

Parashat Bo 5777 Refugees

This week we will gather once again for that great affirmation of American religion: “the Superbowl.”

On Sunday, the Atlanta Falcons and the New England Patriots will square off in the great battle played out in our country every February.

In 2013, a poll revealed that half of those who watched the Super Bowl believed that God has something to do with who wins the game. Who says Americans reject religion?!

Lots of people get religion during the Super Bowl: they are praying for one team or the other to win (or, around here when it comes to the Patriots, to lose!)

How many people here are rooting for Atlanta? How many for New England? How many don't care either way?

There is, by the way, a Jewish angle here. If we ask the question, as Jews, which team should we be supporting? Or to put it differently, *which team is the most Jewish?*, we will run into a big problem!

Because BOTH the owner of the New England Patriots, Robert Kraft, and the owner of the Atlanta Falcons, Arthur Blank, are M.O.T. (Members of the Tribe).

So let me put it this way: Jewishly, you can go for either team and you will be ok. Interestingly, though they are both going to fight tooth and nail for their team to win, both Kraft and Blank have expressed a genuine friendship for each other. They may be on opposite sides of the field on Sunday, but they consider each other “brothers.”

If only that was the same in today's hyper charged political environment!

It is very hard to venture into a discussion of politics today without there being a lot of anger, fighting, name calling and hard feelings. Though we are one country, we seem to be more and more divided, politically.

There are Jewish Republicans and Jewish Democrats, and within the Jewish community there are die hard Trump supporters and die hard opponents. Jews don't agree on everything, or should I say, on anything... and I am sure that that is the case with regard to the executive order that President Trump signed this week. (In fact, after sending out an email to the congregation, I heard from lots of different congregants with lots of different views.)

This week President Trump signed the “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States” order. Obviously, every American shares that goal. I know that I do, and I am sure that everyone in this room, no matter which team you are rooting for (Patriots or Falcons, Democrats or Republicans), share that goal.

But once you go past the title, this executive order is at odds with some core Jewish values. The one thing that the order did do, however, is that it got every branch of the organized Jewish community on the same page. Every branch of Judaism — Reform, Conservative, ORTHODOX, and Reconstructionist — all came out against it. Why? Not because we don’t want to protect our country from terrorism. But because the arbitrary and across the board nature of the order has thrown the lives of thousands of innocent people, not terrorists, into disarray.

It curtails the entry into our country people, Green Card holders (who have legal permission to be in the United States), refugees (who have already undergone extensive vetting (including those who worked for the US military)), and people like foreign students and researchers (who, after being vetted by our government, received temporary Visas to come to the US), from entering the United States.

How bad is it to restrict the entry into our country of people in these categories? Green Card Holders, people with visas, and refugees who have gone through the long vetting process... these are just categories in our minds... but behind these categories stands thousands of real people.

Let me give you an example: Sirin Hamsho is an electrical engineer who works for GE in their Wind Farm Division. She lives with her husband and two small children in Albany, NY. Her husband is an American citizen, as are her children, but she is a French citizen who was born in Syria. She was out of the country when the executive order was signed, and now, she cannot return to the United States.

Sirin is not a terrorist, a refugee, or an illegal immigrant, but she is Moslem and she was born in Syria, and so, although she has already established a family and a life here and is here legally, she cannot get back into the US!

There is no question that the President is given great authority to protect our borders, and that many Americans support President Trump’s travel ban, and that it was one of the President’s campaign promises. But from a Jewish perspective it is immoral and unethical.

Why? Because it excludes an entire group of people based on the fact that they come from certain countries and that they are Moslem. Although the word “Moslem” or “Christian” doesn’t appear in the order, in section 5 b, it says that the US will give priority to claims by refugees who are minority groups who are escaping religious persecution if they are a religious minority in that country. Read between the lines and

you see that since these 7 countries are ALL Moslem majority countries, the preference is to give refuge to Christians, Jews and Yahzidis, and to exclude Moslems.

And this fulfills the promise that Donald Trump made when he campaigned to restrict Moslem immigration to the United States.

We Jews have been on the other end of that kind of discrimination. We remember the disastrous impact of the 1924 National Origins Act which limited Jewish immigration into America when we were fleeing Nazi persecution.

We remember the turning away of the St. Louis, a German ocean liner filled with Jewish refugees, from our borders in 1939. After Kristallnacht, the Germans permitted the exit of Jews who would be willing to leave everything behind and exit Germany... and they let this ship sail, with a German crew, first to Cuba and then to the US... and then it had to return to Europe.

What happened to those refugees? There were about 900 Jewish passengers, 250 were taken by Great Britain, and the rest by other European countries like France and Belgium. Once the war started, these refugees in Europe once again found themselves under Nazi rule. About half escaped and the other half were killed.

All Americans, and all American Jews, want secure borders and want to fight against terrorism, and yes, all of us want to keep terrorists out of our country, but we do not ever want to return to a time that refugees will be rejected from our country based on their religion. You vet refugees who want to enter our country one by one, on an individual basis.

Moreover, discriminating against Moslems as a class of people doesn't prevent terrorism, it feeds it. If we truly want to make our country safe and defeat radical Islamic terrorism, then we need to work with our allies in the Moslem world who are also fighting against terrorism. By putting in place a Moslem ban, we are actually fueling the jihadist's narrative: that the US is anti Moslem. A Moslem ban makes us less safe, not more safe.

This week we are reading Parashat Bo, which tells about our people's exodus from Egypt. The Torah reminds us over and over again to love the stranger, to care about the stranger, and not to discriminate against the stranger for we, too, have been strangers. We were marked as strangers in Biblical Egypt and, throughout our history, again and again, we found ourselves in the role of the unwelcome.

And then we came to this country, on whose Statue of Liberty is written a poem by Emma Lazarus, a Jewish woman, which says "... Here at our sea washed, sunset gates shall stand, a mighty woman with a torch, whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles... cries she, with silent lips "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming

shore, send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

We Jews, and we Americans, have not always agreed with each other on a whole host of issues. We may also be uncertain about how to advance those principles which are important to us, but let us all strive to uphold the most cherished values that we have: to move towards a vision of a country and a world where the stranger will feel welcome; a world where Falcon fans and Patriot fans, and Jews, Christians, Moslems, people of all faiths and people of no faith, can live together in peace, where strangers become neighbors.

Shabbat Shalom