

Dear holy community,

Last week I traveled to San Diego as part of a delegation of twenty-five Jewish clergy from T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. Our trip had two purposes. The first was to stand in solidarity with and support of the immigrant community and local organizers Mijente as they rallied to #FreeOurFuture and disrupt the implementation of Operation Streamline. The second part of the trip was a day of travel and learning from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and the directors of migrant shelters in Tijuana about the history and painful present of immigration into the United States.

Why did I go? Because as Jews, we have old and intimate knowledge of what it's like to be unwanted and demeaned as a people, what it's like to seek asylum and be denied. "You shall love the immigrant as yourself, for you were immigrants in Egypt," says God, thirty-six times in our Torah. The trip was full of empowering moments and heartbreaking ones, bright sunshine and bitter pain. I want to share it with you.



At Logan Airport, waiting to take off, July 1, 2018. Photo credit: Cantor Vera Broekhuysen

I got into San Diego early on July 2. At 8:30 a.m., I led a large group from T'ruah, Bend the Arc, Jews For Racial and Economic Justice, and other groups in a morning *minyan*; a half hour later we were at a [rally](#) in Chicano Park. Eight hundred people showed up to protest with huge *papier-mâché* puppets and colorful, beautiful signs and banners reading "Free Our Families," "Shut Down Sessions," and "Stop Streamline."

Operation Streamline had been set to go into effect in California on that day, though ultimately it did not begin until July 9. Streamline mandates that all migrants who cross the border anywhere other

than at a checkpoint be prosecuted rather than allowed to apply for asylum, and permits up to seventy people to be tried and sentenced at a time in mass hearings.

T'ruah told our delegation very clearly before the rally that, as white U.S. citizens, we were there to **support** Mijente and the other immigrant community organizers. By showing up, putting my body into this work, and taking the lead from the communities that are most severely impacted by these immigration policies, I felt power and *tikkun*, repair. As our government attempts to usurp immigrants' control of their personal safety, family structure, and self-determination, it's our job to step back, listen, and let immigrants determine their own response.

After the rally, we set out on a 2.5-mile march to the Gaslamp Quarter downtown. We danced; we sang; we chanted. As we reached the Westin Hotel down the street from the Edward J. Schwartz Federal Building, where Immigrations and Customs conducts its interviews and detentions, I saw two tiny figures in hard hats lowering their bodies over the top of the hotel. For the next half-hour we watched, cheering and praying, as they rappelled down the front of the Westin and hung a huge banner reading, "Free our families now" and "Stop Streamline."



Protesters rappel; June 2, 2018 Photo credit: Cantor Vera Broekhuysen

Meanwhile, a dozen interfaith clergy linked arms and sat down in front of the Schwartz building, blocking access to it. The rally finished up in front of the Federal courthouse. When it dispersed, chartered buses took immigrant protesters—many of them undocumented—back to Texas and Arizona.

The next day, we reconvened early at the downtown Hyatt hotel to *daven Shacharit* (pray the morning prayers) together, and then had an hour with lawyers and leaders from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Jewish Family Services of San Diego. Soon we piled into a bus for

Tijuana. There, we visited the Instituto Madre Asunta shelter, which serves immigrant women and children and focuses on family reunification, and Casa del Migrante, which focuses on getting men back to work after deportation. Sister Mary Galván of Madre Asunta told us that decades ago the shelter mostly took in women whose husbands had abandoned them and who needed work to feed their children. Then, workers flowed pretty freely across the southern border.



T'ruah clergy and HIAS members sit with staff of Casa del Migrante, Tijuana. Photo credit: Rabbi Jill Zimmerman

Now, immigrants are fleeing gang violence, extreme poverty, and/or persecution: from the Congo, from Central America, and from the southern Mexican states. Asylum seekers come to our borders out of desperation. Today, what most of them find is not *rachmonis* (mercy) and refuge, but misery.

Deported mothers whose children remain in the U.S. linger in the shelters, unwilling to leave the border even when the only sight they have of their kids is on Madre Asunta's computer screens. One woman's adolescent son killed himself, unable to bear never knowing if he'd see her again.

This is what I learned on my trip:

Legal immigration is hopelessly handicapped. Visa allotments are slim fractions of their previous levels. There are not enough judges to hear cases fairly, or to accept new asylum seekers even at legal checkpoints. Domestic violence and gang-related persecution no longer qualify as grounds for asylum. Since April, "zero tolerance" has forced criminal prosecution of all undocumented immigrants, including those with credible claims for asylum.

Parents and children are being separated cruelly, needlessly, and sometimes permanently. Breastfeeding babies have been detained apart from their mothers. The government failed to record or keep records of which children—more than 2,300 in the past two months—were separated from which adults. The U.S. has scrapped community-monitoring programs that were previously used as alternatives to detention for families and which had a 99 percent success rate of families appearing for check-ins and hearings.

Parents are now regularly told they must renounce their asylum claims to get their kids back. Undocumented minors, no matter how young, are not entitled to a lawyer, though 90 percent of

children who appear at immigration hearings without a lawyer are deported. Once a parent has been deported without his or her child (or vice versa), he or she must qualify for custody in both the U.S. and their country of origin, where it can take them months or years just to get redocumented.

So what can we do?

We can **show up for our local immigrant communities**. We can be allies. We can follow their lead. Here in Massachusetts we have Cosecha, Massachusetts Jobs with Justice, and the Merrimack Valley Project, which is presenting at our Tisha b'Av observance on July 21. We can exercise our privilege as citizens: call, write to, and demonstrate in front of our elected officials (local, state, and national). We can demand compassionate immigration, an increase in the number of immigrant and asylum/refugee visas, and an end to family separations and family detentions. Together, we can begin to heal this broken system. Together, we can demand reckoning and reparation. I am grateful to have you as my community in this time, as we all strive to meet the challenges that define it.

Bivracha, with blessing,
- Cantor Vera

If you are moved to donate to one of the organizations that created these actions and made my trip possible, here's the list:

[T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights](#)

[Mijente](#)

[Casa del Migrante](#)

Instituto Madre Asunta does not have a donations webpage but if you wish to donate to them, please contact me and I will put you in touch with Sister Mary Galván.