and moved in with him! He invited Elena to his family's passover seder, and Elena used her new freedom to decline his invite to the seder-- to wisely rest her autonomous and liberated self instead! She is still living with him to this day.

Zooming back hundreds of years, on Rosh Hashanah, young Shlomo, Rabbi Shimon Tsemach Duran, and a small group of people dared to enter the great synagogue of Mallorca to pour out their souls in prayer. Their calls reverberated and echoes filled the nearly empty synagogue. They came again the next day, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, and again, poured their hearts out in prayer. Just after they blew the shofar, the police entered the synagogue to arrest them.

Shlomo, and his father and the rest of the people were thrown into one small prison cell, where Rabbi Shimon continued leading the Rosh Hashanah prayers by heart. Everyone in the cell was singing deep into the night. At dawn the next morning, They saw a beam of sunlight come through the small window, and Rabbi Shimon said to everyone, "We must have emunah, we must have faith! I feel that G-d heard our prayers and will protect us!"

But the guard overheard him and laughed. "You think you have hope? You only have three days left, and then you all will be executed. Let's see what your *G-d* does for you then."

Shlomo, Rabbi Shimon, and the defiant, steadfast Jews just learned that they will be executed in three days. Rabbi Shimon turned to his son Shlomo and, with a slight smile, said, "Won't you help us pass the time? How about you make one of those ships you draw so well."

Shlomo's fear turned to elation. What!? His father was actually asking him to draw?! He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of chalk. With the beam of light carefully stretching across the wall, Shlomo started sketching, remembering all the beautiful ships he had once watched at the harbor.

He drew a wooden deck, the solid base of the ship, the wind that filled the sails-- and everyone watched him go. Shlomo drew until the sun set and the prison cell was enveloped in darkness. All night, everyone sang and prayed fervently until the sun rose once again.

The next morning Shlomo continued to work on his drawing, with all eyes on him. He finished every last detail of this majestic ship, and then started drawing the sea around it. He drew the swirls of water that lapped up against the base of the ship-- the waves looked like they might just spill right off the wall and splash on to the floor. The drawing seemed to be complete, but then Rabbi Shimon suggested that he draw the two of them on the deck of the ship, which Shlomo did. After sitting in prison for two days, the people again prayed all night until the light came back the next day. One by one, different people in the prison cell asked Shlomo to draw them on the ship as well, and they watched -- transfixed. By the end of the day, there was only one person left to sketch on the wall. That night everyone prayed with even *more* fervor, with *more* urgency than the previous nights.

The next morning, the third day, as the sliver of light danced on their prison cell wall, Shlomo quickly drew the last person on the deck of this ship. Just as he finished the final line, everyone heard keys jangling. The police had come to unlock the door to bring everyone to the courtyard for their execution! Shlomo turned to his father, who he saw was deep in meditation. At that moment, Rabbi Shimon pronounced G-d's hidden, holy, secret name out loud. *snap*

Suddenly, Shlomo couldn't hear the jangling keys, or the police, and the darkness of the prison cell vanished. He looked down, and saw that his feet were securely standing on wood. He looked up, and all around himself, and he saw that he and his father, and the other people were standing on the exact same ship that he had drawn on the wall! They were all aboard a *real* ship, floating on the *real* sea, that was speeding away from Mallorca. Everyone from the prison cell rejoiced with Shlomo and Rabbi Shimon Tsemach Duran-- because they knew that they were on their way to freedom, and that they had actually survived. They would never forget that Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, when they were saved and sealed into the book of life.

Sephardi communities and storytellers have been telling this story for hundreds of years-- it has been preciously passed down from generation to generation. There are over 100 versions of this miracle story recorded in archives, each one with slightly different details.

This folk- story is so powerful, yet when I researched the history of the Sephardi Jews of Mallorca, aside from this one, I only found terrible stories of torture and death. Just as

there are powerful stories of liberation and survival like Elena's, there are so many devastating stories as well, some of which we'll never know, and we have to hear and transmit those stories. One of the 613 mitzvot is to remember Yetziat Mitzrayim-- to tell the story of our ancestors' liberation from Egypt, including the parts of grief and loss. In these times, I think it's important that we listen and seek out stories that break our hearts, and also listen and seek out stories that remind us how so many people are working to bring transformative change.

A dear friend, Emet Ezell, organizes and leads song for Never Again Action, a movement that organizes against ICE's detention of immigrants, and is led by Immigrants, Latinx Jews, Sephardi, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi Jews, Jews of Color, and allies.

