

Sanctuary

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By Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana

Congregation Beth Israel, Portland, Oregon

We've been together, you and I, for awhile now – and you've heard a lot from me over the years. But I am not sure I ever told you about the time I was a spy. For real. Now this is just between us, right?

It was in 1979, just a few months before the Moscow Summer Olympics. I had spent much of the year in Stockholm where my father was serving as interim rabbi. He was leading the בית הכנסת הגדול של שטוקהולם, The "Stockholm Great Synagogue" while their rabbi was on sabbatical. I loved that synagogue and its graceful sanctuary. I had taken a year off from college to join my parents there. Being the clergy of that amazing institution made my father the Chief Rabbi of Sweden for that year – a quasi-governmental and high-profile role. The perfect cover for a spy.

During that time, as the Cold War was at its height, there was very little good information coming out of the USSR. It was hard to separate truth from rumor, innuendo and propaganda. "Fake News" is not a new invention – particularly not during the Soviet era. While the US sat at a comfortable distance, at least in those pre-Internet days, Sweden was in a much more delicate state, situated between NATO pact countries and the USSR. Friends I knew there feared imminent Soviet invasion.

This was also the height of the Refusnik era and Soviet Jews were experiencing repression while being denied the ability to leave.

Rumor was circulating that year, that the Soviet leadership was planning to empty Moscow of its Jews in advance of the Olympics. This frightening possibility had many on edge. And at the same time it was clear that Russian Jews had little information about the outside world, particularly the realities of Jewish life in the West. Evidently it was felt that a rabbi from Sweden would have an easier time getting information in and out than someone from America.

And evidently, someone felt that a rabbi travelling with his 20 year old son would make a good cover.

We joined a Swedish tour group, the two of us, travelling to Moscow. That was interesting because my Swedish was terrible, and with my immense "Jew-fro" I certainly didn't look the part. It was hard to imagine that I would pass. Our original plan included Leningrad, but we were told the unrest there was too great – and that it was best to limit our travel time in the

hopes that the Soviets would not catch on to our plan. We were counting on the slow nature of bureaucracy to shield us. That seemed overly hopeful to me, but what did I know of spycraft?

We were given a list of Jewish Refusniks to contact. My father, harkening back to his days in the pre-state Israeli Underground, devised a coded system so that the addresses and phone numbers we carried would be untraceable if confiscated; a way of protecting these already vulnerable people. Still, I was rather nervous going through customs, particularly because we were sneaking in Jewish books and tallit as well as the most valuable trading commodity available at the time: American blue jeans.

We had been told that the hotel we were staying in – newly built for the Olympics and hosting only foreign guests – had every room bugged, so we communicated with hand signs and written notes which we destroyed. It was all very James Bond. Soon after arriving in Moscow, my father and I slipped away from our State-sanctioned tour guide – who we assumed was a KGB informer - and began contacting leaders of the Jewish resistance.

“Refusniks” was the name given to those Jews who had given up on Soviet repression and had begun the process of applying for an exit visa. The moment they did so, these Jews – often highly educated professionals – lost their job, their status and any hope of income. The risks were high and the possibility of success very low. And yet, these Jews threw away everything to find freedom. In the USSR, passports for Jews were stamped with a large J indicating that as Jews they were not considered full citizens. The list of repression tactics was long, and the truth of their circumstances came out to the West in small doses.

For a long time, American Jews did not want to hear about the plight of Soviet Jews. It seemed so distant and the conflict with the USSR so vast and dangerous. It took firebrands like Rabbi Meir Kahane of the JDL, who many labeled a terrorist, to wake up the Jewish world to the reality that Soviet Jews suffered. Now another Rabbi Cahana was slipping into Moscow to meet with those Jews. I don't know if my father ever shared our adventures with his cousin, but the Cahana family gets things done.

It was a remarkable experience for me. We gathered in an anonymous Soviet apartment, in a non-descript apartment complex in a Moscow suburb. Word had gotten out that an American rabbi was visiting. It was dangerous to meet and we assumed we'd have a handful of people. Instead, the rooms were overflowing, not a place was left to sit. We crowded close together with the seemingly hundreds of Jews there, singing Shabbat and other songs. The songs were so vibrant and passionate that the Russian men and women there joked about KGB agents standing on the pavement outside the windows arm in arm and singing along with us.

And then, I marveled as my father gave a talk to those assembled - entirely in Hebrew; a language these Refusniks were forbidden to study. I was ashamed that they were following

every word intently, while my college-level Hebrew gave me only limited access to my father's words.

