

Modern Day Exodus Story: Our religious and moral duty to asylum-seekers: A Passover and Easter reflection

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Source:



This week, families will sit at Seder tables to experience the story of Exodus and the Jewish people's journey out of bondage. Others will gather in church to reflect on the journey to the cross and the hope of new life. For millions of us — first, second and third generation immigrants in Jewish, Christian and multi-faith families — the journey ended here in the United States, where our ancestors found freedom from violence and persecution.

Today, for countless asylum seekers hoping for that same security, the journey is ending short of safety on the streets of Tijuana, in detention centers in Texas and across the United States, and in shelters on both sides of the border, where they wait for federal judges to decide their fate.

As rabbis and reverends who have dedicated our lives and careers to social justice, we've brought dozens of clergy members and faith leaders to the U.S.-Mexico border over the past few months, including a delegation in April co-led by HIAS, the Jewish refugee resettlement non-profit, and T'ruah, the rabbinic human rights organization, as well trips with the New Sanctuary Coalition. Each of us represents different faiths and denominations within those faiths; all of us share the core values of welcoming, protecting and even loving the stranger. We left our communities and congregations in New York, as well as cities across the country, for San Diego, El Paso, Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez, where we saw firsthand the impact of the Trump administration's cruel immigration policies.

We went because it is our moral obligation to bear witness to the suffering of asylum seekers — and to help ease it. Little could have prepared us for what we experienced and who we met.

At the Otero County Processing Center, an ICE detention facility in Chaparral, N.M., where gay men and transgender women alleged sexual abuse last month, we saw a young man from behind a panel of glass silently weeping as he stared ahead. Every so often, he would reach a single finger to his face and wipe away an endless stream of tears. We could not speak to him or

hear his story; we were unable to express our sorrow for the unconscionable situation around him. We could only ask God to guide his footsteps toward peace and to help him reach his desired destination for life, for gladness and for peace.

In immigration court in El Paso, we watched as Blanca, who fled violence in her El Salvadorian village and crossed the Rio Grande with her two young children, faced a judge. She arrived in mid-March and was separated from her children — a practice that the Trump administration maintains it has ended. Her hearing took all of six minutes and resulted with her deportation. Her children, now in a detention center in Houston, may never see her again. We put our hands together as in prayer, nodding to her in what we hoped she understood was support. She smiled and nodded back before she was taken away.

Under a bridge in El Paso, we watched U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents hold hundreds of migrants behind chain-link fencing and concertina wire.

We will never forget these images.

As the Jewish community and our friends and family of all faiths gather this week, we'll imagine ourselves as the Jews in ancient Egypt. It may be, though, that the Jewish refugee story never really ended. Instead, the role of the Jewish people in the story shifted. This is the first time in history when Jews are not predominantly refugees and are uniquely positioned to welcome and protect those in need.

And we can only do so in partnership with all people of faith, through ecumenical Passover celebrations in New York and across the U.S. led by Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Zen leaders, Haggadah readings that reflect our shared values, and actions that turn the words "next year may all be free" into reality for the thousands of asylum seekers at our borders.

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