At an action in Washington D.C this past summer, where hundreds of people locked down ICE headquarters, Emet told the people gathered that our heartbeats syncopate together when we sing. When we sing together, we take deep breaths in unison, and scientists discovered that each of our vagus nerves connect our hearts to be beating at the same rate. We are unified into one calm and connective heartbeat rhythm.

Emet said that singing is a way to lasso G-d into our hearts and bodies, and our collective energies. In order to do the work of Abolishing ICE, we must allow our hearts to sync up together in resistance, joy, grief, and rage. That we collectively reject our government's criminalization of immigrants.

We have the power to lasso G-d into our hearts. To connect to the inner soul spark of G-d that we all carry within each and every one of us.

And as we sing and pray together today, what can it mean that our hearts are syncopating? That our hearts are dancing with one another, right here, pulsing and aching for the world about to be born?

In the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Musaf liturgy, we sing

On Rosh Hashana what will happen to us this upcoming year is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

בראש השנה יכתבון, וביום צום כיפור יִחְתָּמוּן

The prayer goes on to say *who will be born, and who will die, who will be at peace, and who will be troubled--* will all be determined.

And, I have to admit that while I love singing this liturgy, the concept that people's lives can be predetermined at the start of the year makes me uncomfortable! But then, the end of the prayer comes in to say

ותשובה, ותפילה, וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזירה

Reparation, prayer, and righteous action has the power to transform the decree-- the harshness of what is to come.

How can we and everyone tap in to our G-d spark and partake in teshuva, tefilah and tsedukah--- reparations, prayer and righteous action,-- to be part of collectively transforming the harshness of what is to come for the coming year?

Teshuva: reparations.

As a U.S citizen myself-- as someone who is not currently in fear over my safety-- I must be aware of the fact that no matter how much I am morally against the actions of my government-- I am still responsible for teshuva-- for reparations. I cannot forget what is being done in my name, by this government, and so it is on me to actively look for ways to engage in teshuva. In ways that I can repent and work towards transforming the harsh actions of the U.S government.

Tefilah: prayer

When Elena, the Jews of Mallorca, and my grandfather prayed while in prison and concentration camps, they connected to both their inner and outer connection to G-d. They clung tightly to hope and life, and survived the impossible. We all can find ways to connect to a personal spiritual sustenance and be in community with other G-d sparks-- on the streets or in synagogue. We can bring immigrants and their stories into our prayer spaces. We can use the power of prayer and song to intentionally sync up our hearts around this issue in community-- to collectively break through detention center and prison walls, and borders, and structural oppression.

Tsedukah: righteous action

We can send letters of solidarity through Flowers on the Inside, which is an organization that creates postcards with art made by undocumented artists. They print out people's messages onto the postcards, and then mail them to people in detention.

When ICE comes for our neighbors, we can form a human chain preventing ICE from nabbing and deporting people, like how a Nashville suburban neighborhood responded in July for an undocumented father and son. Eventually the ICE agents left!

The Nehar Shalom Community has been plugged in to the local sanctuary movement for years, taking shifts for families that are in sanctuary and showing up when needed. Continuing this work is so crucial, and especially now! We can jump in, take sanctuary shifts, welcome asylum seekers like Elena into our homes, and donate food, clothing, and time.

We can lock down ICE detention centers, and the companies which financially support ICE. We can join in the momentum that Jews all over this country have been swept into with the Never Again Is Now actions, and disrupt business as usual. We can follow the requests of those most affected by deportations, and put our bodies on the line.

We can be present for our community members who are working in the legal realm-- like lawyers who are representing immigrants in detention centers. We can show up and support these direct supporters, so second degree PTSD can be lessened, and so they can show up in this tough work more grounded. We can take them out to tea, listen to their stories, and just really care for them. Emotional support work is also valuable!

We can raise money for bond-funds, for asylum seekers, and financially support organizations that are providing legal services to immigrants and asylum seekers.

Today marks yom teruah, a day of crying out and shouting, with the blasts of the shofar to wake us up for the world's birthday. May we jump in to this new year with our full beating hearts. May we re-remember and claim the powerful name of G-d through our actions. May we notice the profound synchronicities, and lift up people's stories of courage, and never stop telling them. May we feel our ancestral stories woven together, past and present, and deeply know that our redemption is bound up and sewn with each person and every community around us.

Let's bring in the 80's with justice, hope, and solidarity. May all people be sealed in the book of life!

Shana Tova