

RBK – What Do We Do Next?

Once there was a man who was devastated with sorrow. He found that he could not work, could not eat, could not care for himself or his family. Not knowing where to turn, he went to see his rabbi. “Rabbi,” he cried, “my sorrows are overwhelming. They threaten to drown me. Help me deal with my suffering.” And the rabbi told him, “I hear you, and I believe in your suffering. There is a simply solution to your problem, my friend. It will not be an easy road, nor will it happen overnight, but all that you must do for me is to bring me a single mustard seed from a house which has known no sorrow.”

“A single mustard seed?” the man asked. “From a house which has known no sorrow.” Concluded the rabbi. And he sent the confused man on his way. Time passed and the man did not return. Weeks went by and the rabbi waited to see if the man could complete his task. One day, months later, the rabbi was walking through the market when she encountered the very same man. She asked him how his quest was going. “What happened to you? Do you understand now why I asked you to bring me a single mustard seed from a house that had known no sorrow?”

“Well rabbi,” the man replied, looking up from his shopping, “I’m not sure if in your wisdom you saw the way in which this would unfold, but I have indeed learned something from my quest. You see, I stopped at the first house I came to and asked a quiet older lady if she had any sorrow in her home. She seemed surprised at first, but after a few moments of persistence she shared with me that her fire had weakened, and that the cold was creeping in through the cracks in her walls. This made the pain in her joints almost unbearable, but she was not able to chop down any more wood for the fire. When she told me this story, I recognized it might not be the same sorrow I carried in my heart, but hers was sorrow nonetheless. I quickly chopped wood for her to help her with her fire, and left her burdens a bit eased.

I then started to make my way to a second house. It was there I learned that that couple’s daughter was very ill, but that they had no way to go and visit her. As I offered to take them myself to visit her, I felt a kind of warmth in my

heart I had not felt before. It felt so very good to help my neighbors, but even more than this, it felt as if my own suffering became lighter when I was able to help someone else's with theirs.

Honestly, rabbi," the man concluded, "even now I am not shopping for myself, but for a neighbor who cannot afford food this week." And I had forgotten entirely about the mustard seed until you reminded me."

"You have indeed learned the lesson I meant for you to learn," offered the rabbi. "Your own suffering is not made less real by focusing on someone else's. But a Jewish perspective is that we are commanded to love our neighbors as our selves. And that means seeing other people more fully than we are able to when we carry around our burdens like they are all that matter. We are responsible for one another, and helping others with their sorrows, does put our own into a different perspective."

I think the challenge of this story is to ask the question, how far does empathy go? Is there a point at which it is no longer my problem to solve the problems of others? Can I take care of just my family, or just my congregation, or just my ethnic group or race or religion, and feel as if I have done enough? The Talmud (Shabbat 54b), puts it this way: whoever can prevent their household from committing a sin but does not, is responsible for the sins of their household. If one can prevent their fellow citizens, they are responsible for their fellow citizens. If the whole world, they are responsible for the sins of the whole world.

In other words, our commanded-ness, or our responsibility extends exactly as far as our power or agency. Those with more agency, have more responsibility, and in this way we bring justice to the world. This requires us to take an honest look at our own agency. In what arenas do we need to take responsibility, even in addressing issues that feel far away? How do we protect one another as Jews? As Hoosiers? As Americans?

Can we be doing more to keep our own children safe? The answer is yes. Can we be doing more to keep our congregations safe? Of course. Can we be doing more to ensure that the Jewish community here in Indiana and in our

country is safe? We begin by gathering together tonight, and every Shabbat. But yes, of course we can do more.

The answer is “yes” when asked about extending our reach as well. In this room we enjoy a tremendous amount of agency and privilege. Two mayors, a Lieutenant Governor and our Senators have all reached out to us to ask how they might help us in the wake of our communal tragedy. Our response to them was unambiguous. We need the world to understand and take responsibility for a resurgence of Anti-Semitism. We need our leaders to accept that their words have great power to destroy, but also to heal wounds. We need them to understand that all minority groups, and especially the Jews will continue to feel vulnerable as long that anti-Semitism is not met with unequivocal and unilateral rejection and denouncement. Period.

And. Jews care about so much more. We worry about the effects that political and social instability and suffering will have on others, our neighbors. And when we refuse to connect our suffering with theirs: other immigrant groups, other religious minorities, and every disenfranchised group in our country will continue to feel under attack. This is the thing that the Black Lives Matter movement, the March for Our Lives movement organized by children, and the Me Too movement, even the Occupy Wall Street movement – all have in common. Those who feel disempowered and excluded from the table are demanding their rightful place in the creation of a just and equitable society. And we are to be Or LaGoyim, a Light Un to the Nations, those who were tasked with bringing forward our vision of justice from Torah to shine like a great light for all the world to see. It is a prophetic, universal message of peace and love, and that is what is should mean to be a Jew. We are, and always have been Activists.

