



# KEDEM: KEHILLAT DAVID HAMELEKH YOM KIPPUR SHACHARIT 5872/ 2021

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When Sue and I first arrived in Australia, there were two major, contentious topics of conversation among students of Australian society: the first was about Aboriginal reconciliation; and the second was about migrants, or the sort of people we want to settle in this country. Today we can add two more, the COVID pandemic and climate change. The first two go back virtually to the beginnings of European settlement in this land, and they dominate its history like twin song-lines running through its cultural landscape.

The great social commentator Donald Horne links these two themes in his 2003 book, 10 steps to a more tolerant Australia, which, by the way, Deborah Stone reviewed when she was review editor of the Australian Jewish News all those years ago. According to Horne, it's all about what he calls the "disease" of xenophobia, an irrational hatred of those who are different from ourselves. The illness of xenophobia has never been more prevalent, not only in Australia but across the globe. Whatever its political, social and economic effects may be, this disease is undoubtedly destroying our soul. That's what I want to concentrate on over the next few minutes, and especially with regard to the question of migrants; more specifically, those people that officialdom calls nowadays "illegal maritime immigrants", or as we know them, refugees who arrived by boat.

Early on in my rabbinic service here in Melbourne I was invited to join a demonstration at the Maribyrnong Detention Centre. The Centre at that time was being used to house a large number of "boat people" who had arrived without proper papers from Central Asian countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, South Asian countries like Sri Lanka and Cambodia, and other theatres of violence. To me, back then, this was simple human rights issue, a matter of justice and of Torah. We Jews should care about these people because they like us are created "in the image of God," and because, as it says in Torah, "we know the feelings of the oppressed since we were oppressed in the land of Egypt."

Though the refugees were in detention, they were innocent of any moral wrongdoing. What we didn't know at that time but learned subsequently was that their human dignity was being eroded by their punitive treatment in the Maribyrnong Detention Centre. For example, the women in detention were regularly humiliated by the guards when seeking sanitary products. Through a seminar we held on the issue of asylum seekers, we were able to enlist the support of Walter Jona z"l, a great humanitarian as well as parliamentarian (they're not necessarily the same, of course). Walter asked to see the evidence for these claims, and once he was on board, he wielded his considerable influence behind the scenes to ameliorate the women's situation.

Once we showed that we were able to do something to protect the dignity of others, it restored their hope. As my teacher Rabbi Hugo Gryn often said of his Holocaust experience, quoting his father in the camp, a person can live for three weeks without food, they can live for three days without water, but they cannot live for three minutes without hope. Caryn Granek taught us eloquently on Rosh Hashana about Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who maintained that we Jews are "agents of hope." Sacks argued that hope is a distinctively Jewish response to crisis, the only viable, effective response to the trauma of living, the human condition. When we lose hope, life becomes a "vale of tears" to us.

About five years ago, a few people at TBI got together to see what they could do to aid refugees, many of them "illegal maritime immigrants." This group called itself Project Dignity. It included "the two Karens;" two remarkable women named Karen, who are involved professionally in working with refugees. I call them the karnayim – that's my Hebrew pun. The Hebrew term keren is a horn, like a horn of plenty. The two Karens are truly karnayim, "horns of plenty," for their clients.

In the beginning Project Dignity ran programs to educate the community at large about refugees and to give a break to refugees themselves, for example, panel discussions and film showings, social gatherings at the synagogue and field trips to places of interest around Melbourne. During the COVID lockdown attention shifted to the physical needs of the refugees, who are on bridging visas or other forms of short stay permits that give them no security or access to any welfare benefits. Dozens of volunteers prepared frozen meals which were then distributed to refugees all around the outlying suburbs of the city. Eventually, through the course of Melbourne's six lockdowns, the focus shifted to delivering boxes of fruit and vegetables and bags of bread and groceries on a regular basis to people who without these deliveries would be in great distress. This has gone on since March 2020, for 18 months. Over that time, the Project has delivered the equivalent of several thousands of meals. Some members of Kedem have participated actively in this life-giving mitzvah. I saw Bev Gelbart at our food distribution centre just yesterday morning, and Lionel Appleboom was there on another occasion. The Project is "dignity" in practice. The recipients rely on these regular gifts of food, but equally on the sense of human kindness and chesed that lie behind them

Recently, in the chaotic period immediately after the Taliban occupied Kabul and claimed sovereignty over Afghanistan, Sue and I delivered a supply of food to an Afghani refugee whom we had come to know. He invited us in and, in his very basic English, he began to share with us his fears for his family left behind in Kabul, his wife and children including his endangered teenaged daughters. He got them on a video call and asked us to speak with them, though they had no English beyond "thank you" and "okay".

