

Leading by example: How local government shapes the response to immigration policies

With the news of the senseless violence in El Paso and the recent mass roundup of undocumented workers in Mississippi, it's impossible to ignore the often heart-breaking challenges immigrants face in the United States.

With a Congress that is either incapable or unwilling to compromise on legislation that effectively addresses the weaknesses in our current immigration policy, and a president more interested in inflaming an increasingly radicalized base for political gain, the burden of protecting at-risk populations while simultaneously enforcing the law increasingly is falling on local governments in communities across America.

The question is: how can we make the global local?

As an immigration attorney and

mayor of a city blessed with a flourishing immigrant population, I have seen firsthand how action – or inaction – can impact a community. Elected representatives of local governments need to understand that immigrants are members of the community and are due the same dignity, respect, and right to safety as their native-born neighbors. Across the country, lawfully admitted aliens add to the richness of experience and promote shared values. This is not a recent development – integration is embedded in the DNA of the USA. Responsible governance requires us to make sure that recent immigrants are encouraged to engage with their communities in order to fully integrate and contribute. While critics of immigration claim that newcomers threaten to dilute some unarticulated notion of “American-ness,” the reality is that these

citizens readily embrace our customs and traditions, bringing vibrancy and depth to their adopted communities.

Things become more complex when we're asked to examine unlawful immigration and how it affects the management of a small town or city. In the face of increasing strains on services and the difficulty that comes from governing people who frequently do not want to be found, leaders are forced to make tough decisions when allotting resources or enacting policies that are fair and in keeping with the spirit of the law. In sanctuary cities, for example, we understand that even the undocumented are important members of the community, and we take



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pains to dexterously advise the population to ensure that everyone knows their rights and can safely raise their children.

While no one wants open borders, we need to exercise deliberate compassion when dealing with hard-working families who often toil in the shadows and contribute vital services. At the same time,

we have to be mindful that this spirit of inclusion can be stunted by fear, intolerance, or simply misinformation, particularly when those sentiments are spewed by so-called leaders. And no matter how effective we are at managing complicated immigration issues, there are cities and towns in other parts of the country that actively work with ICE and CBP to limit

Will the Jeffrey Epstein case serve as a wake-up call?

As a Jewish feminist and child advocate, I was horrified to learn of the cruel and abusive behavior committed by convicted sex offender and financier Jeffrey Epstein. I am doubly pained by the fact that he was a Jew. That is not because our religion is in any way immune to the transgressions that traverse all groups. We certainly are not immune, and we don't need to distance ourselves from Epstein out of shame.

I am pained because the Epstein debacle – which comes down to the cloaking of his perversity and cruelty behind the banner of money and power – shows a very serious lapse in how we rein in members of our own community when their actions defy American law and the Torah.

There is a poetic cadence to the way this case ended in a jailhouse suicide. In secular terms, the suicide arguably could be seen as a craven response to the release of the 2,000-page record of his legion of contacts who were embroiled in his Byzantine world, which was made public just one day before he took his life. In religious terms, he took his life just one day before Tisha B'Av, the day we commemorate the desecration of our Holy Temple.

Taking his life right before the fast day makes it especially hard to escape the symbolic representation of his existence in this earthly world: it was nothing more than a colossal desecration of both God and humanity. The manner in which he ended his life – by self-strangulation – left his victims figuratively “hanging,” depriving them

of the much needed closure to the wounds they suffered for years.

News reports show his victims crying out for justice, looking toward his alleged accomplices as new prosecutorial targets. As a Jewish woman, I, too, cry out for justice not only for the Epstein victims, but for all the under-aged Jewish children who are forced into sexual slavery. This is a topic I know a lot about.

More than three decades ago I became involved in a painful legal drama involving my daughter, who was left to suffer at the hands of an alleged pedophile and those who protected him rather than her. The story was described by attorney Karen Winner in her book “Divorced from Justice” as “the most notorious case on record.” A New York Magazine cover story on pedophilia referred to me as “the issue's best-known cause celebre.” What was never written about, because at the time it was too shocking to reckon with, was the vast network of power, from the religious institutions that exercised power over lay authorities, to the legal and governmental institutions that failed spectacularly and deliberately, by shielding the alleged pedophile – not the child – at every step of the way.

