

Shabbat Shalom. I am grateful to have a little of your time this morning to talk about something that is compelling to me, and I hope it will be to you, also.

Today's Torah portion speaks of brothers who left home, fleeing famine. 400 years later, their descendants had to flee Egypt to escape persecution by Pharaoh. Those stories are foundational to us, and speak to why the situation with Central American asylum seekers resonates with us as Jews.

Like many of you, I have been troubled by our nation's growing resentment of immigrants, but, until recently, I didn't know what to do about it. That is until my oldest child, Sarah, was sitting in a bar in Houston, where she now lives, and met some folks really doing something to help. Those people were talking about the Dilley Pro Bono Project, an organization that provides free legal counsel to asylum seekers at the South Texas Family Detention Center in Dilley, Texas.

If you read my posting in the Reflection Booklet at High Holidays, you'll recall that when Sarah called me from that bar, I thought she was signing HERSELF up for the Dilley Project and I was cheering her on. And she thought she was signing ME up, and she was cheering me on. Long story short, in October, I found myself in a godforsaken little town south of San Antonio, headed to do something I wasn't at all sure I could do.

The Detection Center in Dilley, Texas, is one of the places Customs and Border Patrol (CPB) bring women and children from Central America seeking asylum. They are held there until they are called before an immigration official for what is known as a Credible Fear Interview or CFI. In that interview, the official determines if the mother's or her child's case has a chance of meeting the US standard for asylum.

That standard is very specific, and has gotten more limited in the current administration. It requires that a person be persecuted on the basis of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or have a specific characteristic that they cannot change (like being the daughter of someone who has received death threats to his entire family.) Asylum is not granted for economic hardship, domestic violence, or general fear.

The Dilley Pro Bono Project talks to the detained women, and sometimes their children, to prepare them for their Critical Fear Interview. The hope is that with some guidance those women could be released from Dilley to begin the years-long process of seeking asylum in our courts. Asylum seekers do not have the right to an attorney, which means that people fleeing for their lives to a country where they don't speak the language or even know the legal codes that define asylum, are asked to appear before an

immigration official and make their case. As you can imagine, before the Dilley Pro Bono Project, asylum seekers at this facility had a 50/50 shot of making it through. With the help of this organization, the success rate is now beyond 90%.

So, I went to Texas in mid October, along with 11 volunteers. We worked 12+ hour days, barely slept, certainly didn't eat well, and I didn't get a margarita the whole time I was there, damn it.

But I did hear stories of unimaginable horror and persecution. I know some mighty brave people, but aside from our friend Charlene Shiff of blessed memory who survived the Holocaust on her own as a child, none compare to the women I met in Dilley. Each of them had overcome enormous obstacles to save their children's lives.

They are not coming for economic reasons, they are not terrorists, and they are certainly not middle easterners. Some are simple people, some educated; some poor, some middle class; some rural, some urban; some farmers, some professionals. Each had suffered absolute horror in the country of her birth. Each was braver than the last.

I thought I would tell you a couple of their stories, with names changed, of course, to give you an idea of what they have suffered.

Esme is from a tiny village in Central America. Six of the twelve houses were already abandoned by her neighbors, who fled in fear. Esme is the sole support her two daughters - she made money selling tomatoes. One of her daughters is less than 10, the other a young teen. The teen has an untreated eye condition that left her partially blind.

On a Thursday in September, Esme saw masked men approach a neighbor and shoot her in broad daylight. Two days later, after dark, two masked men banged on Esme's door and forced their way into her house. One of them took off his shirt. When she saw 'MS' tattooed on his back and shoulder, she knew why they were there. They pulled her daughters out of their beds and forced everyone to kneel, holding a gun first at Esme's temple and then in her mouth. They took her phone and what little money she had. 'They told me I could not say anything to anyone about what I had seen on Thursday. They said if I didn't leave by dawn, they would kill me and my daughters.'

