

The Seals We Bear

There is unique language that follows us through these sacred days. *L'shanah tovah tikateivu v'teichateimu* - May you be written and sealed for a good year. In the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, we say that "on Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed."

The Talmud imagines three books opened before God on this day. The righteous are written and sealed immediately for life. The opposite for the wicked. And then there are the rest of us, the complicated ones, the human ones, suspended between holidays and fates with the book still open.¹

It is an image so familiar that we may miss how peculiar it is. Why a book? And why a seal? In the Ancient Near East, a king pressed a signet into wax or clay and transformed a document into something authoritative. A seal conveyed "these words come from me" - they bear my identity.

Our rabbis make a bold claim about God's seal, "*Chotamo shel HaKadosh Baruch Hu emet.*" - "The seal of the Holy One is truth." The medieval commentator Rashi notices something hidden within *emet*, the Hebrew word for truth. Its letters stretch across the alphabet: alef, the beginning; mem, its middle; tav, its end.² Truth requires the whole story. Beginning. Middle. End. Where we came from. Where we stand now. Where we hope to go.

On this Rosh Hashanah, we stand amidst this open book of life, being urged towards a true rendering of our story. What stories seal us? What stories have been impressed so deeply upon our hearts that they authenticate who we are? And when the Book of Life is opened, which pages remind us what our lives are for?

There is an ancient midrash I have always loved. When our ancestors were enslaved in Egypt, Pharaoh eventually discovered something troubling about the Israelites. On Shabbat, when their labor ceased, they would gather and take out scrolls from their past and read them to one another. The Midrash imagines that these scrolls contained history, and tales of trial and redemption. Once a week, our ancestors opened stories larger than their suffering and remembered that Egypt was one chapter rather than the whole book.³ And from knowing this larger story, their spirits endured hardship.

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 16b.

² Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 55a. Rashi ad loc. connects the letters of *emet* with the beginning, middle, and end of the alphabet.

³ Shemot Rabbah 5:18-19.

And Pharaoh understood the danger. So he intensified their labor and stripped away their ability to gather and share these stories. It is a remarkable imagination of slavery. Pharaoh understood that domination requires control of more than the body. Sever a people from its story and you begin to crush its spirit. Because people who can remember a time before Pharaoh can imagine a time after Pharaoh. People who know they descend from Abraham and Sarah cannot easily be convinced that bricks and taskmasters are their destiny.

This ancient image feels especially powerful on Rosh Hashanah. Today we gather and open the scrolls. We place ourselves again inside a story older than any one of us. We inherit a book already filled with names, migrations, wounds, acts of courage, dreams fulfilled by descendants who never met the dreamers. And these stories bear the question of responsibility: What will we do with the story we have inherited?

Two hundred and fifty years ago this summer, a group of Americans wrestled with a remarkably similar question. On July 4, 1776, after approving the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress passed another resolution: "That Dr. Benjamin Franklin, Mr. John Adams, and Mr. Thomas Jefferson, be a committee, to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America." They had announced a nation. Now they needed an image capable of authenticating it. A seal. A story compressed into a symbol.

Benjamin Franklin proposed the image of Moses standing at the shore of the Red Sea, his arm extended as the waters overwhelm Pharaoh and his army. Thomas Jefferson proposed the image of the Israelites journeying in the wilderness, guided by a pillar of cloud during the day and fire at night.

In the end, it was John Adams's proposal of the eagle that was adopted, but consider what Franklin and Jefferson proposed. At the birth of the United States, when two of its founders went searching for an image capable of expressing the purpose of America, they reached for Exodus, two parts of the story of our people as refugees seeking a new home, a promised land. They imagined the origin story of our Jewish people becoming the seal, the embodied story of this great nation.

What is the truth of that story for us today?

On Yom Kippur, you will hear from me about the explosive hate we face as a people, and our call to action in this moment. But first we must remember our seal and our story.

As many of you know, I am a passionate pluralist. I believe this community is at its wisest when we gather in ideological diversity and allow our ideas to collide. I find it spiritually dangerous whenever Judaism becomes identified with a political party or reduced to a particular policy platform. We have Jewish texts that can be marshaled behind nearly every imaginable political argument. I bristle whenever someone announces, "Judaism says X," period. Judaism says X. And Y. And Z. And an entire alphabet of ideas living in sacred tension.

There is one domain, however, about which our tradition has been remarkably consistent. The most repeated commandment of Torah carries the same image of our founding fathers. "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." "You know the heart of the stranger."⁴ "There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger." Our sages counted the Torah's warnings concerning the stranger forty-six times.⁵ More than any other teaching in our tradition, ensuring we see this as fundamental and definitional to our story and seal.

