

Breaking the ICE
Rosh HaShanah II 5786
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I want to tell you about a pastor I met over the summer. Her name is Reverend Terri Dennehy, and she serves a church in Stamford. We met on Zoom—I was there to learn, and she was there to teach. The topic? Clergy Court Accompaniment, which is exactly what it sounds like—accompanying someone to their court appointment. Reverend Terri spoke about her personal experience accompanying immigrants to the Stamford Courthouse and the many lessons she'd gleaned over the last several months of doing this work.

Lesson 1: If you're driving someone to their appointment, don't park in the court parking garage, or get to the roundabout too early, or go to the closest Dunkin Donuts, or walk to the courthouse from a couple blocks away—ICE agents hang out in all of these places.

Lesson 2: While you can't prevent ICE from arresting an immigrant friend, you can make it uncomfortable by asking to see the warrant or offering to help deescalate the situation.

Lesson 3: Every accompaniment team needs a clergy person because we're trained to be a calm presence, and God forbid an immigrant friend is arrested at court, their family will need a lot of support during that crisis.

I was at this meeting to learn about court accompaniment, and I was so impressed with Reverend Terri's knowledge. I was also blown away to learn that she had developed and organized all of this information during her brief summer study break. Instead of taking some continuing education classes, which is what pastors would usually do, she opted for on-the-ground learning, which has since expanded to lots of facilitating. I've subsequently attended an in-person training that Reverend Terri co-facilitated—the room was packed with church members and synagogue members and at least one other rabbi, all of us eager to do something—anything—to try to make a difference at such a chaotic and scary time in our country.

We sit here in Norwalk, a city composed of the beautiful rainbow of humanity, knowing that ICE agents brutally attacked and arrested members of our local community—including 2 brothers, Leonel and Ricardo Chavez, just over a month ago. Leonel served as maintenance staff at St. Paul's Church on the Green—right down the block—and he was the primary breadwinner for his family until his arrest.

I am horrified to know this is happening right here where we live. I'm horrified to know that this is happening in other cities across Connecticut, and all across our country. I know so many of us are bewildered and perhaps paralyzed by these actions.

As we celebrate this new year, our thoughts turn once again to the Book of Life. We contemplate our precious existence in this world, and ask: what will this next year hold for us? Who do we want to be in the year 5786? This year, we add another question: What will this year hold for our neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues, and friends who are immigrants?

Before I say anything more, I want to acknowledge that this issue might feel somewhat distant from our lives. Most of us, most of our relatives, are not at risk for an ICE arrest, and it may even be hard to fathom what living with that fear is like. Most of us enjoy a comfortable lifestyle, which is starkly different from most of the people ICE is targeting. And yet, we must not look away. People in our lives, in our communities, are at great risk. Our society has a problem.

I'll invite each of us to take a moment and try to call to mind people in your life who are directly affected by these actions and who are living in great fear. We're talking about our neighbors. Our kid's or grandkid's classmate. Our niece or nephew's boyfriend. The folks who mow our lawns and clean our homes. The person who cooks the delicious food in our favorite restaurant or the one who does the dishes or the handyman or the maintenance team... People all throughout our society—people that each of us knows, people who contribute to the United States economy and our society—are being affected not only by the policies of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, but by their extreme harsh approach.

We are all aware of the increased activity of ICE since January 2025, but to bring it into focus, a few numbers, courtesy of HIAS¹:

- Over 70% of people in ICE custody have no criminal record, and 93% have never been convicted of a violent crime.
- From February through May, ICE detained an average of about 20,000 immigrants each month, a more than threefold increase from 2024.
- ICE has targeted people at workplaces, farms, university campuses, private homes, as well as during random traffic stops. The current administration rescinded a policy that once limited raids in schools, places of worship, hospitals, and other sensitive areas.

¹ <https://hias.org/news/ice-raids-what-you-need-know/>

- As of June 2025, there were approximately 59,000 immigrants held in ICE custody, which is over 140% of its detention capacity. That's 59,000 family members, many of whom brought in the primary income for a family. That's 59,000 families struggling to stay connected, afraid of what will happen to their loved one, working extra hard to stay afloat *and* do what they can to bring their loved one home. That's entire communities working to support separated families, children whose parent is... gone. That's entire immigrant communities throughout the United States worrying if they're next.

