“You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20).

There was a bitter irony in seeing President Trump sign the Executive Order on Immigration on International Holocaust Remembrance Day. That day, I found myself remembering a man named Fred who was once a member of our congregation. Born in Germany, this man decided to emigrate to the United States in 1939 and found himself on the fateful voyage of the St. Louis. You will recall that this was the ship, filled with Jews attempting to escape Nazi Germany, that sailed to Cuba en route to the United States. Because of a tightening American immigration policy and a quota system that listed Jews as undesirables, the vast majority of the passengers were not allowed to disembark and were "returned" to Europe where many died during the course of the war. While Fred was one of the fortunate survivors he was reluctant to speak about his experience. A few years before his death, I was able to convince Fred to tell his story to the congregation. I will never forget the experience of watching this elderly, dignified gentleman, stand on the bimah and share his experience. However, it was when he spoke of seeing the lights of Miami from the ship and knowing that it was turning around to head back to Europe, he broke down in tears. In a voice choking with emotion Fred said, "I watched the gates of America closing before me and felt my heart breaking, too terrified to even contemplate my future."

People who have escaped from the hell fires of Syria, people who have assisted the American military, people who had the proper documentation to work in America, are all finding themselves denied entry to the United States of America. Many of these people will be at risk as a result. Our congregation was preparing to help resettle a Syrian refugee family in Chicago through HIAS, only to learn that it may be many months before these people who have endured so much, have the opportunity to come to these shores. I wonder how many people around the world are repeating the sentiments of the passenger on the St. Louis, "I watched the gates of America closing before me and felt my heart breaking, too terrified to even contemplate my future."

Mark Twain once said, "History never repeats itself but it rhymes."

While there are many differences between 1939 and today, as well as serious security issues to consider, it certainly feels as though history is rhyming at this point in time. In 1938 it was clear to the world that the Germans were going to make good on their promise to make Germany Judenrien - free of Jews. In the summer of 1938 delegates from thirty-two countries met at the French resort of Evian, France. During the nine-day meeting, delegate after delegate rose to express sympathy for the refugees. But when the United States offered excuses for not letting in more refugees the other thirty-one countries in attendance read this as a signal that they too could keep their gates closed to Jews. Responding to the outcome of the Evian Conference, the German government was able to state with great pleasure how "astounding" it was that foreign
countries criticized Germany for their treatment of the Jews but none of them wanted to open the doors to them when "the opportunity offer[ed]." What followed was the Final Solution.

History is rhyming in a deafening way and once again the United States is setting an example for the world that will impact the lives of millions of people at risk.

- With 1.3 million Syrian asylum seekers in Europe, how will the executive order be read in countries such as France and Germany?
- How will Muslim countries whose cooperation we depend upon respond to an executive order that gives Christians attempting to come to America preference over Muslims?
- Will people continue to be emboldened to express virulent anti-Muslim sentiment as a man did on Friday in the JFK airport, when he, in the name of President Trump, attacked a female Delta employee wearing a Hijab or like those who opened fire in a Canadian Mosque killing people in the act of prayer?

As Jews, our history compels us to speak out, and the Torah commands us to act at such a moment. We are a people who understands the plight of the stranger in society. That is why our Torah commands us, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20). As Jews and as Americans I ask you to heed the call of the moment and,

- Give: Make a contribution to organizations like HIAS which are fighting to resettle people at risk - today's "strangers."
- Speak Out: Be a participant in our democracy by attending rallies, write your elected officials, contact the White House.
- Engage: Join us on Shabbat morning, February 3rd when I will speak on this issue along with an official from HIAS to give us an update and steps we can take to make a difference.

Friends, let us work to ensure that the stories of those turned back from our shores remain in the past and not in our present. It is up to us to guarantee that no one ever says through their tears, "I watched the gates of America closing before me and felt my heart breaking, too terrified to even contemplate my future."

B'Shalom,

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