

Immigration Shabbat Service

November 3, 2017

Drash by Michael Rice



Jane and Michael Rice
Attend SF Heritage Soiree 2015
April 18th (Alex Akamine)

Shabbat Shalom,

This is Shabbat Vayera – A lot happens!

If I could Tweet this drash, I would say: “Go see Ai Wei Wei’s documentary film, *Human Flow*, an incredible portrait of refugees around the world.”

Like Ai Wei Wei’s film, Vayera tells a story of strangers and immigrants who are vilified and must flee. Vayera is powerful and many-layered, telling of Abraham and Sarah welcoming the three strangers, angels of God, to their open-sided tent, of the attack on the strangers in Sodom and Gomorrah, of the flight of Lot and his daughters. There are fraught encounters with King Abimelech when Sarah and Abraham sojourned in Gerar, the banishment of Hagar and her son to the desert, and, finally, God’s test of Abraham with the binding of Isaac.

Yes, this Parshah is a source of our Jewish values of hospitality, one of the 36 times the Torah speaks to “Welcoming the Stranger.” But we also read in Vayera of families, parents, children, struggling to escape life-threatening strife, some perishing, others saved only by acts of angels.

In this Parshah, I saw themes of tension between Sarah and Abraham. We are disturbed at Lot’s readiness to give up his daughters to the mob and Abraham’s readiness to give up his wife to a powerful chief.

But the Vayera message, “Welcoming the stranger,” is a Jewish value deeply held and practiced at Sha’ar Zahav. CSZ welcomes all to participate in Shabbat and share the Oneg. We invite newcomers to return and make new friends.

You warmly welcomed Jane and me to CSZ as new members 5 years ago. I deeply appreciate Sha’ar Zahav’s 40-year history of helping those in need—regardless of the need. At CSZ there is no barrier to caring.

Sha’ar Zahav welcomes the stranger, and more. We have always reached out to those who are, in a way, banished to the desert, and seeking a safe home. This year especially, we continue our engagement with Jewish Family and Community Services-

East Bay. Our members hosted LGBT refugees from Iraq, Iran, and Georgia. We raised 100s of dollars of gift cards for other JFCS clients.

This is not a one-way path. All of us who hear the clients tell their stories of oppression and escape, are moved to tears. The stories remind us how our efforts reflect the core of our Jewish values.

Back to my Tweet.

“Human Flow” opens with a beautiful blue ocean stretching across the screen. The camera moves to a packed open boat being pulled into Lesbos in Greece; more boats follow. We see the faces of the exhausted, scared, cold but thankful families. We follow lines of refugees walking across Macedonia to camps stuck at the border, confronted by barbed wire, Hungarian soldiers, and muzzled dogs.

At the now-closed Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, once a Cold War flashpoint in the Berlin Airlift, hangars become living space for 1,200 refugees, among the one million refugees Germany welcomed.

Other moments show thousands of refugee tents and huts in Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Kenya, Bangla Desh, and France.

After Ai Wei Wei follows refugees in Asia, Europe, Africa, where does he take us? On the border in Tijuana. A fence, a bit of wall with gaps. His film crew walks back and forth across the “open” border while a patrolman on a dirt bike watches from a hill.

Imagine how many “Dreamers” and their families crossed at that very spot?

Of course, the barbed wire, soldiers, dogs, displaced families in Germany call up our memories of the Shoah, and help me to stand here tonight.

As a leader of our Social Action Committee, I am incredibly gratified how our refugee and immigrant engagement has grown, with so many of you offering your commitment. We now have a special task.

This Immigration Shabbat, the Union of Reform Jewish Congregations Religious Action Center is asking us to join a national effort to support a “Clean” DACA bill.

This is a bipartisan proposal to grant to current DACA recipients, brought to the United States as children, permanent resident status, other protections, and a pathway to citizenship. The URJ message is that Congress must pass a clean bill, with no added enforcement measures or funding for a border wall.

On Monday, November 6, our Social Action Committee will meet here to phone bank elected officials, asking them to insist on a clean DACA bill.

There are many ways to welcome the stranger. We must help the Dreamers.

Please join us.
Shabbat Shalom