DON'T TAKE GOD'S NAME OR WORDS IN VAIN
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Who among us is not horrified and deeply saddened by the US policy of separating children from their parents at the US border?

As Jews we know all too well what happens when human beings are declared illegal and children are ripped from the arms of their parents. If the definition of empathy is to imagine yourself in another person's shoes, then as a parent I have had many restless nights over the past few weeks imagining who would help my own child tie their shoes or wipe their tears if they were forcibly separated from me in a strange country, surrounded by chain link fencing and sleeping on cold concrete floors with nothing but a gym mat and mylar blanket to comfort them at night. Such images overpower me.

I also know the inefficacy of shouting south of the border from this pulpit, it's not that you wouldn't raise your voices with mine, I know many of you would, but what good does it do? We might feel better, a bit cathartic, but it won't change anything.

As PM Trudeau recently observed, "that is not how we do it in Canada."

While I cannot change US Immigration policy from Vancouver I join in proud solidarity with my US clergy colleagues who are on the front lines of this human rights issue.

But there is a broader issue that I believe I can address, one that has important implications not only for the immigration debate but in all instances where the words of Torah and the bible more broadly are used to justify public policy or silence dissent.

Earlier this month, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions used a quote from the Christian Bible, commonly referred to as the New Testament, to support the brutal separation of children and their parents. During a speech in Fort Wayne, IN, Sessions remarked,

> *"I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order. Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves and protect the weak and the lawful."*

Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders supported the idea of a biblical mandate for lawfulness when she answered a question about the Attorney General's remarks by saying,

> *"I'm not aware of the attorney general's comments or what he would be referencing. I can say that it is very biblical to enforce the law.... That is actually repeated a number of times throughout the Bible."*

The statement by Mr. Sessions and the support of it by Ms Sanders is not the first use of that particular quote from the Christian Bible to justify a government action. It is, in fact, the fourth time that exact quote has been cited to somehow connect God's will with horrible behaviour by a government. The first time was just before the American Civil War when southern pastors quoted the passage to justify slavery. The second time was in July 1933, during Hitler's first summer in power, when a young German pastor named Joachim Hossenfelder preached a sermon in the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin. Dina Kraft wrote in Haaretz that "He used the words of Romans 13 to remind worshippers of the importance of obedience to those in authority. The church was festooned with Nazi banners and Stormtrooper flags, its pews packed with the Nazi Party faithful – including men in the brown shirts of the Sturmabteilung, the Nazis' paramilitary movement."

The third and most recent use of the quote, until now, happened thirty years ago in South Africa when those same words were used to justify the horrors of Apartheid. So, there we have the rogue's gallery of misguided uses of Christian Biblical teaching: Slavery, the Nazis, Apartheid and now American government separation of children from their parents.

In the hours and days since Sessions and Sanders made their comments, Christian theologians, representatives from various Christian denominations, and even one devout late-night comedian have decried Sessions' conclusion that the practice of ripping children away from their parents is in any way a reflection of Christian doctrine.

I am certain that the theologians are correct, just as I am certain that the Torah and all of the cannon of Jewish law would not support such action.

I make this assertion not because you can't find examples of the separation of parents and children or other heinous acts done in the bible. Of course, you can,

As my colleague Rabbi Rachel Beaman wrote for an article published by our Reform Movement, "The Hebrew Bible is the product of human authors who attempted to capture cosmic truths. That means that these texts that are the sacred account of our people's history and the compass that guides our people's journey in this world -- these sacred texts include within them the biases, prejudices, concerns, and the beauty of humanity."

"If you search the pages of our Tanach, you can find justification for all manner of human evils. But it is the responsibility of those who love the text, those who love our tradition, to look not for those verses that reflect the worst of ourselves, but instead to embrace the stories, the commandments, and the truths that push us to be better."

There is a sloppiness, nay an evil to a literalist theology that takes one verse from the bible and builds, walls, laws and hatreds upon it.

I am reminded of a marquee I once saw outside of a church while driving in upstate New York, it read, “If your religion tells you to hate other people you’re doing it wrong.”

