



Parshat Terumah
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Don't be Indifferent - Make a Difference
by Rav Hazzan Aliza Berger
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

It was Monday morning. I had just parked in the Wegman's lot, and was gathering my re-usable bags when the phone rang. I answered, and the familiar recording began to play, [*robotically*] "an inmate from the Donald D Wyatt Detention Facility would like to speak with you...." I settled back into my seat as I waited for the end of the recording. "This call is being recorded. To accept charges, press 0. Thank you for using Global Tel Link." I pressed zero.

There was a pause, and then a voice filled my car. "You've got to help me. I just can't take this anymore. Please, you have to get me out of here."

The young man on the other end of the line was a 20-year-old from Turkey. He came to Boston with a student visa, and in the stupidity of youth, didn't think anyone would care if he overstayed a little bit. He realized his mistake when he was arrested and has been panicking behind bars for the past three weeks. He begs me to help him, but there's nothing I can do. There's nothing anyone can do. All he can do is wait for his day in court. He's crying on the phone, "but all I want is to go home. Can't you just tell them I'll leave?" I wish it were that simple.

Every Monday, I spend my days in suspended animation, waiting to answer an immigrant support hotline. My job is officially to connect people with information. To connect immigrant detainees with legal resources, to find evidence for them on Facebook and on the internet, to speak with their family members via WhatsApp and Facebook to keep them updated about what is happening here, and to help people to connect with their family members who live in the

United States. My job is to be a resource. And to be a source of kindness and regard in a world which feels anything but kind and regarding.

I speak with fathers who are desperate to be reunited with their children. With parents who came here to support their children back home and are now praying that their family will somehow manage to come up with enough money to pay rent and buy groceries without their salary. I speak with siblings who are desperate for news, with wives who burst into tears when I tell them I can't call their husbands in jail (when you're detained, you can't receive calls, you can only pay exorbitant fees to call out.) In the afternoons, fathers call to speak with their children and I sometimes hear them as they choke back tears, asking about school, and instructing their little ones to be good for Mami. I hear the sobs start sometimes before they hang up the phone.

It feels surreal. Surreal that I can be sitting at my kitchen counter, picking out wedding photos for our album, while on the other end of the phone line, I'm speaking to someone who hasn't seen her husband in months and doesn't know when or if she will get to see him again. It feels surreal that I can be shopping at Target, talking with someone about their upcoming court date and what they need to do knowing that something like 97% of asylum cases are rejected.

It feels surreal. How is it that there are so many lives torn apart, so many families upended, and yet our lives go on undisturbed? How is it that we can see injustices unfolding around us, and then just turn off the tv and go on with our days? How is it that we've grown so hardened to other people's pain?

I feel this acutely. After all these many months of volunteering, I feel like my heart is hardening. It used to be that every case made me want to cry. And then, it was only a few cases per day and now I make it through the whole day without crying. The stories aren't any easier, but somehow I'm getting used to it. Somehow we're getting used to this kind of suffering.

Somehow we think this is normal. We've forgotten where we come from; forgotten that our own people were decimated because the world refused to see our plight. It's easier to forget.

Elie Wiesel once said, "it is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair. Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor [is] of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the other to an abstraction."

We cannot reduce one another to an abstraction. We cannot continue to be indifferent.

That's why I'm coming to you today. We need you. No more indifference, we need to make a difference. We need your help.

On March 4th, our Social Justice Advisory Board is having a training session led by the Boston Immigrant Justice Network. We will be learning about how we can make a difference in someone's life by writing a letter that lifts their spirit. We will be learning about how we can make a difference by showing up in court, showing people that as they fight for the right to live here with their families, we are with them. We will be learning about ways that we can support families and help new friends, friends that have just been granted asylum here and are trying to put their lives back together.

We need you.

We are not an indifferent community. We can make a difference.

Let me tell you a story. Months ago, when Qwin's lawyers reached out to say they had taken on a new case and needed help finding housing for a Rwandan journalist who doesn't really speak

English, we didn't know where to turn. That same day, a family came to see Rabbi Gardenswartz. They told him they couldn't stand to be indifferent to all of the suffering that is unfolding around us. They wanted to make a difference. And so, he asked them if they would open their homes to a stranger. They said, on the spot, yes. And on Friday of last week, they did. They opened their home and 40 angels from our community have signed on to help by bringing him meals, taking him out, helping him to get medical care and phone service. Together these 42 angels are helping him to rebuild his life. 42 angels have made a difference.

Maybe this feels overwhelming. This feels like more than you can do with everything you've got going on. Let me tell you a different story. A few weeks ago, I was on the hotline and someone called with a simple request. "Do you think that you could write me a letter? I'm so lonely in here and it would make such a difference if I could just talk to someone." "Of course," I said, and then, when I got off the phone, I posted on Facebook to see if anyone would be willing to send a letter to support this man and a few of the other people I've spoken with on the hotline.

On Monday, I answered a call unlike one I have ever received. The man on the other end of the line was crying, but tears of gratitude. He said, "I'm calling because I have to tell you, the most amazing thing happened today. I got a letter. A letter in the mail. That's never happened before. I've been here in jail for almost a year and I can't talk to my family and I don't have any friends here and today, for the first time I got a letter. You don't know how good that feels. There's someone in the world who cares about me! I'm not asking for any money, I'm not asking for anything, just knowing that someone was thinking about me...I just can't tell you what that meant to me."

The world may be indifferent, but we are not. Join us on March 4th. Join us. We are not indifferent. We can make a difference.