We in the American Jewish community hold the legacy of multiple great waves of migration, in both legal and illegal forms, that enabled one of the strongest and most dynamic centers of Jewish life in our history. And we are heirs to an even longer story of a people searching for a Promised Land. Blocked and barred, burned and berated, we are tasked to remember an eternal obligation as strangers in a strange land.

There is much within Judaism that can support differing policies at a nation's borders. Torah understands boundaries. Jewish tradition understands the responsibilities of a sovereign community. A country has the right and responsibility to establish laws governing entry. A government has an obligation to protect its citizens. People who commit crimes should be held accountable under law.

We can argue, vigorously and Jewishly, about asylum standards, immigration quotas, and what should happen at the border. Our tradition leaves considerable room for that argument. But our source story, our people's seal, is imprinted with how we treat the person already in our midst.

Our ancient scrolls engrave into the Jewish psyche the conviction that our identity is tied to how we treat the stranger that resides with us, no matter how they entered. And that everyone, citizen and stranger alike, should be held accountable for their actions under the law.

America has been deporting people under Democratic and Republican presidents for generations. During the Clinton years, there were roughly 12 million removals and returns. Under George W. Bush, more than 10 million. Under Barack Obama, more than 5 million. During Donald Trump's first term, roughly 2 million. During the Biden administration, nearly 5 million repatriations.

These are different acts carried out under different laws in different circumstances. They make one point unmistakable: immigration enforcement and deportation belong to both political parties. The question I am raising this morning begins somewhere else.

What seal do we place upon the way power is exercised?

As Jews we know all too well what happens to a society when the language of law enforcement becomes the language of dehumanization. Official communications from our government, in media briefings and on government websites, now repeatedly describe human beings as

⁴ Exodus 22:20; 23:9; Leviticus 19:33–34; Deuteronomy 10:18–19.

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b.

"monsters," "animals," "dirtbags." And last week, the White House made the degradation playable: an official government video game on the White House website now invites Americans to chase and deport pixelated migrants for fun.⁶ When our elected officials turn the removal of human beings into entertainment, something more sinister is being broadcast. Justice does not require us to surrender the vocabulary of humanity.

By this summer, Reuters reported that more than fifty people had died in ICE custody since January 2025, while at least seven people had been fatally shot during immigration enforcement operations – the highest in more than a generation.⁷ Each death has its own cause. Each encounter deserves its own investigation. Taken together, however, they tell us something about the magnitude of what is happening. And these detention centers are filled far beyond the population of violent criminals invoked in so much of our public rhetoric. As of this July, more than 70 percent of people in immigration detention had no criminal conviction; children had been held for months beyond the longstanding twenty-day limit, and elderly people with no criminal history had been swept into custody as well. Far more than the question of who do we deport, this growing pattern asks what we are permitting ourselves to become in the process.

During just the first nine months of 2025, more than 170 American citizens were held against their will by immigration agents, including nearly twenty children.⁸ Congressional investigators heard Americans describe being dragged from cars, subjected to brutal force, and denied medical care.⁹ Children who are American citizens under the age of 7 were deported to foreign countries.

Chotamo shel HaKadosh Baruch Hu emet. The seal of God is truth. Truth demands distinctions. An asylum seeker and a murderer are different human stories. A child and a violent criminal are different human stories. A person who entered illegally remains a person. Our obligation to truth forbids us from allowing the word "immigrant" to erase all other words.

And our American Jewish story testifies to the stakes of remembering this.

Emma Lazarus, the Jewish American poet and activist, wrote “the New Colossus” in 1885. In 1903, lines from the sonnet were placed on a bronze plaque at the Statue of Liberty:

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she

⁶ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/arcade/rio-run/>

⁷ Ted Hesson, Kristina Cooke, and Maria Tsvetkova, “Death Rate in ICE Immigrant Detention Centers More Than Doubles Under Trump, Reuters Analysis Finds,” Reuters, June 17, 2026. Reuters identified 50 deaths in immigration detention since January 2025 and calculated that the death rate had risen from approximately one death per 3,848 detainees annually during 2009–2024 to approximately one per 1,630 under the second Trump administration through early June 2026.

⁸ Nicole Foy, “We Found That More Than 170 U.S. Citizens Have Been Held by Immigration Agents. They’ve Been Kicked, Dragged and Detained for Days,” ProPublica, October 16, 2025. Foy’s investigation identified more than 170 citizens held during the first nine months of the administration, nearly twenty children, and more than twenty citizens who said they were held for more than a day without access to family or counsel. Importantly, ProPublica says its count is almost certainly incomplete because the federal government does not track such detentions.

