

Welcoming the stranger

Clergy lament immigrant policy on Tisha B'Av

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Clergy and other speakers address the assembled at the "Lament for Torment of Migrants and Refugees" PHOTO: BRETT M. RHYNE/TJA

BOSTON – Five hundred Jewish activists led by a dozen Jewish clergy packed the plaza of the John F. Kennedy Federal Building here in a Tisha B'Av "Lament for Torment of Migrants and Refugees" on the afternoon of Aug. 11.

The demonstration, which targeted the U.S. Immigration Courts, was one of a series of coordinated protests against U.S. immigration policy under the Trump administration, which includes the detention of migrants and asylum seekers and the separation of families at the Mexico border.

Organizers, chief among them T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, intentionally held the protests on Tisha B'Av, the traditional Jewish day of mourning for the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem. In addition to the local demonstration, protestors gathered in Baltimore, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Washington and scores of other cities.

In New York, police arrested dozens of participants in the "Jews against ICE" occupation of a midtown Manhattan Amazon Books store. Protesters were demanding Amazon Web Services end its cloud computing contracts with U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement and other technical services that help agents

track down immigrants. Bystanders cheered those arrested as police led them to a city bus commandeered to transport them.



Five hundred Jews attended the hour-long demonstration PHOTO: BRETT M. RHYNE/TJA

Locally, the demonstration had more of a spiritual tone, with the speakers leading the assembled in prayer and song, and offering testimonials by detained immigrants from a “Book of Lamentations.” None of the well behaved assembled was arrested, and there was a notable lack of police presence.

“This is a day when we mourn the destruction of families, the destruction of community, the destruction of cities, by the forces of callousness and cruelty,” noted participant and organizer Rabbi Michael Rothbaum of Congregation Beth Elohim in Acton. “We are tragically still mourning the loss of Jewish bodies in this American moment, but we’re also witnessing and mourning the loss of Jewish values: the value of love, respect and honor the immigrant.

“We know what it was like to be an immigrant, to be an outsider, in Egypt, in Minsk, in Spain, in France,” he added. “From generation to generation, and space to space, the Jew has to be standing for family and justice and love.”

Organizers were ecstatic after the powerful event.

“This was incredible,” said Cantor Vera Broekhuysen of Haverhill’s Temple Emanu-El. “We were blessed by an enormous segment of the Greater Boston and Massachusetts Jewish community coming out to show how deeply this issue touches us as Jews.

“It’s not about what political stripe you are,” she continued. “It is recognizing that we come from immigration, we come from oppression. We come from a history where camps are common. We know what they are, what they mean and why they need to be closed.

“It was heartening to see so many people come out today,” Cantor Broekhuysen

noted,
"and



A congregant of Somerville's Havurat Shalom, who declined to be identified, holds a sign distributed by Brookline's Temple Sinai PHOTO: BRETT M. RHYNE/TJA

commit to keeping our sense of what is happening now grounded in our Jewish experience, and using that as our basis for action."

Organizers stressed how Jewish experience creates in us compassion for the suffering of others.

"On Tisha B'Av, we're looking directly at our suffering and our mourning as Jews," said Rabbi David Jaffe of the Inside Out Wisdom and Action Project. "Then, in the afternoon of Tisha B'Av, we move into hope.

"The important things are that we're coming together on Tisha B'Av, saying we know what suffering is like," he continued. "We're going to take action when we see other people suffering in the world. There's brokenness in the wider world. As people who know refugees, who know asylum, know from all that, we're going to turn that around, turn it into action."

Speaker Sasha Batz Stern concurred.

"It felt deeply important, when there's so much to mourn in the world, that we answer our tradition's call to take this day and send our grief, and have that

encourage us to take action tomorrow,” Stern said.

“Tisha B’Av commemorates the fall of two of the Temples in Jerusalem,” Cantor Broekhuysen said. “It’s our most solemn and dreadful – full of awe and dread – day in the year. It’s our low point; lower than Yom Kippur. This is the point where we sit in the muck, in the ruin of all that once was holy, and we weep.”

Cantor Broekhuysen invoked the testimony of Georgia Leonce, an immigrant who addressed the assembled.

“For those of us involved in organizing the event,” she said, “and for those who came, that experience of the place of safety that you have worked so hard to build – as we heard from Georgia in her testimony – being suddenly stripped away and destroyed as people are being turned into exiles and refugees from lands that were no longer safe for them, without any sense of surety, any sense of a system that works anymore, that is a very deep connection to Tisha B’Av.

“So it felt right to do it on this day,” Cantor Broekhuysen said. “On a day that is about fasting, that is about mourning, that is about lamenting all that has gone wrong, and committing to taking those steps to make it better.”

Participants considered the demonstration as a call to action.

“I hope it helps people to understand how our tradition makes room for the tragedies of our own past, and the past and present of our fellow humans,” Stern said. “To understand that it is a Jewish act to grieve the atrocities of the border, and that it is a Jewish act to take action about it tomorrow. I hope people feel this is a worthy observance of the destruction of our sanctuary, our safe place, because that destruction has continued over centuries, over millennia, for our people and for other people.

“There’s no stronger way to show that we’re here,” Stern added. “We’re going to keep working on this: keep marching, keep calling representatives, keep shutting down ICE offices until all people are free.”

“We came away with some very concrete actions,” Rabbi Jaffe noted, ticking off examples. “There’s housing someone who’s coming out of detention; they don’t have money, so it’s helpful to house someone. There’s paying for legal fees for people who don’t have money. There’s taking action at the State House, around the Safe Communities Act, other things like that.

“There’s a walk happening next week,” he added. “There’ll be a 70-mile walk up to Dover that’s going to be around immigration and refugee issues.”

For the interfaith “Solidarity Pilgrimage for Immigrant Justice,” organized by the Essex County Community Organization, participants from Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont will walk from the JFK Federal Building in Boston to the ICE Detention Center in Dover, N.H. The pilgrimage will take place from Aug. 19 through Aug. 24.

Other organizers of the event were Rav Claudia Kreiman of Temple Beth Zion in Brookline; Cantor Beth Levin of Temple Shir Tikvah in Winchester; Rabbi Barbara Penzner of Temple Hillel B’nai Torah in West Roxbury; Rabbi Victor Reinstein of Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue in Jamaica Plain; Rabbi Robin Sparr of Temple Emanuel of the Merrimack Valley in Lowell; Rabbi Toba Spitzer of Congregation Dorshei Tzedek in West Newton; and Rabbi Andrew Vogel of Temple Sinai in Brookline.

Additional participants included Rabbi Leonard Gordon of B’nai Tikvah in Canton and Rabbis David Lerner and Leora Kling Perkins of Temple Emunah in Lexington.

Last year on Tisha B’Av, 300 Jews assembled at the ICE offices in Burlington to protest Trump administration immigration policies. Significantly more people attended this year’s demonstration, and more than twice as many clergy spoke, as well.

The Jewish Advocate asked Rabbi Penzner, who participated last year, if she thought the movement was growing.

“God willing, this is going to be a shrinking movement,” Rabbi Penzner replied. “It’s our prayer this is the last time we have to do this.

“Let’s open up the camps, let’s reunite the families, let’s remember that we were immigrants,” she continued. “We weren’t forced to go through the same kinds of hoops that immigrants have to go through today. We were able to get here and strengthen our community, with a lot of assistance. We owe it to the next generation of immigrants to be there for them. Sadly, this generation of immigrants is having their families torn apart.

“Of course that tears us apart as Jews,” Rabbi Penzner said. “We expected there’d be more people, because we’ve been living with this now for over two years. We pray it’s going to end soon.”

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