



Testimony Before City Council Committee on Denver Public Safety Enforcement Priorities Ordinance

by Rabbi Bernard Gerson, August 2, 2017

Good Morning:

My name is Bernard Gerson. I have served for 24 years as the Rabbi of Congregation Rodef Shalom on Denver's East Side, and more recently, for the past five years have participated as a faith leader in the Metro Denver Caucus of Together Colorado.

Although not a native of Denver, I have come to embrace this city as my home, and love the sense of safety and trust that has developed between me and my neighbors in the Winston Downs neighborhood. We watch each other's homes for suspicious activity, take care of one another when a loved one is sick, and have seen gradual turnover in the area as those who built their homes in the 1950s and 60s are selling to younger families.

Although not the most diverse neighborhood in the city, we are proud of the way in which we accept newcomers, regardless of where they might have resided beforehand.

My faith tradition makes no bones about the importance of welcoming strangers. The Book of Leviticus commands us that "When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself" (19:33-34). In our history as a people, Jews have lived in someone else's land far longer and wider than we have resided in our own homeland. And, I recall personally the immigrant experiences of my own family, who came to this country in the early 20th century, seeking safety and freedom from persecution. They were free to settle in outlying districts of the City of Boston, and planted seeds that led to their eventual integration as American citizens. The path to that identity was less intense in those days, but for as long as they awaited their naturalization ceremonies, my grandparents and great-grandparents contributed to their environs through their labor and the investment of their children. They were free to do so, and if there were any chance encounters with police, it was on terms of friendly discourse, as the latter went about their daily beats.

Today, amidst the complications of larger populations and more sophisticated avenues of assimilation, we have no less of an obligation to advocate for a law enforcement system that treats all people, immigrants and non-immigrants alike, with respect and that affords them a basic guarantee of security from wrongdoing.

It is incumbent upon us as a moral community to defend the dignity and rights of all, to believe in the possibility of rehabilitation and a fresh start in life. Once someone has completed their responsibilities in the criminal justice system, deportation should not exist as a secondary punishment. In my work of community organizing with Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and Bahai faith leaders, our lines of distinction are blurred when we get to the moral choice of community, life and liberation over isolation, violence and fear. The aggressive federal enforcement and policies targeting immigrant families threatens the public safety of all Denver residents.

Was it not the prophet Malachi who said, "Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?" Let us never forget: Bonim attem l'Hashem – we are ALL God's children.

Speaking on behalf of my brand of religion, the true meaning of what it means to be a Jew in the world is to care for God, to care for others, and to care for each other. To care enough to take a risk for God and feel responsible for the stranger and for each other. To care enough to translate our feelings into concrete acts of faith and assistance. When we care enough for God, for others, and for each other, we can overcome obstacles, reach great heights, and bring blessings into the world..

Let us not be dictated by fear that masquerades in the uniform of the federal government - especially when it forces us to question our core values as Americans.

Thank you for your consideration of these arguments, and may you be blessed in your service to this fair city by the mountains.

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