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The Teacup and the Chair: Time to Act
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This year, the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia added an important object to its collection: a simple, blue chair displayed prominently, where all visitors begin their visit. A chair displayed in a museum isn't so remarkable. The Smithsonian



has Archie Bunker's armchair, and the Israel Museum has some ornate *eliyahu* chairs used for baby bris ceremonies. But this chair is significant and exciting. It was thrust into a classic Talmudic debate and has given - what I think should be - the final word.

The Talmud tells of a gathering. The greatest rabbis were all together in a salon style conversation when the question was raised: which one is greater - study or action? One rabbi says action, another says study, and the group collectively agrees that study is greater only inasmuch as it leads to action.ⁱ

Two thousand years later, on a Shabbat morning this past January, another Rabbi, Charlie Cytron Walker sat with three lay people in the sanctuary of the Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas. A

man with a gun had taken them hostage. There were 11 hours of talking, conversation, and debate. Then, as the gunman grew agitated and his threats more menacing, Rabbi Cytrin Walker alerted his fellow hostages, and he acted. He threw his chair at the gunman and all four hostages ran to safety.

The initial reports echoed the headline that still sits on the website of the Dallas Morning News: "All hostages rescued from 11 hour standoff." That's not quite what happened. Law enforcement was on the scene but they did not rescue the hostages. The rabbi and some of his people had attended security trainings about what to do in when facing an active threat. They had studied and their study fueled their action. They were not rescued. They saved themselves.

That's the chair now resting in the museum, a symbol of the need to act decisively in drastic times. "*Et la'asot ladonai, heferu toratekha,*" it says in the Psalms, "It is time to act for God's sake, they have voided your Torah," (Psalms 119:126). Throughout history, Jewish sages have used that verse in times of crisis as the basis for permitting things which are otherwise forbidden.ⁱⁱ Their biblical model is Elijah the prophet who confronted 250 idolatrous priests on top of Mt. Carmel in a sacrifice duel. They all build altars, place their sacrifices and cry out to their gods. Elijah wins when God's fire shoots fire from the sky and takes up his offering. The fire shoots down again and incinerates all the enemy

priests while leaving their offerings untouched. It was forbidden to sacrifice outside the ancient temple and forbidden to join idolators in any kind of worship, but this was an emergency and Jewish law understands that desperate times call for desperate measures; decisive action.

This past year has shown us something important: you have to be prepared for the likelihood that nobody is coming to save you in your time of need. You better be ready to act decisively for yourself. But don't take Colleyville's word for it, ask Miah Cerillo, the 11 year old from Uvalde who used her dead teacher's cell phone to call 911 five times over forty minutes from inside her classroom, quietly asking the operator: "Please send the police." While 376 officers stood outside her door and around the building. Ask the people of Bucha, Ukraine. The bodies of over 450 were discovered there on April 1-2, but later analysis of satellite imagery showed dead bodies dumped in the streets as early as the first weeks of March.ⁱⁱⁱ Or ask the girls trafficked and abused by Jeffrey Epstein and his associates. In lawsuits now pending against his estate, it is becoming clear just how many people knew what Epstein was doing and did nothing. Lawyers, accountants, drivers, house staff, local officials, security, pilots - not scumbags from back alley offices but highly credentialed people from firms you know and with people you might even respect. Or just go to Philadelphia to let

the chair teach you: “*Et la’asot ladonai, heferu toratekha,*”- “It is time to act for God's sake, they have made void your Torah.”

In these most egregious cases, we find clearly identifiable perpetrators who act with malice. We focus almost entirely on these villains and their sins of commission and we are too soft on the complicit bystanders and their sins of omission. The writers of the Torah understood this. "Thou shalt not stand idly by as your neighbor bleeds," (Lev. 19: 16) is the kind of commandment you write only when you know that people are inclined to do exactly that.

The new Holocaust documentary by Ken Burns shows the terrible impact wrought by sins of omission and bystanders who stand idly by. The US government and most of the news reading population knew that the Nazis were systematically executing millions of Jews and most of them did nothing. It's actually worse than that, they sometimes collaborated with the Nazis. In her Book, *People Love Dead Jews*, Dara Horn tells the story of Varian Fry. One of only five Americans given the title "Righteous among the Nations" by Yad Vashem.^{iv} Fry went to Marseilles, France in 1940 to bring US immigration visas to 200 people in immediate danger from the Nazis. He quickly learned two things: first, the US government was not going to help him - not the consulate, not the embassy, and not the diplomats back in DC. He also learned that 200 was not enough so he improvised legal and illegal means to

help save 2,000 people. When Fry was arrested and deported home, it was, in fact, the State Department who had orchestrated his removal. These fellow Americans, people who represented the United States, called the Gestapo to coordinate Fry's arrest and removal because, officially, we were trying to stay neutral in the face of a genocide that they knew was unfolding against Jews. In the year 2000, the US Ambassador to France, Felix Rohatyn, spoke at a ceremony in Marseilles to honor Varian Fry. He blasted the State Department as exemplifying the "banality of evil." He quoted a 1940 memo from American diplomat, Samuel Breckenridge Long.^v Regarding Jews seeking to escape Europe, Long proposed, "simply advising our consuls to put every obstacle in the way, require additional evidence, and resort to administrative devices which would postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visas."^{vi} You know what happened to those who were postponed, right? Well now it's clear that all the Americans in power back then also knew: from the nameless clerks to the Secretary Hull and Roosevelt himself.