What's their crime?

It seems the crime is that they were born elsewhere.

Now, what we're NOT here to do is judge whether someone is legally permitted to be here. That's not my job, and none of us is qualified for that. We have a court system for that, and it's important that folks get a fair hearing if they need one. If a person has committed a crime, we have guidance for that. I'm also not addressing today the question of more attainable paths to citizenship in this country; that's a different, and very important, sermon.

But as Jews, we are uniquely positioned to relate to the experience of our immigrant neighbors and friends. Our entire master narrative is one of displacement and migration, starting with Avraham's first interaction with God: *Lech Lecha*, "leave your birthplace, your father's home, and journey to the place I will show you."² As we read through the Torah, we see Hagar cast out of the home³, Jacob fleeing the wrath of his brother⁴, Joseph bringing the entire first family down to Egypt⁵, and eventually the Exodus and 40 years of wandering.

Jewish history after the Bible flows over with more displacement, more migration—see the Babylonian exile after the destruction of the first Temple, the Roman exile after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Expulsions from Spain and other European lands; the ghettoization, shipment to concentration camps, and outright murders of Jews during the Shoah; and the migration of Jews from Middle Eastern and African countries to Israel after 1948, to point to a few big ones. To be a Jew is to carry in our DNA the possibility that we might just have to pick up and move somewhere else. We know the feeling that accompanies that genetic reality—it's fear, or tentative comfort, or a periodic jolt reminding

² Genesis 12:1

³ Genesis 21:14

⁴ Genesis 28:5

⁵ Genesis 46:5-7

us not to forget. The vast majority of us live here because someone in our family experienced persecution and made the hard decision to migrate—thank God they did. Today's immigrants have their own version of that same story. We're all just trying to make a meaningful and safe life for ourselves in this country.

Take for example the story that Cheryl⁶ from Columbus OH tells of her great-grandmother, Sadie Shlomowitz, who came to this country as a young Polish immigrant in the early 1900s and spoke no English. She was hired by the famous Yiddish actor Jacob Adler to work as a maid in his home. Sadie had no education but was very bright, and Jacob's children Luther and Stella Adler liked to play school. They had a willing pupil in Sadie and that was how she learned to read and write in English. She soon met a strapping 6'2" young man named Max Miller and they fell in love. Max was a third generation "Yankee" and he was also only 16 years old. She told him that she was only 20 and he said that he was 19. They raised three daughters in the Bronx. Cheryl recalls that Grandma Miller stood 4'9" and her husband Max always had a cigar in his mouth. As a child, Cheryl says she always wondered how the cigar ash didn't hit Grandma in the head. She died when Cheryl was a senior in high school and Max only lived 6 months without her. Cheryl learned a lot about hardship and love from their 68-year marriage.

Another example: Emma & Rogelio Torres⁷, who both grew up in migrant farmworker families. They met in the early 1980s near Yuma, Arizona. A young mother bereaved of her husband, Emma met Rogelio because she needed a truck and he had one. She soon noticed that he was good with kids, and she also needed a babysitter. The unlikely couple soon fell in love and married. Reflecting on their struggles, Emma shared that after having dropped out of school in sixth grade, her goal was just to speak English and get her GED. That would help her achieve more education than her family ever had. And the more she would go to night classes and learn, the more she saw the value of education. She urged Rogelio to do the same. She would tell him, 'Come on, go to school. Learn to speak English, you know, education is what breaks the cycle of poverty that we're in.' Rogelio's family was much more focused on earning money and not relying on unemployment, and he was much more reluctant to go to school. In the end, he supported her in her dreams, and they became his dreams, too. After she pursued a bachelors and then a masters degree in social work, they decided to serve farm worker families and help them improve their lives, and that's how they've been making a difference ever since.

⁶ <https://www.pbs.org/jewishamericans/share/immigration.html>

⁷ <https://storycorps.org/stories/?collection=historias>

Just regular people trying to make it in a new place, to stay afloat, to make a life and a difference.