Well before dawn, she took her children and fled to her mother's house, a day's travel away. She left her youngest with her mother, said goodbye, knowing that

she may never see that child again. She and the older daughter left, but in reality, she didn't know where she was going to go. She knew she couldn't stay with her mother because there was not enough food there for all of them, plus there was more danger the MS would find them if Esme was there.

She started walking, but without direction. At a crossroads she met another mother, a woman she didn't know, who was walking north. 'Come with me' said the other woman. 'Dios nos cuida' 'God will watch over us.' Esme realized that she had no alternative - no food at her mother's, she couldn't go back to her village, she had no place to go.

So she and her partially blind daughter traveled with a stranger across El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico, on foot. They had no money to buy food, water, shelter, or transportation. Somehow they finally made it to the Rio Grande, but they had no money to pay a boatman to ferry them across. They started to wade into the water, but a boatman took pity on them and floated them across without charge. In short order, she was pick up by CBP, taken to the hielera (cooler/ice box) for several days, and finally brought to the detention center in Dilley.

In Dilley the women and children are kept together. They are given new clothing - bright neon sweatsuits, rain jackets, and shoes. They are fed three times a day and given medical care if they are gravely ill. There is a preschool for those toddlers who can bear to be separated from their mothers, and a school for older children. After they have been there a few days, or sometimes weeks, they are given an appointment to go before an immigration officer to explain why they deserve asylum. That's when the Dilley Pro Bono Project kicks in. I helped Esme organize her claim chronologically, telling her what elements were necessary to be granted asylum so she wouldn't leave any of those points out.

At the end of our interview, I asked if she wanted to call her mother to tell her she was alive, but she had no numbers for anyone in El Salvador. The MS had stolen her phone, so she has not spoken to her mother or her other daughter, and may not be able to ever do so again.

I told Esme that I too had had armed men come into my house and threaten me, so I understood some of the terror she felt. The difference is that I live in a place where the police arrived to protect me. At that point in my time at Dilley, Esme

was the bravest woman I had met. I told her 'Espero que Dios siga cuidandole.' (I hope God will continue to watch over you.)

Rape, sexual slavery, child theft, extortion, threats to kill entire extended families. I heard all of these things. The last woman I talked to was barely a woman, but her story is compelling, too.

Ima also lived in a tiny village, but she is from a different Central American country. She is only 18, and was still living with her parents and her now two year old daughter, Ana. Ima's mother did not have work, her father worked in construction, but only when there was work, and there hadn't been any in a long time. They often went hungry - even the 2 year old - because they had no money for food. Gangs were present everywhere in her little town, and controlled what people could and couldn't do.

We talked to her for awhile, about her life back home, looking for grounds for an asylum claim. Coming from a lawless place where people are starving and the police don't protect you is not enough. Discrimination based on her race, religion, nationality, or politics? Nothing. Had her family been threatened by the MS? No, they were too poor. We were worried - did she have grounds for asylum? And then we asked, 'Have you ever been abused?' A pause. A tear. And then the story came tumbling out, while she cradled her 2 year old. It was as if she held on tight enough to her child, they would both be safe. Here's what happened to her.

Ima was walking to school for her final exams last year, happy that she was about to graduate from high school. The first in her family to do that. A black car with darkened windows pulled up alongside her and two masked men grabbed her and pulled her inside. They each raped her, and then they threw her out of the car. The last thing they said was 'We know where you live, we know you have siblings, we know you have a child. Say anything to anyone, and we will kill you all. And don't forget, we will get you again if we want to.'

She didn't know what to do, so she went on to school. She didn't say anything to anyone. When she got home that afternoon, she went into the house, and did not come out again for a year. She did not tell her parents what had happened. She didn't talk to her best friend. She never told anyone about being violated and threatened at 17, until she was sitting in a sterile room under fluorescent lights in Dilley, Texas, with two women she'd never met.