This is what it was like for those Soviet Jews I met. Everything had been taken from them and yet they studied more. And what they longed for more than anything else, what they had sacrificed so much for, was to be a refugee in the West. What they wanted was Sanctuary.

The image of those days in Moscow has been so strong with me over the last few months, as talk of refugees, immigration and Sanctuary has been in the news. We keep speaking in abstracts – the quota on legal immigration, the travel ban from select countries, the reduced number of refugees. But I can't see abstracts – I see the faces of those who subjected themselves to horrific repression for the chance to escape. In Moscow we heard stories of people who were scooped up by the KGB at random moments and disappeared for days or weeks. Or forever. Children and spouses who never knew if their loved ones would return, or what state they would be in. Jews dreaming to practice their religion away from the ever-present eyes of a repressive regime. I saw them desperate to leave.

A decade later, I was in Israel beginning my rabbinic studies, when the Berlin wall fell. The floodgates of Soviet Jewish immigration opened and I watched as the news joyfully headlined every jet landing at Ben-Gurion airport packed with Russian emigrants. That Passover, I remember, it was well-known that anybody who was anybody had a Russian family at their seder. They were beyond welcomed.

In America, too, Jewish communities around the country rushed to welcome new Jewish immigrants. Portland was at the forefront of this movement, sponsoring families well before the breakup of the Soviet Republic. Russian resettlement became a priority for this community. Traditional institutions, like Jewish Family and Child Services were retooled and new institutions like Community Warehouse were founded to deal with the influx. There are many heroes in that story. One we should mention is our beloved Jerry Stern who died just a few years ago. In 1989, Jerry and Helen travelled to the USSR to visit with Jewish émigrés who were preparing to leave. Jerry was reminded of how his own parents had left Russia in the early 20th century and been helped by the Jewish immigration organization HIAS. He felt it was his turn to help. The story is that he went to the Federation to find out what the cost was to sponsor a seat on the plane bringing Jewish refugees to Israel. He and Helen wound up paying for the entire "freedom flight." And then they provided a challenge grant to the Portland Jewish community to sponsor a second flight.¹

¹ Ellen Eisenberg, *The Oregon Jewish Story 1950-2010* (Oregon: OSU Press, 2016), p. 186. Thank you to Judy Margles, Director of the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education

American Jews, heroes like Jerry and Helen Stern, welcomed these Russian refugees with open arms. Some in this room were instrumental in that welcome. Some in this room were recipients of that generosity. All of us have benefited.

And this is what saddens me about the way our nation is discussing, or not discussing immigration. We have been presented an image of immigrants as criminals, terrorists and vagrants; a danger to our lives and our livelihoods. But the opposite is true. A draft report from the US Department of Health and Human Services – a governmental report rejected by the Trump Administration because it did not fit their narrative, showed that over the past decade refugees to this country brought in \$63 billion more in government revenues than they cost.² Immigrants and refugees to this country work hard, build businesses, pay taxes and contribute to society. They come seeking safety. The least they deserve is Sanctuary.

Not long ago, someone asked me what “Sanctuary Cities” has to do with Judaism. Well, we invented the concept. In the Torah G-d commands the Israelites that when they enter the Promised Land that there will be cities set aside for the Levites. They will have a unique status:

וְאֵת הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ לְלוֹיִם אֶת שֵׁשׁ-עָרֵי הַמִּקְלָט
אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ לָנֶס שָׁמָּה הָרִצָּח

And the cities which you shall give to the Levites shall be six cities of refuge, which you shall appoint for the man slayer that he may flee there (Num. 36:6)

Six cities of refuge, sanctuary cities, established for those who were in need of safety. These biblical towns were inhabited by the Priests themselves and they offered shelter to those who were fleeing a hot-blooded criminal justice system – one based on family vendetta rather than reasoned law. Today US Sanctuary cities, and Sanctuary States like Oregon, offer protection from a system too often rooted in racism. Sanctuary cities create a separation from federal immigration enforcement and local law enforcement. It allows undocumented immigrants to access legal protections and services without fear of deportation and the breakup of families.³ Federal immigration enforcement continues, just without the assistance of local law enforcement. Studies show that these Sanctuary areas have lower crime rates, including homicide, than non-sanctuary counties.⁴

More important than statistics, though; for us Torah commands compassion as we consider those who live among us. In Leviticus we read:

