LOVE THE STRANGER
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – Yom Kippur 5776
Temple Sholom

This sermon is also available on YouTube: https://youtu.be/2cHd_FV2MWs

For me it was those little blue shoes. In the picture of little Alan Kurdi, laying there like he was sleeping on the beach in Turkey. Only he wasn't sleeping, I had been sleeping.

It was the shoes that woke me from my slumber, from my disregard for the suffering of the Syrian people in the midst of the greatest humanitarian refugee crisis since World War Two. **Over 10 million** people have fled from chaos… into chaos. There are 360,000 refugee ***children under the age of 11*** in Turkey alone. The United Nations even has a counter for refugees who somehow get to a UN station and sign up for aid. The registered refugee reading a few days ago was 4,087,139. I am sure it's more now.

But it only took one. It was those tiny shoes, on those tiny feet, with their tiny toes. I know those shoes, those feet, those toes, my own children have them. They should not be laying there lifeless on the God forbid horribly, inaptly named Golden Beach – they should be running through sand castles, stomping on puddles, chasing the tide in and out.

Unetaneh Tokef kedushat HaYom
On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
Who will live and who will die?
Who by earthquake….. and who by drowning?

Rabbi Asher Lopatin writes that the *Unetaneh Tokef*, so often understood to show that everything is in God's hands and nothing is in our own, actually has the opposite meaning. "The God of Un'taneh Tokef," he writes, "has spent the last year stepping back from the world in order to let human beings act independently, and these actions become the book of the world, signed by the people responsible for them..."

The Syrian Civil war has been going on for more than 4 years. God has stepped back, and so have human beings.

Two hundred thousand people have died in the fighting, or while running or swimming for their lives, many of them children like Alan and his brother Galib. Millions of children are suffering from trauma and ill health. A quarter of Syria's schools have been damaged, destroyed or taken over for shelter. More than half of Syria's hospitals are destroyed.

But "it's the children that catch us", writes Sarah Wildman for the Jewish Daily Forward, "[It's the children] that bring those dizzying numbers into full focus. Their eyes round, their faces tired or hidden behind a parent's legs. They are asleep on their parents' shoulders; they walk beside them or are strapped to their bellies, legs dangling, as their mothers or fathers stride ever forward.

They are far younger than the Syrian conflict so many of them flee. They have been trapped the entirety of their young lives, and now we see them, lying lifeless on beaches."[1]

Jonathan Sacks, Britain's former chief rabbi, wrote: "I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Then I realized that it is easy to love your neighbour because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard - is to love the stranger, one whose color, culture or creed is different from yours. That is why the command 'Love the stranger because you were once strangers' resonates so often throughout the Bible. It is summoning us now."[2]

We would all save the child, because children -- no matter their country, culture or religion -- are all innocent.

Sacks suggests a modern day *kindertransport* – like was organized to save Jewish children on the eve of the Shoah, perhaps the humanitarian refugee crisis most similar to this one. [There have been other "great" humanitarian refugee crises – Vietnamese/Cambodian "boat people", Rwanda, Somalia, etc.]

But "Save the Children" is not, "loving the stranger". To love the stranger you have to take the parents too.

To love the stranger you have to love the Syrians who were taught to fear and hate Israel, to fear and hate….Jews.

No, "love the stranger" does not mean you have to open wide the borders to Islamists, fundamentalists or terrorists. But in these numbers the world is dealing with, too many innocents will die while we carefully screen for the next Bin Laden.

While we dither and wait and debate how many new terrorists will be created? Anger and resentment, fear and frustration build up in those who stand pressed against razor wire fences.

B'Makom she'ain anashim, hishtadel lihyoth ish Pikei Avot extolls us, "In a place where people are acting inhuman, be a human being!"

I hear the concern, the alarm, the plaintive note of caution from your emails to me, from scholars and historians, from politicians.

"Think before acting."

'It's a Muslim problem, let those countries come to their aide. They hate us anyway.'

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[1] Why Refugees' Plight Is Personal for Me — and All Jews, The Forward, Sarah Wildman September 13, 2015

[2] Refugee crisis: 'Love the stranger because you were once strangers' calls us now, The Guardian, Lord Jonathan Sacks, September 6, 2015

"Allowing millions of Syrians and others from the Muslim Middle East into Europe will end up as a catastrophe for Europe, and therefore for the West."[3]

I read these statements and emails and my mind can't help swapping the word Muslim for Jew. Re-read them that way and they are indistinguishable from the same statements that were issued when it was our people, the Jewish people trying desperately to get out of Europe ahead of the Nazi menace.

Sacks reminds us -- like we could ever forget, we will Never Forget, Never Again -- that one of the darkest moments in human history, not just Jewish history but HUMAN HISTORY occurred in July 1938, when representatives of 32 countries gathered in the French spa town of Evian to discuss the humanitarian disaster that everyone knew was about to overtake the Jews of Europe wherever Hitler's Germany held sway.