In 1986, my mother, a rabbi's wife, walked into a room and witnessed her grandchild – my daughter – in the tight grip of her father. She was horrified and grabbed my daughter away immediately. My mother gave a detailed account to the district attorney of Ulster County, who

found her account credible. But my child never was allowed to testify before the Ulster County grand jury, nor was she allowed to be interviewed by the district attorney. Why?

The answer is simple. A succession of New York power brokers stepped in to wield unusual influence in this case. First, my mother's report of eye witnessing the abuse brought forward a controversial publicly funded agency, the Brooklyn Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children. In a memo to the New York State Legislature, Jeremiah B. McKenna, chief counsel to the New State Senate Committee on Crime and Correction, would write that he called upon a contact whom he had “worked with on a kiddie porn investigation” and found out this agency was “known to assist divorced Orthodox Jewish fathers in child custody cases.” He later would write, in a letter to the New York City Human Resources Administration, that “Amy Neustein is a victim of a criminal conspiracy.”

Second, after the father made what the agency called “social visits” to the higher ups at the BSPCC, his request not to be investigated for sexual abuse was obliged willingly. He never had to answer any questions about his daughter. Instead, I was charged by the BSPCC with “neglect” for making a report of abuse



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“that was not totally true,” even though my child confirmed the abuse to the agency workers and later to a leading child abuse expert who supported the child's claims. It was not easy for my child to talk to the workers who boasted of their repeatedly telling her about the “danger” she was posing to her father by speaking openly. Yet, as a

result of this undoubtedly baseless charge of neglect, my child was seized from me immediately and placed in a foster home in Brooklyn.

Once in foster care, the agency told the Ulster County DA that he would have to “move heaven and earth” to get them to allow the child to cooperate with a grand jury investigation. They also made it known they would give testimony in support of the father. The case was dropped.

There was another report of suspected abuse by the father, this time made by the foster mother. The report was not investigated. Around the same time, my child's teacher told me that my daughter was very upset because she was forced “to go on appointments” every evening and “couldn't do her homework.” My daughter became obsessed with “modelling” and complained about her figure constantly. In a letter from Kathy Rosenthal, a founding member at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, to

the undocumented living among them.

The Torah teaches us to befriend the stranger, as we were once strangers ourselves. Now more than ever, we need to encourage the kind of cultural and economic vitality that comes with welcoming new neighbors. We cannot hope for addition by subtraction, and if we want to build a country that truly is first among nations, we need to show that our identity is not based on lineage, but a commitment to the principles that guide us – fairness, bravery, and generosity. The Congressional silence has been deafening, and we will remain a nation divided without decisive action in Washington. Until then, small towns must look inward to find a direction. It's a journey that can start only at home.

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the commissioner of the Administration of Children's Services, she would say that photos of the child "showed a child being groomed for child erotica."

By the age of 8, a once heavy-set child had become so slim that a shunt had to be placed in her heart because of severe anorexia nervosa. At the emergency room at Kings County Hospital they found her to be severely dehydrated and emaciated. The admitting doctor testified, and told the press that the child was "by far the worst case of emaciation he had ever seen" and thought "she could possibly die." After my child regained her strength she confronted her father in the hospital. A nurse overhead her say "You got me into this. If you don't get me out of here, I'm going to tell everything." The father asked social services not to investigate him for sex abuse – and they oblige.

Ironically, it was Jeffrey Epstein's high profile that finally proved his downfall. Power protects such perverts until the protectors themselves are put under a spotlight. We need to force such agencies and powerful protectors to become as accountable for their actions as those they are trying to protect. Let Jeffrey's Epstein sordid life and suspicious death act as a clarion call to stand strong against the rich and powerful.

Because if we don't, we will have desecrated everything we hold dear.

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A VIEW FROM THE PEW

The mitzvah of gratitude

The Torah portion this week, Parshat Ekev, teaches us a transcendent lesson of Jewish living. Long before day-planners, computers, and smart phones, with calendars and apps that constantly remind us of what we are supposed to be doing, the rabbinic interpretation of the Torah enabled Jews to schedule our lives by Jewish time and thereby remind us of what was important in a Jew's life.

