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Reflections form Rabbi Morris Allen

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Rabbi Morris Allen, Beth Jacob Congregation, Mendota Heights, MN.

As people of faith, with souls filled with the spirit of God, we understand that the only way to move forward is by affirming the past but not being paralyzed by it.

For us as Jews that truth has guided us across generations to live with a vision of hope and optimism that our tomorrows will indeed be better and more sacred than today. Nowhere is that truth more obvious and more importantly taught than in the story of migration, oppression and liberation captured in our sojourn in Egypt. A once oppressed and victimized people craft a vision and dream for a future-- a future defined by ethical behavior and responsibility. Instead of reveling in defeat and suffering as victims, we are exhorted some 36 times to never forget the heart of the stranger for we were once strangers in a strange land. Instead of becoming victims, we became a catalyst for seeking to mend a broken world and to repair that which inevitably breaks as a result of human failings but not divine plans.

As we gather today, we remember the decency and the beauty of those who came to Postville in search of a better life and opportunity, longing for nothing more than my own grandparents sought two generations ago when they left their poverty stricken homes in Russia in search of work and opportunity. We remember those whose lives were broken by a crass understanding of human dignity and by a system that sought to criminalize employees but look the other way in terms of employers. We remember the bravery of young and old who have been willing to speak of their experiences and seek justice.

Unless and until comprehensive immigration reform occurs inside this country, the tragic story of the Postville raid is repeated every day across the land: families are separated, workers are deported, and too many live in fear. This comprehensive reform must not be punitive but rather must reflect the truth that for too long business and farmers have depended on these workers for their industry, but have not assumed real responsibility for their security safety and well being. Real reform means in the case of Postville that until ethical concerns are partnered with ritual concerns in the production of kosher food, we Jews remain in part complicit for the failures of this system. Real reform means that children of immigrants are able to secure the same promise and pursue the same dreams of the classmates they sit next to in school.

Finally we must embrace reconciliation. The meaning of the story of my people is that unless we are willing to affirm the past but not be defined by it, we would have never succeeded to survive. We must engage with those who continue to harbor suspicions of immigrants, hear them and help them to understand a different story. We must seek reconciliation with those who fail to understand that the greatness of America, and indeed of humanity, is our diversity and our own uniqueness. Reconciliation in this country will come about when real remorse and responsibility are evident. Let us accept serious Comprehensive Immigration Reform as the statement of remorse on behalf of our government-- and when it is passed we must reconcile with those institutions that we have railed against. We seek reconciliation as well with the former owners and managers of agriprocessors. After justice is served and after personal remorse is evident we must help seek reconciliation for them--allowing for their rehabilitation and permitting them to move forward with renewed meaning and purpose in their own lives together with their family.

I stand here today, filled with awe in the simple courage of the workers themselves who in their own unique ways have reminded us all that human dignity must be the core value of humanity, and even as we remember events 5 years ago, we demand reform and look forward to reconciliation Hebrew phrase to close...