Jews were desperate to leave. . . . Yet country after country shut its doors. Nation after nation in effect said it wasn't their problem. Or more precisely said they didn't want it to be their problem.

We know well the tragedy of the St Louis, one of the last ships to leave Nazi Germany in 1939 before Europe became involved in World War II. The ship carried 937 Jewish refugees who were persecuted in Nazi Germany after the terrifying night of *Kristallnacht*, the night of the broken glass. It was a night of anti-Jewish shop burning, houses being torn apart, and mass arrests. The Jewish passengers left behind families and friends, hoping to bring them to Cuba when they earned enough money. Unfortunately, as the ship sailed closer to the border of Cuba, the Cuban government refused entry for the passengers.

They tried to seek entry to the United States, they were turned away.
They sailed up the coast toward Halifax, it was only two days from the port and safe harbour when Ottawa, under pressure from high-ranking politicians within, refused to grant the Jewish families a home. The S.S. St. Louis sailed back to Europe and the Jewish passengers all ended up in Nazi concentration camps, a third of them died there.

We know the infamous response of an unidentified Canadian immigration agent who in early 1945 was asked how many Jews would be allowed in Canada after the war. He replied, "None is too many."

A memorial now sits at Halifax's Pier 21 — the very place where the ship would have docked had Canada welcomed it.

"It's important to remember the mistakes the country has made," Sol Messinger, a survivor of the St Louis implores us, echoing philosopher George Santayana's famous line, "Those who do not remember history are condemned to repeat it."

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[3] Europe Is Making a Fatal Mistake, National Review, Dennis Prager, September 15, 2015

This is not the Shoah, thank God.

What's happening in Europe is a humanitarian crisis of the first order; but it's not genocide. It shouldn't need to be said that the Holocaust was the determined effort by one of the world's leading industrialized powers to murder all the world's Jews in the course of a nearly successful effort to conquer the globe.

Raising images of the Holocaust may help draw attention to the crisis. But it also shuts down reasoned discourse, and thus drowns out urgent questions that need airing.

"If the borders are opened wide, how many millions will want to flee the world's no-longer-liveable regions for the safe haven of a continent that works?"

Prime Minister Netanyahu, rightfully, reminds us that Israel is a small country that lacks geographic and demographic depth – it cannot take in masses of Syrian refugees.
Yet Israel is not standing idly by. Quietly so as not to endanger those it is helping, Israel is treating hundreds of Syrian wounded on its Northern Border. IsrAid, and the IDF who's director of emergency field hospitals was here in Vancouver a few weeks ago is providing life saving care in a true embodiment of the imperative to not stand by the blood of your neighbour. Because for Israel – these are not strangers, these are neighbours who one day God willing we will peacefully share a border with.

"But in an atmosphere where every dinghy is the St. Louis, where refrigerator trucks smuggling migrants into Austria become boxcars transporting Jews to the gas chambers, where numbers thoughtlessly scrawled on refugees' forearms in felt-tip pen by Czech police frantically trying to keep track of the human tidal wave are transformed into numbers tattooed on death-camp inmates — in such an atmosphere, there's nothing left to discuss."[4]

The Talmud tells us, "one who has bread in his basket is not like one who does not have bread in his basket." Someone who has everything is not at all like someone who has nothing. Because someone who has everything is tempted to forget what it is like to have nothing. Have we forgotten what it is like to be the stranger, the worlds unwanted, to be running for our lives, to have every door and border and shore closed off to us?

We must "love the stranger, because we were once strangers in the land." Our basket was empty and now it is full, but don't forget it was empty once, just like theirs.

Kerry McKenna is a conversion student at Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom in Montreal. With permission her rabbi shared with me an email she received from her:

[4] JJ Goldberg, "What Shouldn't We Compare to the Holocaust? A Refugee Crisis, for Starters" The Forward, September 14, 2015

“This summer my family had the good fortune to spend a few weeks in Turkey and Greece on holiday. In Greece we were on the island of Kalymnos, about a twenty minute ferry ride from the larger island of Kos where the lion’s share of Syrian refugees are landing.

We hear about it daily on the news - the refugee crisis. I realize now that I had unknowingly created a special category of people in my mind – ‘refugees’.

These fantasies that we all create in our minds to buffer ourselves from all the unimaginable tragedy that happens daily become much more difficult to keep up when it’s right in your face.

While we had adventures and swam in the sea and created memories; other families, Syrian families, sat in the blazing sun around the port and waited desperately. The stress and hopelessness and precariousness of their situation so apparent on the faces of parents who so desperately tried to keep their children safe… and fed.