The Jewish calendar not only sets aside a weekly Shabbat and an annual calendar of Holy Days, but also a daily structure of worship and blessings. One of these structural tools is the tradition of expressing gratitude to God for the food that sustains our bodies, which is derived from the words of this week's Torah reading. "When you have eaten your fill, you give thanks to Adonai your God for the good portion of this earth that God has given to you" (Deuteronomy 8:10).

The rabbis of the Talmud derived from this passage the command to recite Birkat HaMazon, the grace after a meal. The Talmud says that the purpose of these blessings is to make each of us realize that without God, none of us would ever enjoy the gifts of this world, despite how hard we work. It is a clear statement that gratitude is a central value of Judaism.

"U'vayrachta," which is a derivative of the Hebrew word "baruch," literally means "and you will bless." Yet the JPS translation, following a long line of rabbinic tradition, understands "u'vayrachta" as the command to give thanks. I believe that every time any of us recite a bracha and begin with the words "Baruch ata Adonai," we are expressing gratitude to God for being alive, and that it is a blessing in itself. The message of the Birkat HaMazon is to be grateful for what we have and to commit ourselves to be God's agent in the world.

When we live each day being just a little more decent, with just one additional grain of integrity, we should be both grateful and satisfied. Each of us should learn to say "Today, I lived the best I could, and I am grateful that I did. Tomorrow is another opportunity to add more grains of goodness by expressing gratitude to God in both word and deed.

The more I think about gratitude these days, the more I wonder if saying "thank you" to God through the Birkat, and to other people as well, is enough.

Judaism teaches us that it is not enough.

The 19th century sage Chatam Sofer, in commenting on another verse from this week's Torah portion, "man does live on bread alone," understands this verse as teaching that no one should focus his or her life merely on making a living. "A person's true purpose is to sustain him or herself in order to have the strength to learn and teach; observe and act: and uphold Torah, in truth and faithfulness"

My brother, Rabbi Mark Borovitz, in his Torah commentary "Finding Recovery and Yourself in Torah" (Jewish Lights, 2016), comments on another verse from later in this parsha. In Deuteronomy 10:16, we are commanded "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts so that you (plural) will no longer be stiff-necked."

Mark suggests "this refers to the need to remove the thin membrane that too often separates the individual from a clear connection to other people and to God. Like a cataract obscures our physical sight, this membrane clouds our spiritual, emotional and intellectual vision."

Mark then asks his readers to consider three questions:



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1. How do you continually remove the cloudiness from your thinking and feeling so that you are truly living according to your soul?

2. How do you give dignity to all human beings and help everyone have a voice in our societal discussions?

3. When and how do each of us and all of us surrender to God's will?

As our calendar is about to turn to the month of Elul and the daily sounding of the shofar, I find that the call to gratitude for our physical sustenance and the reminder that

we do not live by bread alone not only call upon me to be grateful for the blessings of my life but also command me to be a better partner with God in providing physical, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional sustenance to all.

To me, in 2019, this means that it is my obligation – it is our obligation, as Americans and as Jews – to be God's voice and hands in the world by insuring that no one goes hungry, that no one lacks shelter or lives in unsanitary conditions, especially here in our nation. Deuteronomy repeats more than 30 times that we must take affirma-

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tive action on behalf of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in our midst. Our government's inability to deal with the terror of continued mass murders in our cities, our schools, and our college campuses; the tragic suffering of children along our southern border; and the threat of funding cuts to food stamps and Medicaid for the poorest of our fellow Americans leads me to feel shame rather than gratitude.

This Shabbat and every day, as we recite the Birkat HaMazon, may all of us remain unsatisfied as long as the strangers on our borders and too many of the citizens in our communities do not have enough food to eat or places to sleep.

May we all come to read the verse "circumcise the foreskin of your hearts so that you will no longer be stiff-necked" as my brother Mark suggests, as a command to remove the thin membrane that too often separates the individual from a clear connection to other people and to God.

May 5770 be a year in which each of us as individuals and all of us as an American Jewish community see all the residents of America and all the inhabitants of the world as our sisters and our brothers, and realize that they too possess the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

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