As someone who loves a religion that holds the texts of the Hebrew Bible as sacred, I take strong issue with anyone’s attempt to use the Bible and therefore attribute to God anything but love, compassion and empathy for the most vulnerable in society. It was written by vulnerable people, by refugees and outcasts. Thirty-six times it repeats, “Love the stranger” do not sully such an empathic teaching with words of xenophobia and nationalism.

To do so is a violation of another one of the commandments we share across biblical religions, to not take God’s name in vain.

In its simplest interpretation, what Rashi called the pshat, to not take God’s name in vain means that we shouldn’t throw God’s name around loosely or with insincerity.

But in a larger, perhaps deeper sense the commandment instructs us not to attribute to God that which is not God’s. To not say that God did this or wants us to do that when we don’t know it to be true, and likewise not to invoke God’s name in support of our position or agenda when we don’t know for sure that God would be in support of our actions.

Ibn Ezra, a great Torah Scholar of 12th century Spain, observed that this single commandment is in fact more important than all of the prohibitions that follow it. He wrote, that murder, adultery and theft are circumscribed by opportunity, but the misuse of God’s name, once it becomes a habit, will grow like a cancer and in the end one’s every assertion will be proceeded by invoking God’s name. What our society gets when this happens, is not only the sins of murder, adultery and stealing, but these acts being performed in the name of God.

So that one day the chief law enforcement officer of the most powerful nation in the world can stand in front of the world and say that God wants the government to separate children from their parents and incarcerate them as criminals for fleeing their own evil pharaoh. AND that citizens should support such a law because in doing so they support God.

Does it occur to such a man that the entire biblical narrative is of a people fleeing drought, famine and persecution for the promise of a new life in a new land? A people that spoke truth to power, that had to break a law to be redeemed from slavery?

How dare someone link the God of the Holiness Code, the God that caused Abraham & Sarah to rush out to greet the stranger, or punished Pharoah for his inhumanity, or that comforted Jacob on his death bed, how dare that God and our sacred texts be used as the justification for heartless laws and the tearing of children from their mother’s arms. How dare they or we in our own Jewish fundamentalism and myopathy justify anything but compassion and empathy in God’s name.

Our God is an awesome God, a loving God, a compassionate God, an empathic God. Our God is always on the side of the most vulnerable, the widow, the orphan, the stranger. And our God is their God too, for God is ONE.

And if that is an inconvenient truth? If that does not fit with one's politics, biases or values – then the nature of religion is to call on us to change ourselves accordingly. God is the constant, we are the variable.

And when someone takes God's name in vain and uses it as a bludgeon against the most vulnerable we are required to stand up and to say in one voice that while the Bible teaches us many things, above all else, our tradition teaches us that every life is precious and that we are responsible for our neighbors.

Rabbi Beaman ended her article with a beautiful prayer that I think captures the demand that religion places upon each of us, particularly in these contentious and painful times.

I pray that we will be like Eve, who was willing to risk her safe existence in order to pursue knowledge.

I pray that we will be like Abraham and Sarah, who hurried to welcome strangers into their camp and rushed to prepare a meal for them.

I pray that we will be like Rebekah, who was judged as remarkable because of her kindness to a traveler.

I pray that we will be like Caleb, who refused to accept the pessimism of his fellow leaders and who clung to his certainty that the future could be safer, brighter, and better.

I pray that we will be like Rahab, who hid strangers in her home when they were sought by those who wanted to harm them.

I pray that we will be like Abraham and Moses, who stood toe-to-toe with the power of the universe and confronted injustice with loud voices and sure hearts.

As in fact we here at Temple Sholom have done in welcoming and supporting our brothers and sisters from Syria this past year. How dramatically different it is for our fundamental philosophy to be one of inclusion and love rather than rejection and forced separation. And here, sitting with us tonight, is one result of that inclusion and love.

I pray that we will remember Rabbi Akivah's teaching that the heart of the Torah, the verse at the center of the scroll and at the center of the Jewish tradition, is Leviticus 19:18 which says, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

This is my prayer for all of us and for all those who hold the Bible as a sacred text.

Kein Yehi Ratzon, May this be God's will. May it be our will.

Amen.