It was at that moment, when I saw his family on screen and realised that they were sitting in their home in Kabul, unable to go outside because they are women, unable to escape, unable to attend school or get a job, with their father and husband sitting alone and isolated in a bare room in the outskirts of Melbourne – it was at that moment that I began to understand what being a refugee is really about. It was heartbreaking to see their tears and to feel their desperation, to know that there is so little that can be done to help them, that is, both the family still in Afghanistan and the father and husband “boat person” in Melbourne - because the political will is simply not there. The immediacy of their reality, the terrible fear that they live with from moment to moment, the face-to-face trauma of the encounter, the affront to human dignity was nearly overwhelming for us.

Nearly overwhelming, I say, because we still hold on to hope. The story is not yet completed. Despite the despicable cruelty of the Taliban, dignity is not gone. If we react with dignity, with hope, then dignity and hope remain alive.

So, what can we do? One thing is what I'm doing right now: speak out, share your concern for those who are stigmatised as “refugees”, insist that they be treated as we would want to be treated. Do not be a silent bystander. Keep the issue alive, learn about it, contact your parliamentarians about it. We can treat the issue with the seriousness and urgency it deserves.

We can volunteer to feed the refugees here in Melbourne and thus keep their spirits alive through tending to their physical well-being. We can accompany the Afghani refugees on this journey of horror that some of them now face. We can put them in touch with agencies that can advocate on their behalf.

We can lobby our political institutions and parties and help them to focus on the humanitarian aspects of the refugee crisis. We can use our votes to recast politics, away from the politics of fear to what Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks called a “politics of hope.”

In doing these things we add our personal commentaries to the haftarah for this Yom Kippur morning, Isaiah's critique of the Yom Kippur Fast. Let's hear what Isaiah says:

*Is not this the fast I desire – to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home, and never to neglect your fellow human being?*

*Then shall your light burst forth like the dawn, and your wounds shall quickly heal, Your Righteous One leading the way before you, the Presence of the Eternal One guarding you from behind.*

*Then, when you call, God will answer, and when you cry, God will respond “Hineini, I am here”. [Isaiah 58:6-9a]*

These words were spoken more than 2500 years ago. Yet they remain as relevant, as poignant today as they were at the time of the Babylonian exile. They were spoken to our ancestors who, like us, were created b'tzelem Elohim, in the divine image, about how they should treat others – the oppressed, the enslaved, the hungry, the dispossessed, the marginalised – because they, too, are created in the divine image.

Isaiah tells us, if when we are called upon, we answer Hineini, I am here, then God, when called upon, will respond Hineini, I am here. How can we understand this assertion? It is much as what happened when Sue and I sat with our Afghani friend whose family is stranded in Kabul. We had the power to listen and respond to his story, his almost unbearable pain. We all have that power, to listen to those in pain and suffering. And insofar as we have that power, we can each of us say Hineini, I am here. When we do that, we stand in for God – so to speak - on behalf of our fellow human being who is suffering, who is oppressed or hungry or in despair. We show them that there are those out there who care, and so we restore hope to a desperate situation.

As Isaiah assures us, when that is our Fast, the “light shall burst forth like the dawn” with healing in its wings, and we shall have done what we can to fulfil our destiny. By observing this kind of Fast, we act to overcome xenophobia and we restore wholeness to our soul and to the soul of our nation. Perhaps it is just for this purpose that we were created b'tzelem Elohim, in God's image.

So may we be sealed in the Book of Life. Ken y'hi ratzon