⁹ Nicole Foy, “Immigration Agents Have Often Grabbed and Mistreated Citizens, Congressional Investigators Find,” ProPublica, December 9, 2025, reporting on the investigation conducted by Senate Democrats.

With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"¹⁰

Horace Kallen, the American philosopher and first Jew to ever teach at Princeton University, published in 1915 the vision of America as a haven of cultural pluralism. He hailed America's ability to embrace immigrants as the single most important strength of our country: for the multitudes to join together as a symphony, "a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind."¹¹

Oscar Handlin, the legendary American historian and one of the first Jews to secure a full professorship at Harvard, published his Pulitzer-prize winning book *Uprooted* in 1951. There he wrote, "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history."¹²

And this story is written directly into Rodeph Sholom. Our original charter in 1842 included among the purposes of this congregation the responsibility to assist new immigrants. Nearly ninety years ago, as people fled countries increasingly hostile to their lives and futures, Rodeph Sholom went even further. We operated a Refugee School here in this building.

Within these walls, people uprooted from home came looking for a foothold. This congregation helped refugees acquire the tools they needed to begin again in America, to navigate a new language and society, to find support and integration, to transform arrival into belonging. We again heeded this call a decade ago as we joined in the work of resettling refugees here in New York City. That is written in Rodeph Sholom's Book of Life.

Those are among the seals of this congregation. Because congregations also inherit stories that make claims upon them. We inherit decisions made by people who once stood where we stand and asked: What does Judaism require of us in our moment? Their answers became actions, their actions became stories, their stories become part of our seal.

And this year, in honor of the 250th anniversary of our nation, we are going to open those pages even wider. Rodeph Sholom is partnering with the Tenement Museum through its extraordinary project *Your Story, Our Story*.

¹⁰ Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," November 2, 1883; U.S. National Park Service, Statue of Liberty National Monument, "The New Colossus" and "Emma Lazarus." The poem was composed for the Art Loan Fund Exhibition in Aid of the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund; a bronze plaque bearing its words was installed in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903.

¹¹ Horace M. Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot: A Study of American Nationality," *The Nation* 100 (February 18 and 25, 1915): 190–94, 217–20, esp. 220. Kallen imagines American civilization as "a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind."

¹² Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 3.

The idea begins with something deceptively simple - an object, a symbol, a seal of our families. Something that appears ordinary until someone tells you what it survived.

The Tenement Museum invites people to preserve the stories of immigration, migration, and cultural identity carried by such objects and traditions, so that individual memory can become part of our collective American archive. In the coming days, we will invite you to contribute the stories of your own families. We will create opportunities as a congregation to encounter these stories together, to bear witness to the courage and resilience carried into this community through generations.

These stories are our inheritance, carrying the blessings we enjoy today, and the responsibilities we bear as well. Memory is our ethical technology. We remember so that yesterday can shape what we do with today.

And so perhaps the Book of Life we imagine today has more than one author. We ask God to write us into it. Yet we have inherited pages written before our birth. For some blessed span of years, the pen also rests in our hands. And eventually someone else will turn the page and discover what we wrote.

What will they learn about us? Did the people who inherited the story of Exodus recognize the humanity of the stranger? Did the congregation that once opened a Refugee School remember why? Did we preserve the stories entrusted to us? Did we add a worthy chapter?

The measure of our spirit is made not in moments of ease, but in our moments of greatest fragility. When, tempest-tost we recall our people fleeing Spain, Poland, Morocco, Iran, the Soviet Union, Egypt. When we return to the ancient scrolls of our ancestors and see the opportunity wrought out of bitter adversity. When we can hear God's voice reminding us of place and purpose. Defined not by politics but by our capacity to hold humanity.

The Song of Songs offers one final image: "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death."¹³ A seal upon the heart, and a seal upon the arm. Memory impressed within us, and responsibility expressed through us.

Let the stories of our families become seals upon our hearts. Let the story of our people orient us toward purpose. Let the unfinished story of this extraordinary nation summon us to make its promise ever more real. Let the story of this congregation remind us that those who came before us once stood in an uncertain world, opened their ancient scrolls, remembered who they were, and chose what they would build.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written. On Yom Kippur it is sealed. May we be written and sealed for life. May the seal of our great nation, the seal of our people, the seal of our congregation impress upon us our place.

¹³ Song of Songs 8:6

Now the book is open before us. The next page is ours.