You know, it's not just our people's history with migration and movement and persecution that compels us to care about today's reality. We are the inheritors of a sacred tradition that demands a balance of law, *mishpat*, and *tzedek*, justice or righteousness. The book of Leviticus teaches: "You shall not render an unjust *mishpat*; you shall not favor the poor or show deference to the great; with *tzedek* you shall judge your neighbor."⁸ And the book of Deuteronomy famously teaches: "You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates... and they shall judge the people with *mishpat tzedek* (righteous judgment). You shall not pervert *mishpat*; you shall not show partiality; you shall not take a bribe... *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*—Justice, justice shall you pursue, so that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you."⁹ *Tzedek* and *mishpat*, law and righteousness, go hand in hand. Jewish values demand that society be based on justice, fairness, and a recognition that each of us is a human being created in the image of God. Couple that with the Torah's insistence that we never forget our people's experience of enslavement and cruel treatment, and it's no wonder that we are told 36 separate times to care for the stranger, to love the stranger, for we were strangers in a strange land. We all deserve a chance at a good life, and even when we mess up, we deserve a fair trial.

Caring for the stranger in our midst has become increasingly dangerous—and crucial—because of ICE's increased activity. Last month, over the span of 4 days, ICE arrested 65 individuals in Connecticut, including the Chavez brothers. ICE agents attempted—twice!--to enter the Norwalk Police Department's property. And in a move that really pushed the envelope, ICE agents arrested 2 men *inside the Stamford Courthouse*, apparently from inside the restroom. No warrant produced at any time. Somehow, caring for the dignity of human beings has become a political issue, when what it should be is simply looking out for one another.

It is not acceptable for human beings to be assaulted, arrested without a warrant, and disappeared because they came here from another country, because they have an accent, because their skin is a certain color, because someone pointed a finger at them. Replace any detail about Latine folks with a yellow star, a Jewish-sounding last name, or an Eastern European or German accent... we know exactly how that feels. It's not ok.

Without support, without intervention, it's pretty clear how this new year will unfold for our immigrant friends and neighbors. It won't be a sweet year at all.

⁸ Leviticus 19:15

⁹ Deuteronomy 16:18-20

The time for demanding justice, for actively loving the stranger in our midst is now. This is one of those moments where we will look back to years down the road and ask ourselves: Did I act? Did we act? Did we do enough?

We are not permitted to obstruct ICE from arresting someone—that’s the law. But there are plenty of actions we can take that add *tzedek*, righteousness, to today’s difficult *mishpat*, the law.

1. Be proactive in checking in with immigrant friends and acquaintances. Ask them how they’re doing with all of the ICE activity, and let them know you care about them.
2. If you see ICE confronting someone, you have the privilege—of citizenship, of the color of your skin and your ease with English—to make it uncomfortable. Ask what’s going on. Ask if you can help diffuse the situation. Ask to see the warrant, and if it’s produced, check for the correct person’s name and address, the date of the warrant, and whether it is signed by an appropriate judge.
3. Let your elected officials know how you feel about this issue. Emphasize the human experience, the *tzedek*, and how that’s missing from the *mishpat*, the law.
4. Finally, learn more about court accompaniment and consider supporting immigrants by serving on a court companion team yourself. As I shared with you a few minutes ago, I’ve also been trained as a Court Companion, and I look forward to doing what I can to ease someone’s stress.

Let’s bring it back to Reverend Terri, who I would venture to say has absolutely been doing all she can to help. She has been integral in building a network of lay and clergy people who sign up in teams each weekday to accompany anyone who has a court appointment in Stamford and who requests support. In and around every major city in our state, and around the country, grassroots groups are doing the same thing.

I hope that this new year brings health, happiness, and peace to all of us. And I truly hope that it will be a year when we each do our part to mend some of the brokenness in our society. *Va’ahavtem et-ha’ger ki gerim heyitem b’eretz Mitzrayim*, “you shall love the stranger, for you were a stranger in a strange land.” We’ve been there. And blessedly, now we are in a position to help. Let us not miss this opportunity.

When we hear the call of the shofar, let that tekiyah awaken us to the plight of others. Let the sobs of the shevarim remind us that so many families are not whole. And let the trumpeting of the teruah give us the confidence that we can, in fact, make a difference.