

## “Sanctuary Cities: Then and Now”

*The Nobel Laureate Physicist, Richard Feynman, once said:*

*All learning begins with the posing of a question*

Feynman and, many more great and original thinkers, understood what research has proven to be the case; asking questions can open all sorts of doors.... In my work at the Right Question Institute, a non-profit working in many low-income communities around the country that has received steadfast support from many Temple Emunah members, I've had a chance to see in many situations just how powerful the skill of question formulation can be.

And, research on the development of reading skills also shows that asking questions before reading and asking questions while reading contributes directly to greater comprehension. So before Ana shares some of what she has learned by looking at, thinking about, and reading about this week's *Parashah* and its meaning, we'd like you to follow Feynman's adage and, on your own, or in quick collaboration with people around you, think about what questions come to mind when I present to you a focus for your questions. I'd encourage you to allow yourself the chance to just think in questions, not to explain them, answer them, just let a few questions out, the ones that come to mind immediately and the ones that follow your initial questions.

So, the sound you'll hear now is just the sound of questions for one full minute.

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*Parashat Mas'ei*, verse 6 reads as follows:

The Lord spoke further to Moses (he had been talking to him for a while I guess!): “Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall provide yourselves with places to serve as cities of refuge to which a manslayer who has killed a person unintentionally may flee. The cities might serve you as a refuge from the avenger, so that the manslayer may not die unless he stood trial before the assembly.”

In the following verse, God commands Moses to choose six cities as cities of refuge, three beyond the Jordan and three in the land of Canaan.

The concept of protecting someone who unintentionally committed a crime is a remarkable innovation given to us by our ancient forefathers. In order for the slayer to protect himself from the avenging family of the deceased, the slayer had to go immediately to one of the six cities of refuge. All roads leading to the cities had to be clearly marked with signs pointing the way (In place of GPS). The roads had to be straight and level, with no obstacles (In MA that would mean NO potholes). Once they got there, they were taken to a court to then determine if they were guilty of unintentional homicide in which case they could live rent and tax free during the lifetime of the incumbent High Priest. After the death of the High Priest they could return to their home cities without fearing harm.

There are other examples throughout history of Sanctuary Cities and special protections for fugitives, slaves, debtors, etc.

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The Greeks, for example, had Sanctuary Cities, to which individuals could flee. These were areas around the Greek Temples, which required that people come unarmed. The Greek historian Herodotus, writes about the sanctuary of Heracles by the Nile river to which individuals often fled. Once there, the fleeing individual could perform a supplication, pledge devotion and then be accepted into the sanctuary. Once in the sanctuary, nobody would be allowed to harm the person. Furthermore, attacking someone who sought sanctuary or asylum was considered a polluting offense.

In the early days of Christianity, the churches were places where debtors and fugitive slaves could seek refuge to be protected. Later in the 5<sup>th</sup> century of the common era, laws were passed to protect the right of churches to protect fugitives. This tradition, with its variations continued well into the Middle Ages.

Closer to our time, you can see another example of Sanctuary on the Black Heritage Trail in Boston. Lewis Hayden (born in 1811 in Kentucky), escaped with his family from slavery and after spending time in Canada and New Bedford, he settled in Beacon Hill. Lewis eventually offered Sanctuary in his house to fugitive slaves. He helped protect more than 100 people escaping slavery and he also delivered a strong message for any slave catcher coming close to his house:

*“You can leave here in Peace or leave in pieces”*

Today millions of people around the world seek refuge. Whether as refugees or crossing borders, or overstaying their visas. They are doing so

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for many reasons: drought, lack of economic opportunity, discrimination, oppression, war, cartel and gang violence, etc. Our world has a problem managing the flow of people seeking better lives. The crackdown on undocumented immigrants and putting limits on who can come to our country as refugees is unfortunately not unique to the U.S. Many countries around the world, including Israel, deport undocumented immigrants as a standard practice.

In the U.S., there are 500 cities and jurisdictions who have declared themselves Sanctuary cities. A Sanctuary City is not a legal term, it merely means that the city, town or jurisdiction has put policies into place to limit cooperation with federal immigration efforts. In 2017 alone, more than 36 new Sanctuary cities have been added to the list and the expectation is that many more will be added, THANKS TO INCREDIBLE ORGANIZING EFFORTS BY DIRECTLY AFFECTED COMMUNITIES AND ALLIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

However, many states, encouraged by President Trump and Attorney General Jefferson Beauregard Sessions, are trying to find ways to crack down on these sanctuary cities. But they are facing **resistance**.

Churches have been very active in the modern sanctuary movement. Beginning in the 1980s when the federal government was reluctant to grant refugee status to Central Americans escaping violence, they provided Sanctuary. This was not easy. In fact, it was dangerous! Rev. John Fife of Arizona and other ministers and lay people were arrested on suspicion of harboring undocumented immigrants.

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Churches today are again at the forefront of providing Sanctuary to undocumented refugees. It is unclear exactly how many churches are currently offering sanctuary to people in fear of being deported, but there are many, including one in Cambridge. Immigration officials with a warrant can arrest undocumented immigrants regardless of whether they are at a house of worship like a church, synagogue, or mosque. Today, it might also be dangerous to provide Sanctuary. The Immigration and Nationality Act prohibits anyone from knowingly harboring an undocumented immigrant “in any place, include any building.”

The fact that the federal government can arrest someone being offered sanctuary in a faith based community doesn't mean they will do so. However, perhaps these Sanctuaries need protection and support from other congregations in their communities. Up until now immigration officials have not arrested anyone being offered sanctuary in a faith based community. But these days, we do not know what to expect, things might change.

The idea of supporting churches offering Sanctuary is beginning to take hold as synagogues are beginning to organize clusters of faith based communities willing to offer financial and other support to churches offering sanctuary. Temple Emunah might need to consider at some point being in such cluster to support a nearby church that is willing to provide Sanctuary.

So regardless of the reason, or the countries they are coming from or arriving to, the question we can ask ourselves, is what should our

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responsibility and obligation be towards welcoming people seeking refuge? Do we have a special responsibility as Jews to welcome strangers? Should we have a role in supporting the modern Sanctuary Movement?

We believe we do. Many of us have parents who had to flee Europe before and during World War II, or had to flee the Middle East after the creation of the State of Israel. We know that thanks to others, many of our relatives survived.

The *parashah* today forces us to think about Cities of Refuge and modern-day Sanctuaries and our connection as Jews to the plight of people seeking not only better lives, but in most instances just protecting their lives. Whether refugees, asylum seekers, or undocumented immigrants, they all deserve our attention and support.