

Avadim Hayinu - We Were Slaves  
Rabbi Amy Josefa Ariel 2.9.21

The first un-roofed walls I knew about were Sindy and Victor's. Brick by brick, they made them, with their own hands, leaving openings for windows. Their daughter Chela was just a baby then, and Sindy wasn't yet pregnant with Maicol. Because it wasn't coffee-harvesting season in Honduras's mountains, they had time to work on their home. They didn't know how they'd afford a roof, but no matter what, they'd need walls first. They didn't know Sindy would develop a bad infection during pregnancy that would be misdiagnosed a few times before it got treated at the medical clinic many hours away from their house. I don't know if they knew they were all malnourished. They didn't know baby Maicol would get sick and need medical care, too. They did know that Victor had so far chosen not to join a caravan north.

Miguel, a former teacher of mine from Saint Louis, a would-be-but-isn't Jesuit priest, who moved permanently to live in community with folks in Honduras . . . well, to help with that roof he and I started a gofundme and called it "Love is Boss." Today, Sindy and Victor's house has a roof, Sindy received the medical care she needed, so did Maicol, the whole family has gotten groceries, we celebrated Chela's third birthday, and over the past eighteen months our fund has infused this small community in the mountains of Honduras with almost \$30,000 - a portion of that raised by Beth Jacob . . . over 160 people have sent money like prayers.

In this way, in Beth Jacob's commitment to sanctuary, we are also trying to help prevent the need for sanctuary. We are working to keep families together before they are torn apart, and we are connected with them through their stories.

Avadim Hayinu . . . "We were slaves to Pharaoh, and God freed us with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Had not the Holy One liberated our people, then we, our children, and our children's children would still be enslaved. And even if we were all wise, all people of understanding, all old and learned in Torah, it is a positive commandment on us to tell the story of the Exodus. The more one tells the story, the more they are praised."

So opens the story in our Passover Haggadah. This is how we begin the telling of how we became a people. Every year. We do not speak about the *Israelites* who were enslaved. We do not tell of our *ancestors* who were enslaved. We tell this story in the first person. It is *we* who were in Egypt. *We* who were oppressed. It is *our* tears we taste in the salt water, *our* affliction that sticks to our mouths as we chew the matzah.

We can empathize, we are reminded, with what it's like to be oppressed, to lack, to suffer by using story to travel through time and space and experience. Jewish tradition, Jewish text, the Torah itself is a balance of law and story, of halacha and aggadah, of justice and empathy. Narrative is the most powerful way we can imaginatively enter the inner world of other people.

A story is a meeting place. A dwelling place. There is sanctuary in a story.

To be sure, there are messages in our texts that are subtle, even hidden, but in glaring spotlight, 36 times in the Torah we are commanded not to oppress the stranger for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. There are a few of those times in this week's Torah portion, Mishpatim.

In the midst of a litany of laws - each of which evokes memory of a particular story - in Exodus 23:9 there is an addition to this repeated command: "You shall not oppress the stranger for you know the *"nefesh"* of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. "V'ger lo tilchatz v'atem, y'datem et nefesh hager, ki-gerim he'yitem b'erezt mitzrayim."

This word, *nefesh*, first appears in Genesis referring to non-human animals. When it comes to us, we are told that "the human became a living soul." (Genesis 2:7) "v'yehi Hadam, l'nefesh hayah." Not that this human was "given" a soul, but that this human became a soul. Our mystics have said that our bodies may in truth be the outermost expression of our souls, and that when we touch one another, it is our soul touching the soul of another. Mystic or not, our story teaches that it's not so much that we have souls, but that we are souls.

If we know the soul of the stranger, are they still a stranger?

Miguel has shared pictures with us of Sindy and Victor standing, eyes gleaming with pride, in front of the roofed-house they built. He has shared pictures of Victor's soft smile, long, dark lashes on his cheeks, head bent to kiss his newborn child. I'll never forget the image of Victor's eyes, filled with tears, as he sat on the bus waiting to go home for his murdered father's funeral.

We've never met Victor, or Sindy, or Chela, or Maicol.  
We don't know them, not really.  
But their souls . . . their souls, we do know.

Empathy is an essential element to a moral life.  
It is how we enter into one another's pain.  
It is how we affirm and recognize one another's dignity.  
It is how we ensure that our stories become sacred meeting places . . .  
Sanctuaries.