

Rabbi Brett Krichiver – Notes from Tornillo, TX

I have taken many bus rides through the desert. The rabbis who gathered in a Texas desert yesterday, many after a pilgrimage from the farthest reaches of our country – from East Coast and West, from Chicago and Michigan, Indiana and all points in between joked with one another about leading trips through the Negev, and the Judean hills which lead up to Jerusalem and down towards the Dead Sea.

It was a familiar landscape then, to be driving towards... nothing, leaving all civilization behind, and hopefully carrying civility with us. But this was a very different trip than others I had experienced. We went for a specific reason, one perhaps missed by the press in some cases. Our reasoning will always be missed in the unforgiving glare of a 24 hours news cycle, when complexity is trumped by sound bites, when truth is condensed for easy consumption, and black and white, hyperbole and exaggeration are the norm.

We sang, “Let us gather all together in the cold and in the heat, and make a vow that history’s cruel lesson won’t repeat. We will not stand idly by and watch our values die when we heed the call for justice we are praying with our feet. These lyrics by Rabbi Joe Black and Steve Brodsky of Temple Emanuel in Denver infused our day with the spiritual significance of why we were there.

Tornillo is the address of an Interment camp for children separated from their families as they crossed our border with Mexico seeking asylum. It is objectively there for only one purpose, and that is to deter families from crossing that border. What was originally temporary is anything but. What was originally small in scale is ramping up every day to close to 4,000 children. And no amount of soccer fields and movie nights can replace the abuse committed by our country, in our name, as they are held captive, away from their families, who our government has proven incapable of even locating.

Clergy from every denomination gathered not to protest as much as to bear witness. Rabbis Josh Whinston and Miriam Terlinchamp, who organized our rally shared that while local faith groups are involved in helping provide education, clothing, and every kind of donation to these children, the healthy and legal

process of absorbing immigrants in El Paso has effectively ended as our border has become Militarized. And as our President promises to send thousands of troops to secure our border against an imagined flood of terrorists, middle-easterners, and hardened criminals, faith-based resources on the ground showed us the truth. And we were there to bear witness.

A Muslim leader who travelled from Michigan with our caravan shared: "Koranic scripture states clearly to love and serve the needy, the refugee, our neighbors near and far. I truly appreciate it is the mandate of every nation to secure its borders, but we must do so in a way that maintains our American values, while preserving respect and dignity of those who turn to us in their time of need. Without causing harm or suffering in particular to these poor children. As a parent," she shared, "I am horrified and utterly heartbroken for these children."

And we chanted - Change begins with me. Change begins with me. Change begins with me. Peace. Peace will. Peace will come. Let it begin with me.

A local Catholic girls' school attended our rally, all in uniforms and somber faces. Nuns in t-shirts pronouncing their solidarity with those imprisoned at Tornillo. And after we sang songs and shared appreciation of one another's presence, many of these girls broken into tears, and ran to hug us. I was surprised as I heard over and over through tears and in broken English, may God bless you, thank you for being here.

I came to learn later that many of these girls had relatives in the camp, illegals, undocumented, seeking only to start a better life, as our ancestors did a hundred years ago, and yours did two hundred years ago, human beings who are used even today as a pawn in some political game of wills between two parties who have not done enough, either of them, to care for the widow, the stranger, the orphan, the refugee, the homeless, the disenfranchised, the vulnerable. A sign a Catholic school girl held high read: Once I tried to write a history of immigrants in America, and then I realized that immigrants were American history.

The next speaker had been coming to protest at Tornillo for months. She explained that often she is asked: “Why is this the hill you choose to die on, why focus on this?” Her answer? “We cannot allow it to be forgotten, when we do - we give permission for it to continue. Tornillo is the blueprint of what is to come as funding increases to ICE. The reason these kids are held here for so long is that more hoops have been put in place for those who might come forward as sponsors. This was supposed to be temporary, and it is growing every day. Seeing the buildings going up in the background you cannot go back, your heart won’t let you.”

Before the next speaker we paused for a moment of silence we had planned every time a busload of children drove into the camp. These buses were heavily armored with gates and prison screens, windows blacked out for us not to be able to see in, other than to see the waving arms of children, hopefully reading our signs in English and in Spanish quoting from Exodus 22 – You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” This was only one of a dozen or more buses we witnessed in the single hour of our rally. We understand that many more enter the camp under the cover of night. And then we heard from Elizabeth Vega, who grew up near Tornillo, in Texas, in the desert. She told us this is her homeland, and she shared what she called a poem for her ancestors:

“I am story, ten thousand lives printed on bone and soul, bone and soul stabbed with tear-stained DNA. The sum of cells transformed by cultures crushed but not destroyed. Mayan and Azteca slaughtered but reborn times four. Reincarnated infant lives, infant cries screaming remember. I am a cauldron of legacy, overflowing whispers of freedom packed and carried through midnight tracks across desert mountains and Rio Grande. Hope held in callous hands, pushing dirt and compromise, picking fruit farm to farm, creating adobe homes one mountain room at a time. I am the scene of thanksgiving, replenished and watered across family fires and ditches, daily sketches of a sacred life, ordinary... watered like a crying tree still standing, still reaching, still touching a far-flung horizons. Tall and joyful in this space and moment.

Our congregation will always dedicate itself to fighting injustice and poverty in Indianapolis. Our congregation will always dedicate itself to fighting injustice and poverty in Israel. And our congregation will always strive to be the light for justice, morality, humanity and compassion for all those who seek to make this great nation their home, wherever they are. Tornillo is very far out of our way, no matter where you are trying to go. But now I can say I have walked over the bridge of the Americas, crossing the Rio Grande on foot as have thousands of migrants before me. I saw their encampments where they slept, the artwork they left on underpasses and cement canvases to tell their story and ask for witness. The line is long, and will only get longer as more military are sent to replace compassionate border agents and social services with walls, obstacles, and weaponry. And now that I have seen it, my heart will not let me leave. My voice must be heard. And now that you have seen, your voice must be heard as well. B'chol dor vador, chayav adam lirot et atzmo kilu hu yatza mi=miztrayim. In every generation, every person must learn to feel as if they themselves had been transported out of Egypt. This is our Hagaddah, the tale we tell to our children each and every Passover. If we mean it, we cannot afford to turn away from Tornillo. We are still in that desert.