וְכִי-יִגְוֹר אִתְּךָ גֵר בְּאַרְצְכֶם לֹא תוֹנוּ אֹתוֹ:
כְּאֲזֻחַ מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לָכֶם הַגֵּר | הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם
וְאַהֲבֵת לּוֹ כְּמוֹד כִּי-יִגְרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאַרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/us/politics/refugees-revenue-cost-report-trump.html>

³ <http://americasvoice.org/blog/what-is-a-sanctuary-city/#part1>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/01/27/trump-says-sanctuary-cities-are-hotbeds-of-crime-data-say-the-opposite/?utm_term=.93eefb0d3bae

אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

*And if a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not wrong him.
But the stranger who dwells with you shall be to you as one born among you,
and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt;
I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 19:33-34)*

This commandment to love the stranger is so pervasive that it is repeated 35 times in the Torah – the most repeated of any commandments. Our Jewish history, from Egypt to the Holocaust is a history of being the repressed stranger, the feared ones, the “other.” Even back in the Torah we are commanded to remember that history and to build a society where the pursuit of justice, peace and equality is not limited by one’s immigration status. From the moment Abraham left his home and became a wanderer, we know what it is like to be the immigrant, to be, like Moses, “a Stranger in a Strange Land” (Ex. 2:22). And like our wandering ancestor Abraham we step out of our tent to welcome someone who to us is the stranger (Gen. 18:1-22). That is our way.

We can be proud that the Reform Jewish Movement has been at the forefront of efforts to transform our country’s outmoded immigration system and to call to account our Jewish responsibilities to immigrants and refugees. We have longstanding policies on the subject. This year, I was called upon to serve as chair of the CCAR Resolutions Committee, which crafts policy statement for the world-wide organization of Reform Rabbis. I am proud that the first resolution drafted by my committee and adopted by the CCAR Board is on protecting individuals at risk of deportation. It is a Sanctuary resolution. This was based on a resolution adopted by the Union for Reform Judaism⁵. The two organizations of the largest Jewish movement in America, Reform rabbis and lay leaders, unite in supporting the rights of immigrants and refugees.

So when Attorney General Jeff Sessions comes to Portland to condemn our efforts here in a Sanctuary City⁶, I say that we are in the right and he is in the wrong. I say that it is right - in a world with a record 65 million displaced individuals, fleeing war and climate-changed induced famine - it is right to join the world in taking in not fewer refugees than ever⁷, but more than ever. In a world in which our President has chosen to cancel his predecessor’s Executive Order protecting 750,000 so-called “Dreamers” from immediate deportation, we are right to call on Congress - which has had 16 years to come up with legislation - to finally set aside partisanship and pass legislation to keep these young people in the only country they have known. We are right to let them live the American Dream without breaking up families. We are right to condemn a travel ban, originally crafted to exclude Muslims. We are right to welcome the stranger, the immigrant, the well-vetted refugee who has suffered so much in search of

⁵ <https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/resolution-protecting-individuals-risk-deportation-united-states> The CCAR website and link to the resolution is temporarily unavailable.

⁶ http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2017/09/attorney_general_jeff_sessions_1.html

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/27/donald-trump-caps-refugee-admissions-2018-historic-low>

sanctuary. We are right to say as the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus had inscribed on the New Colossus which greeted so many of our immigrant ancestors to these safe shores:

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.⁸

Send them to me, we say, because we are big enough, we are good enough, we are safe enough despite our President's increasingly restrictive bans on travel to the United States.⁹ Send them to me and let us welcome them and keep them safe.

So today, I am requesting that the Temple's Social Action Committee join with Catholic Charities, an organization which has been doing remarkable work at resettlement and integration of immigrants and refugees in our area. And I am asking you to help them. Will you go to the airport and greet refugees coming into the US for the first time? Will you witness them joining family who made the perilous journey before as they are finally reunited? Will you welcome them? Will you help them, as we did Russian Jewish immigrants? Will you integrate them into our community? Help them feel seen and appreciated? Help them feel wanted? Will you help young Dreamers fulfill the Promise of America as we hope our children and grandchildren will? Will you help the stranger know that we all are safer when we share the safety of Sanctuary?

Decades ago, I played the part of a spy. And I looked into the eyes of those who risked everything for the dream of freedom. Years later I saw them fulfill that dream and come into the land of the free. I know the hope and the yearning for safety. And I know that we owe it to those who suffered to find a home. Like our ancestors who wandered, let us help them wander no more. Let us give them Sanctuary.

⁸ <https://www.howtallisthestatueofliberty.org/what-is-the-quote-on-the-statue-of-liberty/>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/us/politics/new-order-bars-almost-all-travel-from-seven-countries.html>