During the year she stayed cloistered in her house, she saw the black car going up and down her street. She saw men watching her house. I'm not sure why she decided to leave when she did. I asked her how much money she brought with her on the trip. 'Nada' (Nothing), she said. 'I didn't have any to bring.' Was Ima braver than Esme? At 18 years old, carrying her two year old through heat and rain, having no food but what she could beg from others, having to swim rivers because she couldn't pay to cross. I can't imagine doing what she did. I told Ima I was glad her daughter is too young to know how she had suffered, but that I hoped one day Ana would know what a strong and courageous mother she has.

I hope when you hear politicians talking about these asylum seekers as neer do wells looking for free handouts, that you will know that is not true. These women are coming to escape persecution. They live in a place where there is no law enforcement, where the police are corrupt, where gangs and narco traffickers would as soon shoot you as look at you, and where the murder rates are among the highest in the world.

They told me they didn't want to leave home - even the poor women said they were happy living where they did, that until recently they were among family in a beautiful part of the world that was home to them. They are brave, honest, willing workers with beautiful, smart children that any country should be proud to welcome.

All this sounds pretty awful. But I imagine you are asking why these women didn't go to the police or just get out of Dodge? Here are some of their answers.

Why didn't you go to the police?

- Because my neighbor Maria did that, and the gang killed Maria's son.
- Because I have seen police officers, still in uniform, robbing people when they go off duty.
- Because when I did go to the police I got a threatening phone call from La Mara as I was walking out of the station.
- Because I called the police repeatedly and they always waited an hour to show up. They knew that by then the gang would be gone.
- Because my uncle is in the police, and he told me never to report anything if I didn't want to get killed.
- Because the boy who repaired cell phones in my town went to the police, and the 'MS18' found him and killed him.
- Because I went to the police and they told me they couldn't do anything because I couldn't prove which masked men had tried to steal my child.

- Because I went to the police and they told me a man has a right to do that to his woman.

Why don't you move to another part of El Salvador or Guatemala or Honduras?

- Because the gangs (13, MS13, 18, La Mara 18, MS, Rapelleros, they have many names) are present everywhere, even in little tiny towns with only 6 (now 4) occupied houses.
- Because I moved to my tia's house in another town, and the one who trafficked me found me and dragged me out by my hair.
- Because the shoe salesman in my town fled to the capital, and the MS13 found him and shot him.
- Because my husband and abuser is a member of the military, and he can find me anywhere in the country.
- Because my friend Sandra fled to Santa Ana and they found her and hanged her.
- Because the woman I bought food from didn't comply with their threats, and they killed her last December.
- Because the man who held me prisoner and abused me for three years is a member of the gang, and they will find me wherever I go.
- Because I have no family here - they have all been killed or have fled.
- Because my husband buys his drugs from El Chapo's son, and El Chapo can find anyone anywhere.

In the last century our country closed its doors to European Jews who were fleeing persecution. Our country was afraid the Jews would take American jobs or change the nature of American society. Somehow that sounds familiar to me.

It started in 1930 when President Hoover issued an Executive Order saying 'No one likely to become a public charge' could be admitted to the US. That is the clause the US State Department used to deny entry to Jews fleeing Nazi persecution before and during WWII.

However, in the 1930s, there were Americans who opposed that policy. Francis Perkins, the first female cabinet officer in US history, was Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, and she was so opposed to the State Department's policy that she said she would personally sign a bond for anyone fleeing Germany so that they would not become a public charge. Would that we now had more cabinet officers like Ms Perkins, willing to do the right thing for those fleeing persecution in Central America.

So there are obvious parallels between European Jews fleeing persecution and Central Americans fleeing lawless conditions and persecution in their countries. Not exact parallels, but nonetheless, the Central Americans are fleeing a place where they cannot be safe. As Jews, we are reminded by the Torah to “remember the heart of the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Egypt.” My youngest child, Sus, tells me that the commandment to remember the stranger appears 36 times in the Torah. I think God wanted us to pay attention.

At Passover we tell our foundational story, the story of our flight from oppression. Deuteronomy (26:7 - 8) says, ‘We cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression.’ I don’t know if the Lord hears the cries of these desperate Central Americans. But I heard them, and I hope through me that you can hear them, too.