When we say that some are guilty are all responsible, we must understand that means you and me. Yom Kippur is a day for your own atonement. It is not a time to look for the guilt of others. Last week, I told you the confessional prayers are said in the voice the "WE" and not "ME" for the sake of mutual support. Another reason is to force you to

confront the possibility of your own complicity in wrongdoings that you are likely to attribute only to other people. Look again at pages 270 - 272, we confess to violence, xenophobia, conscious and unconscious harm to others. Not because we'd never do those things but because we'd likely never otherwise see it in ourselves.

Texas Governor Abbot and others have been busing migrants to DC since April. This makes us mad. You feel that it shows depravity and callousness toward humanity. You're not going to like me for saying this, but I think they've called your bluff. One year ago, 16,000 Haitian migrants were stuck in Del Rio, Texas, camped under the International Bridge with nowhere to go. City leaders called for help from anywhere: state, churches, federal government, private sector. Yes, the busing is an act of political gamesmanship, but they have a point we better consider seriously. They have said, almost literally: "Hey, DC, you're are a sanctuary city, right? You believe in the dignity of all migrants and the right to asylum. 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses,' You say? (and by the way, we have quoted that poem, more than a few times from this bima in recent years). "Great," they say, "Here you go. We'll even cover the transportation costs. Thanks for balancing the load more fairly. 16,000 Haitians suddenly trying to live with no money in a remote town of 38,000 people was a bit much to handle. And, in case

you don't follow local news from here, the alternatives to our busses are not good."

On a hot evening in San Antonio this past June, a guy heard cries for help near his work and discovered an 18-wheeler filled with migrants who'd been smuggled across the border. There were 50 dead inside and 16 others suffering so badly they couldn't move themselves from the truck.^{vii} The worst case of its kind in recent memory. The Texas Tribune reported: "Both the Biden administration and Gov. Abbott have strengthened border restrictions, keeping Trump regulations to expel many migrants immediately without asylum hearings.... As the prospect of seeking protection on the US side of the border has become more difficult, deaths have risen." In the federal fiscal year just ending, there have been 748 migrant deaths reported at that border, the highest since the UN's International Organization for Migration, began tracking the data.^{viii}

I used to take groups from Sinai to the Rio Grande Valley to help migrants at the Catholic Charities respite center. We went to towns like Del Rio and to San Antonio. We no longer need to go there to work first-hand with migrants. We are now officially overwhelmed right here at home. Yet, we have not responded so well.^{ix} Mayor Bowser declared an emergency and the city remains at odds with Federal agencies over how to deal with the arrivals. NGOs and congregations have been

critical of government responses and of each other.^x There's one respite center in Montgomery County for 50 people and a three-night maximum. A recent story in the Post told of three migrants who'd escaped violent crackdowns in Venezuela, survived the treacherous jungle passage into Central America, and avoided the gangs preying on migrants across Mexico. They'd maxxed out the respite center and were sleeping in a church doorway near Union Station before the pastor relented and gave them a place to sleep - but just for one night.

Those governors are calling our bluff and before we reflexively attack them as the sole villains, we better take a deeper look in the mirror. We should say the words a few times, with genuine intention: *Ashamnu, bagadnu, chatanu*. We are not so stiff necked as to say we are innocent and without sin. And even if we didn't sin per se, we are likely complicit in the burning of this trash fire of a world.

So, let's get Talmudic and re-open the debate. What's better: discussion and studying hypotheticals or action and making something happen. I know good people will take both sides and some might even find a middle ground of how we can value both. But give me one person with a chair in their hands, ready to run for the door and act for what's good and right, they don't even need to be a rabbi, and I'll follow them today.

Et Laasot Ladonai Haferu toratecha. It's time to act for God's sake.
 And not just on immigrants. On all of it. Let that be sealed for good in
 the book of our new year.

ⁱ Kiddushin 40b, read the sugya here: <https://www.sefaria.org/Kiddushin.40b.8?lang=bi>

ⁱⁱ <https://library.yctarah.org/files/2016/09/Et-Laasot-La-Hashem.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/04/world/europe/bucha-ukraine-bodies.html>

^{iv} <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/fry.html> (accessed 9/30/2022)

^v <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/breckinridge-long>

^{vi} <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/19/news/varian-fry-fought-us-state-dept-to-rescue-jews-in-world-war-ii.html> (accessed 9/30/2022)

^{vii} <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/06/27/bodies-18-wheeler-san-antonio-lackland/>

^{viii} <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/06/28/texas-migrant-deaths-smuggling/>

^{ix} <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/09/07/migrants-dc-buses-texas/>

^x <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/08/22/bowser-migrant-national-guard-denial/>