Four months ago the world was dismayed upon the news that a “temporary” detention camp had been erected in the Texas desert for housing children torn apart from their parents after entering the country illegally. In May the President declared a “zero tolerance” policy on unlawful immigration, flaunting existing law regarding those seeking asylum, and creating a political

football out of a moral issue that several presidents before him have handled in an ethical and law-abiding manner. We know immigration needs reforms, but the systematic torture of children in our country cannot be the way forward.

Trump ended the policy of separating families in June after a huge public outcry. And then the story was lost. Meanwhile, the controversial camp in Tornillo, Texas has not only persisted, it has grown exponentially. A few weeks turned into a few months, and 1300 children became 2000 and plans exist now to increase capacity to 3,800 beds. As an aside, estimates are that it will cost Americans \$100 million a month to continue to operate this facility.

Texas Senator Jose Rodriguez recently was quoted in the press as saying, "This has continued too long, and frankly I don't find the federal government reliable in terms of having any plans to close the facility. I wouldn't be surprised if at the end of December they extend the contract again."

Despite regulations that minors are not to be held for longer than 20 days, the average stay for children in this center and others is approaching sixty days.

A large and growing group of Reform rabbis have organized caravans to travel to Texas during the week before Thanksgiving. Our plan is to rally nearby the Detention Camp, and then march to the camp to deliver a list of demands. We are hopeful that our presence raises public awareness of this ongoing tragedy. Several of our group are interested in joining with the Honduran immigrants as they approach the US border so that they might be treated with respect and civility, but that is not our primary goal. The more we hear from our colleagues on the ground in El Paso and elsewhere, this Detention Camp ceased long ago to be a political issue, it has become a moral crisis for our country. Without our agency, our voice, and our concern, these children will continue to go without their parents' or sponsors' care, to go without educational or mental health resources, and without any civil oversight on what has become essentially an internment camp for migrant children.

On November 12th, the Monday of Veteran's Day, we will meet the caravan as it begins in Michigan on its way south, and host a short rally to encourage, educate and inspire ourselves.

What if we were able to recreate the scene from last Monday night, to support the thousands of children who suffer right now, today in a camp that should never have existed in the first place? I hope you will consider joining us at noon on Monday, even if you are unable to travel to Texas for the rally Thursday.

The Jewish community is experiencing our own moment of profound pain and sorrow. Our suffering is very great. Synagogues are feeling under attack, we know our enemies are gathering strength. We need support and protection. IHC, like most synagogues this week, has bolstered our security measures and considered increasing our defenses in more substantial ways. And we are so grateful to the outpouring of care and concern from interfaith partners, elected officials, agencies, schools, and businesses from every corner. But our pain will only feel assuaged when we connect those historical blows to the many tragedies befalling others right now, right here, in our country.

The key to understanding the story of the mustard seed is that there is no magic cure to suffering. The mustard seed is a false narrative, designed to distract you from the real content. The only source of meaning in this world, the only way we might bring God into our world, is by looking into the eyes of our neighbors and seeing God there – seeing past our differences to recognize our shared humanity and common vulnerability. For those who are more recent immigrants to this great country; for those who are LGBT who feel more vulnerable than they ever have in America; for those who do not or cannot know whether there will be anyone to stand up for them when they are under attack, we must be the ones who do.

At the risk of sounding pedantic, I want to share with you once again that great poem shared by Pastor Martin Niemoller, a victim of Nazi Germany. He himself recalls supporting Hitler's ideas about racial superiority. He voted for Hitler, and was himself quite anti-Semitic. But when he met with Hitler himself, he understood the consequences in a different way. He realized that his phone had been tapped, and he was asked to swear loyalty to the Nazi party, above and beyond his religious affiliation. When he refused and spoke out publicly about his narrowing freedoms, he was sent to Dachau. He survived and in his memoir he

wrote the following, “whenever I [now] have the chance to meet a Jew... I cannot help but tell him: Dear friend, I stand in front of you [with] guilt between us. I have sinned and my people has sinned against your people and ourselves...’

And in public speeches and sermons – including here in the United States, he began by reciting this poem.

First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out — because I was not a Jew

Then they came for the communists and I did not speak out — because I was not a communist

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.

— *(Pastor Niemoeller, Victim of the Nazis in Germany)*