

Zero Tolerance. Zero Compassion.

Rabbi PJ Schwartz

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Yesterday morning, a mother from Nicaragua stood before our journalists and multi-faith religious leaders in the simple and dignified space of the Catholic Charities Respite Center in McAllen, Texas, cradling her sleeping infant in her arms. “We are here because my country is no longer safe for my child,” she said. Now, she is already on a bus to San Francisco, her ticket purchased by relatives there, her safe passage arranged by Sister Norma and the remarkable staff and volunteers of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley.

The Nicaraguan mother, like the other families we met in the Respite Center, is among the lucky ones—those who can still cradle their babies, who can still play with their children on the colorful mats in the corner, who were able to take their first shower in weeks and to wash off the mud and cold of passage.

It was some combination of chance, powerful love, and spiritual commitment that landed mother and child on that westbound bus: the luck of a given moment on a given day and the love and commitment of volunteers and faith communities who share time, supplies, food and medical services. One can only wonder at how that mother and child could still be together in the face of the current administration’s cruel and draconian requirement that children be taken from their parents at the border. When asked, the mother shrugged: maybe a compassionate border guard, maybe because the child was just a baby, maybe our prayers worked.

We have witnessed traumatic cruelty in our nation in these recent weeks, and if witnessing it has been traumatic, we can only begin to imagine the pain of those who have suffered it directly: the parents and children whose wails tear at our hearts. The name of this policy, “Zero Tolerance,” is Orwellian at best. The practice of ripping children from their parents at the border is not Zero Tolerance. It is Zero Compassion. It is Zero Wisdom because it deprives security professionals of discretion. It is Zero Coherence because it expends security resources indiscriminately, instead of focusing them on the populations who might put us at risk. This alarming practice has violated core Jewish values and affronted the American values of which Dreamers dream.

While the executive order ending the policy of separating families, issued on June 20, 2018, is a step in the right direction, the administration has no plan about how to reunite those 2,300 children already separated from their parents—and children should *never* be incarcerated, with or without their parents.

The work of calling for transparency must continue—by each of us who cares about the conscience, heart, and destiny of America. These troubled times remind me of the words of Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who represented the Jewish community at the March on Washington in August of 1963. He said (in the gendered language of the day) that “when God created man, He created him as everybody’s neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man’s dignity and integrity.”

And the Jewish people—who know all too well what happens when human beings are declared illegal and children are ripped from the arms of their parents—have an added responsibility. We are required to stand up and 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.

So what can we do? We can contact our elected officials and urge them to continue working across the aisle to pass a reasonable and fair immigration reform bill. We can support groups that defend the rights of immigrants, groups that include the National Immigrant Justice Center and the Young Center for Immigrant and Children’s Rights. We can gather and send care packages to detainees and separated families. We can continue to speak up and make the choice to stand with families fleeing violence and persecution. We can choose to reject a false narrative about why the inhumane policy of family separation is happening.

And we can pray. I offer this prayer from Rabbi Paul Kipnes:

Pray for the children

The ones who were taken away

And pray for the leaders

Whose moral compasses have gone astray

Pray for the kids

Who wallow in their cages

And pray for the guards
Whose work sullies their wages

Pray for the dads
Who are now childless and under arrest
And pray for the moms
Whose kids were ripped right from their breasts

Pray for the parents
Away from their children day and night
And pray for our government
Which desperately needs to see the light

Pray for the religious
Whose values others erroneously claim
To justify pulling children from their parents
But really, they just profane God's name

Pray for the people
Who avert their eyes from this travesty
And pray for government
Which employs this immoral strategy

But mostly,
Pray for the children
Created *b'tselem Elohim*

And pray for us all

As we all suffer the dark parts of the American dream

May this be God's will. May this be our will. Amen



In *Chukat*, this week's *parasha*, the prophet Miriam dies. After she's buried, the scene abruptly shifts to the lack of water in the wilderness. We're left wondering: How did the people mourn her loss? To get water, God tells Moses to gather the people and speak with a rock. Instead, Moses strikes the rock with his staff. Water pours out. Rabbi Sharyn Henry notes that Moses hasn't yet mourned for Miriam. Striking the rock, she says, is his reaction to unexpressed grief. The water and his tears are the same.

Living Waters

Let the well of living waters
Flow through me
From the Source,
From ancient pools
Of holiness and light,
Ancient pools that sustain the body
And soothe the heart.

My grief has turned
My heart to stone,
My sorrow and loneliness
Have hardened my veins.
Crack me open with Your divine rod.
Release my tears with your staff.
Let me know wholeness
And peace,
Once again.