One afternoon I was in the port with my two oldest daughters (age 6 & 7) and I bought them each an ice cream sandwich. They weren’t paying much attention to a Syrian family, who like ours had three young kids, huddled together in shade of a nearby building.

We had seen hundreds of families just like them in the three weeks we were in Turkey and Greece. In that moment we all had the same reaction- the unbearable awkwardness that accompanies being face to face with the inequity that exists in the world, the uncomfortable feeling of acknowledging your own privilege.

When my girls opened their ice cream packets they realized that each packet contained four little ice cream sandwiches. For a moment they were thrilled at their good fortune. But then one of the Syrian girls, she must have been about 3, caught my oldest daughter’s eye, my daughter said to her sister, “why don’t we just share one of the packages?” In the same breath she handed her package over to the little girl who was watching.

I was proud of course, but I’m not sharing this story to illustrate how great my kids are – they’re just kids. I’m sharing this story because it illustrates so simply something that we all know from the time we are very little, and something that is so obvious when a real live human is standing in front of you.

When you have more than enough of something and someone else has none you share.”

No matter our personal situations, be we well off, comfortable or just scraping by, we have more than they do, we have bread in our basket, in matters of life and death we have more than enough, we can share.

We have land, we have food, we have security, we can share.

Is Canada the best place for Syrian refugees? No, it would be better to keep them near their homeland that way, when troubles are over, they are in position to return to rebuild. Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan have taken in two million; the rest of the oil-rich Gulf states have refused, they need to do their part.

But as Irwin Cotler reminded us at the Federation Opening event the other night, quoting Rabbi Tarfon from the Mishnah: "It is not our responsibility to finish the work [of repairing the world], but we are not free to desist from it either" (2:16).

Like that story about the man returning washed up starfish one by one from the shore to the sea. When questioned about the magnitude of the task before him and how he couldn't possibly make a difference, he returns another back into the sea and declares, "I made a difference for that one."

For those refugees with family here, like Alan or for those who have no place else to go, Canada can make a difference. Canada is the right place at the right time, because time is running out, thousands of children are drowning, families are suffering, people are dying.

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On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
Who will live and who will die?
U'tshuvah, u'tfilah, u'tzedakkah mayaveyreen et roah ha'gzayrah
BUT repentance, prayer and acts of righteousness can transcend the harshness of the decree.

It is said that President Abraham Lincoln often slipped out of the White House on Wednesday evenings to listen to the sermons of Dr. Phineas Gurley at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church.

He generally preferred to come and go unnoticed, so when Dr. Gurley knew the president was coming, he left his study door open. On one of those occasions, the president quietly entered through a side door of the church, took his seat in the minister's study, located just off the sanctuary, and propped the door open just wide enough to hear the preacher.

During the walk home one Wednesday evening, an aide asked Mr. Lincoln his appraisal of the sermon. The president thoughtfully replied, "The content was excellent... he delivered with elo-quence... he had put work into the message...."

"Then you thought it was an excellent sermon?" questioned the aide.

"No," Lincoln answered.

"But you said that the content was excellent, it was delivered with eloquence and it showed much work," the aide pressed.

"That's true," Lincoln said. "But Dr. Gurley forgot the most important ingredient. He forgot to ask us to do something great."

Tonight I want to ask you to do something great. I want to ask you to save a life, the life a stranger – because we were once strangers in the land, because we are human beings and that is the only similarity that we really need.

Two weeks ago our Temple Board voted unanimously that Temple Sholom should sponsor a Syrian Refugee family.

A small working group of temple members has been working tirelessly to figure out the details, requirements, steps and costs involved in this act of *pikuach nefesh* – of saving a life.

Last Thursday afternoon between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – five Vancouver synagogues, their rabbis and lay leaders met with the Jewish Federation and our interfaith partners in the Anglican Arch Diocese. We are working on a plan and a program for each synagogue to sponsor a refugee family.

This will not be a small project. We will be responsible not only for raising enough money to show the Canadian government that we can support a family for a year; we will also be responsible for everything from meeting them at the airport to finding them a place to live, from helping them learn English to helping them find work and schools.

We will be responsible long after their images and stories have disappeared from the headlines of our news. But we will stand together with other synagogues and churches across this country who are living their values, our Jewish values and stepping forward to do what they can. If this isn't the essence of *Tikkun Olam*, what is?

We will do something great, not for the publicity and the edification, but because in a time of great crisis, we must act with great responsibility. Because, "acts of righteousness can transcend the harshness of the decree."

Newspaper editor Arthur Brisbane is credited with the adage, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Tonight and in the weeks, months and years ahead let the image of an innocent toddler, with his tiny shoes resting a final time on a golden Turkish beach be our Shofar blast calling Jews around the world to do what we can to save as many lives today as we can, and God willing many more in the future.

We too were once strangers in the land.

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