

Brexit, Trump, and Walled Cities

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Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara

The day after tomorrow, early Sunday morning, I will be flying to England to join Marian, who has already been there for the past week and a half. We have many family members there: Marian's mother, her sister, two nieces, and also our son-in-law's parents and grandparents. Today they are all in a state of complete and utter shock from the results of yesterday's referendum in which the people of the UK voted to leave the European Union.

Facebook postings from our various British family members have ranged from "perhaps we need a benign dictator; democracy has failed us!" to "I'm cleaning all my windows to vent my frustration over this vote" to a colorful one-word expletive.

The people of Great Britain voted yesterday to firm up the border around their island nation. Seeking to restore a lost feeling of British independence and identity, the vote to leave Europe was a vote to limit immigration and to limit the free flow of business and jobs. If the UK were not already an island, separated from Europe by the English Channel, the exit from Europe would undoubtedly have been joined with a demand to build a wall around the country. The appeal of the Brexit campaign to leave the European Union is deeply similar to the passionate impulse in this country to build a wall between the US and Mexico.

Not every wall is evil.

Those of you who have traveled to Israel in the past fifteen years have seen the imposing security wall that the Israelis have built between Israel proper and the occupied territories. That wall was built in response to the terror attacks of the second intifada. I think often of Rabbi David Forman, the Founder and first Executive Director of Rabbis for Human Rights, who took one of our CBB Israel groups to see the Israeli separation wall. He showed it to us and he declared that he considered the wall a tragedy, but he was grateful for it. In the years before that wall was built, he was terrified to allow his children to ride the buses in Jerusalem, for fear they would be killed in a terror attack. Buses full of passengers and coffee shops filled with customers, were being attacked on an almost daily basis. After the wall went up, the terror attacks stopped.

The Romans built Hadrian's wall, running along the border with Scotland, to protect the northern edge of their empire. The Chinese built their Great Wall. Not

all walls are evil, but it bears asking, “when do we need a wall, and what is lost by building that wall?”

In this week’s Torah portion, Moses sends twelve scouts into the Promised Land, one man from each of the twelve tribes, to scout out the land that the Israelites intend to invade. In his instructions to the scouts, he says to them: “Look at the land and the people who dwell there. Are they strong or are they weak? Are they few or many? And how is the land; is it fertile or not? And what about the cities? Do they live in open villages or in walled cities?”

Our first thought might be that Moses simply wants to start devising strategy, and needs to know whether he will be attacking vulnerable communities on the plain or well-defended cities behind walls. But the medieval commentator RaSHI reads it differently. RaSHI says: If they are dwelling out in the open, then they are strong...dwelling in the open is a sign that they confidently rely upon their own strength. But if they dwell behind walls, it is a sign that they consider themselves weak, and need walls to protect them.

We do at times need a wall; but it is a sign not of strength but of weakness. A wall reminds us of our fear.

Britain’s vote to leave Europe came from a feeling of national weakness. Israel’s wall is necessary, and I want it tall and strong. But ultimately it is a sign of Israel’s weakness and our inability to co-exist safely in any other way with the human beings on the other side of the wall. The demand for a wall between this country, the United States, and Mexico also comes from fear and a deep lack of confidence in our own economy and our ability to build and maintain strong systems of health, education and public safety.

At the very end of this Torah portion, we read a short passage that seems unrelated to the story of the spies, but which offers an alternative view of real strength. God instructs the Children of Israel to tie a knotted fringe wrapped in a thread of blue...a tzitzit...on the corners of their garments. And the purpose of the tzitzit is to serve as a visual reminder of the commandments. *“Ur’item oto uz’chartem et kol mitzvotai va’asitem otam.* When you look upon the thread of blue, you shall remember all of my commandments and shall do them. Then you will not be led astray by your own hearts or your own eyes, which lead you into disintegration. Call to mind and do all of my commandments, and be holy.”

In this passage teaching the meaning of the tzitzit...the knotted fringe on the corner of our tallit...the Torah speaks to us of an alternative to building walls. The tzitzit offers us the alternative of the *mitzvot*—a life of inner strength, of discipline, of self-mastery and a life of holiness.

This is exactly why when our children become thirteen we allow them to wear the tallit....the garment of tzitzit. I recently asked one of our upcoming bar mitzvah students why he thought that Judaism defines thirteen as the beginning of adulthood, and he said immediately: that is when you start to be able to control yourself. I think that's right. As that young man said: you **start**. I know I'm still working on it and expect to continue working on it for the rest of my life. We never completely master our impulses, but this religion teaches that the definition of adulthood is self-control, and not going wandering after every desire of our heart and everything that looks good to our eye.

The mitzvot, the commandments which Talia accepts tomorrow are a framework of responsibility, an invisible but infinitely durable structure. And so she will wear officially for the first time, the tallit. With the tzitzit on the corners. Knotted fringes constantly calling out to her to treasure and to preserve our disciplined, ethical, compassionate way of life which has lasted for four thousand years and which offers greater security than the highest and mightiest stone walls.