

To: Stephen Miller, Senior Advisor to the President

Dear Stephen Miller,

I was once your rabbi. When you were about nine or ten years old, your family belonged to Beth Shir Shalom in Santa Monica.

You attended our Religious School.

The actions that you now encourage President Trump to take make it obvious to me that you didn't get my/our Jewish message. I understand that you were a major contributor to the zero-tolerance policy Attorney General Jeff Session initiated to punish and deter desperate families from coming to the United States by separating children from their parents at the border. That notion is completely antithetical to everything I know about Judaism, Jewish law and Jewish values.

If I could get another chance to share with you what Judaism says about children and their families, here is what I would try to teach you today:

In Exodus 23:19 we learn, "You shall not boil a kid in it's mother's milk." Leviticus 22:28 teaches, "...no animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young". And, one more Mr.

Miller. Deuteronomy 22:6 reads, “If, along the road, you chance upon a bird’s nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young.” In the strictest interpretation of Jewish law, these commandments are taken only literally. However, Judaism never reads a biblical verse only on its most simple level. Our Attorney General and President Trump might; Judaism doesn’t.

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, commonly known by the acronym, Ramban, comments that the three commandments I mentioned do not merely focus upon the specifics about which they speak. The reason, he says, for these commandments is “to teach us the trait of mercy and that we not become cruel. Since cruelty spreads in the soul of [humanity]...” From the Jewish perspective, the parent-child relationship is sacrosanct; disrupting it is cruel.

Mr. Miller, the policy that you helped to conceive and put into practice...is cruel! What you would have learned from me is that ours is a spiritual path that is focused on one task: bringing the shattered pieces of the vessel in which the universe was born back together in both a literal and spiritual repair - a healing of transcendent influence and impact. Mr. Miller, Judaism

is a way of responding to the mundane and the unexpected, always seeking the response that is at once the most just and the most merciful. We Jews have chosen our history to be our mandate. We choose to recall and emphasize our most ancient ancestor, Abraham, as a “wondering Aramean”, i.e., a refugee, an immigrant. We choose to remember and underscore that the quintessential experience of the Jewish people is both the slavery in and the exodus from ancient Egypt. We are all refugees, Mr. Miller.

More recently, especially because the eye witnesses to the events of the Holocaust will soon all be dead, and they were children when it happened, we choose to remember that horror through the eyes of children - children like Anne Frank and her older sister Margot who died in Treblinka after they were taken away from their parents, children like those who were part of Kindertransport, sent out of Germany to Great Britain from 1938 to 1939 because their parents were already in concentration camps or they were unable to support them. These were Jewish unaccompanied minors.

Jews are an uncomfortable people. We are never satisfied with the work we have done, always tweaking, always nuancing and finding a slightly different melody, a more subtle and supple choreography for this

dance we call Life. Until the day that it is self-evident to all that we have assembled every piece of the Universe's Birth Vessel and finely tuned the mercy and justice components of our most immediate and worldwide actions, we are not done.

Honestly, Mr. Miller, you've set back the Jewish contribution to making the world spiritually whole through your arbitrary division of these desperate families at our southern border. It's not that we can't reverse what you've done. We can, we are, and we will, along with our sisters and brothers who are Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Unitarian, Jane, Native Peoples and many more. We are a Coalition of the Divinely Mandated. We answer to a moral and ethical code that comes from the core of the Universe and has many colorful and intricate manifestations. All of them speak one ultimate message of love, cooperation, understanding and rescue. And, yes, all of these spiritualities have been corrupted and prostituted by those who cloak themselves in their beauty and positivity only to perpetrate the kind of negativity, violence, malice, and brutality that you do with your actions, the same activities you would condemn in others.

Those of us who know the goals of love and peace at the foundations of all our individual spiritual paths have fought against this corruption for

millennia and we will keep doing so.

We're not going away Mr. Miller and whether you identify now as Jew is not really my concern. What is troublesome is that some of my colleagues and others are concerned about what I might have taught you when you were a member of our community. I can assure you, as I can assure them, that what I taught is a Judaism that cherishes wisdom, values honed over four millennia, wide horizons and an even wider embrace. That's what I and others taught you at Beth Shir Shalom.

Is there still time, is there still a chance that you might change your attitude? That's up to you Mr. Miller. Our sense of mandate comes from the inside out. As one beautiful commentary points out, the Oneness-that-Many Call-God "places" our commandments on our hearts. We must bring them into our hearts. I will never give up hope that you can open your heart, Mr. Miller.

In the meantime, I will act in accordance with the values that our tradition conveys, values that go beyond the superficial and time-limited expediencies of your allegiance to party and a temporal leader and I will engage against you in a מחלוקת לשם שמים, machloket l'shem shamayim , a struggle for the sake of all that is righteous, not merely what you may deem

as right, a struggle for what is simultaneously just and merciful, not merely what you may deem as necessary. The phrase machloket l'shem shamayim, this struggle for justice and mercy, has a rejoinder in our tradition. That rejoinder is the notion of סופה להתקיים, sofah l'hitkaym, that the struggle will have an “end that endures”. The kind of ends that you create Mr. Miller are about a momentary triumphant winner and a loser rendered non-functional. Your ends are built upon arbitrary executive orders or the sudden launching of a policy that has never run the rapids of the checks and balances that are the hallmark of this democracy in which we are so fortunate to live.

This is the season of apology. To get to apology, some would say that shame over a past action or actions is necessary. In fact, some even shout at others, “You should be ashamed of yourself!” That’s not something I would ever shout or demand. That’s yours, Mr. Miller. First you must own what you’ve done: you’ve permanently damaged the lives and psyches of hundreds of families and particularly thousands of children with your amoral policy. You can choose to accept responsibility for the havoc you’ve created and the wounds you’ve inflicted – or not. You can feel that you have indeed wronged these people and apologize to them – or not. You

can take some action that seeks to heal and rectify the injury you've caused – or walk away, wrapping yourself in the deflecting guise of “national security”.

Know this: regardless of whether the Trump administration decides to be accountable, we are choosing to be accountable. We believe, as Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us so precisely, “In a free society, some are guilty, all are responsible.” Because we want this society to remain free, we will continue to act. Someone needs to clean up this mess and, in concert with many others, it will be your long-suffering, uncomfortable Jewish people.

Do you know the Yiddish word mensch, Mr. Miller? In Yiddish, a mensch is a fully-constituted, human and humane being. In Hebrew it parallels to the word ish. Hillel the Elder taught us:

וּבְמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין אָנָשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לְהִיּוֹת אִישׁ

“B'makom she-ein anashim, hishtadeil l'hiyot ish”. (Avot 2:5)

In other words, “In a place where no one is acting like a mensch, be one!”

That's what we will be doing, Mr. Miller, because that's who we are. We can only hope you will decide to join us.