

## A Brief History of Sanctuary

The Sanctuary Movement began in response to a surge of refugees from Latin America seeking asylum in the U.S. in the 1980s. Facing an unwelcoming federal government, faith leaders and groups began to organize and act on their own. In 1982, the first of what would become more than 500 congregations declared itself a public sanctuary—Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. By April, 1987, this number would include at least 60 synagogues. The movement eventually succeeded in changing U.S. asylum law so it did not discriminate against Latin Americans.

The movement waned but never really died out and reemerged in 2007 as the New Sanctuary Movement. Under the Obama administration, pressure from the movement secured policies on prosecutorial discretion and protections such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that mitigated the effects of deportations. In 2014, the first people since the 1980s went into public sanctuary, in part due to increased policing in Arizona under Sheriff Joe Arpaio.<sup>1</sup> Despite some victories for immigrant communities and their allies, the Obama administration presided over the removal of some five million undocumented immigrants, a number comparable to the George W. Bush administration and unprecedented before the 21st century.<sup>2</sup>

It is also crucial to note that 2007 was the last year with a significant influx of undocumented immigrants into the U.S.<sup>3</sup> Since then, most years have seen a net departure of immigrants. Many low-wage jobs traditionally held by migrant workers have shifted to temporary guestworker programs.<sup>4</sup>

With President Trump's moves to cancel protections and step up deportations, the New Sanctuary Movement is once again stepping up to the plate to protect immigrants and their families, counter xenophobic and false messaging, and advance the cause of a multicultural America. As of January 2019, more than 1,100 faith communities have declared themselves part of the New Sanctuary Movement.<sup>5</sup>

The makeup of the immigrant population has also changed. In the 1980s, most of those seeking sanctuary were recent arrivals with little to no resources or connections in this country. They also faced an imminent threat of persecution and death if they were deported, so taking sanctuary inside a church made sense for them. In contrast, today's undocumented immigrants have often lived in the U.S. for years, even decades. They have homes, jobs, families, communities. Displacement from the lives they have built here is therefore one of their main concerns, though many may also face a threat of violence upon their return to their countries of origin. Physical sanctuary often will not make sense, except as a last resort. The movement and its strategies are evolving, led by the people who need sanctuary most.

The Sanctuary Movement in part draws inspiration from the abolitionists of the 18th and 19th centuries and the Underground Railroad. They believed the law of the land—slavery—was profoundly immoral, and they were willing to violate the law in order to rescue individual people who suffered under it. Their ultimate goal, though, was not just to bring a given slave to freedom but to change law and culture so that slavery would forever be abolished. So, too, the Sanctuary movement seeks to protect individual immigrants while pushing for a wholesale change in American policies and attitudes.

- 1 <http://www.thedailybeast.com/this-church-is-reviving-the-sanctuary-movement-to-shelter-undocumented-immigrants-from-deportation>  
<https://www.thenation.com/article/inside-new-sanctuary-movement-thats-protecting-immigrants-ice/>
- 2 Definitions and record-keeping practices changed towards the end of the George W. Bush administration and continued under Obama, making a precise comparison complicated. See <http://www.snopes.com/obama-deported-more-people/>
- 3 <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-02-21/the-myth-of-the-u-s-immigration-crisis>
- 4 [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2914424](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2914424)
- 5 <http://www.sanctuarynotdeportation.org/>



# Jewish Involvement in the Sanctuary Movement

Though the Sanctuary Movement began in the church and included mostly Christian communities, Jews have been involved almost from the very beginning. Temple Emanu-El B'nei Jeshurun of Milwaukee, WI, was the first synagogue whose board approved a resolution involving the synagogue in legal sanctuary activities, in February 1983.<sup>1</sup> In 1984 the Rabbinical Assembly (the Conservative movement's rabbinical association) passed a resolution supporting sanctuary<sup>2</sup>; the Reform<sup>3</sup> and Reconstructionist<sup>4</sup> movements (CCAR and RRA, respectively) did the same in 1985.

When leaders of the Sanctuary Movement began talking about holding a symposium in 1985, which ultimately became the First Inter-American Symposium on Sanctuary, Temple Emanu-El of Tucson hosted it. About 1,300 people participated, including Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, who was a keynote speaker.<sup>5</sup>

In April 2017 T'ruah began mobilizing Jewish communities to join the New Sanctuary Movement in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election. More than 70 synagogues are members of the Mikdash Sanctuary Network, and as of this writing T'ruah has trained over 500 Jewish clergy and lay leaders who are interested in contributing to the movement. In April 2017, the Union for Reform Judaism passed a resolution endorsing the movement<sup>6</sup>, and the Rabbinical Assembly included a reference to it in a larger resolution<sup>7</sup>.

1 *Providing Sanctuary: The Jewish Role*. By Sarah Goldstein and Glenn Stein; edited by Rabbi David Saperstein. UAHC; 1987. Digital copy available upon request from T'ruah.

2 [http://www.truah.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/RA\\_res\\_Central\\_American\\_Refugees\\_1984.pdf](http://www.truah.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/RA_res_Central_American_Refugees_1984.pdf)

3 <http://www.urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/refugees-and-sanctuary>

4 <http://www.truah.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/RRA-sanctuary-res-1985.pdf>

5 Read more about the symposium in the preface to *Sanctuary: A Resource Guide for Understanding and Participating in the Central American Refugees' Struggle*, 1985, online at <http://www.sanctuaryweb.com/Portals/0/2017%20PDFs/Sanctuary%20Movement/1985%20Sanctuary%20A%20Resource%20Guide.pdf>

6 <https://thinkprogress.org/nations-largest-jewish-denomination-encourages-congregations-to-protect-undocumented-immigrants-da309634624a>

7 <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/resolution-immigration-united-states>

## TALMUD SHABBAT 127A

Rabbi Yochanan taught: Hospitality is as important as Torah study, for [the Mishnah used the same phrasing], "Because of guests" and "Because of the cancelling of Torah study." Rav Dimi of Neharde'a taught: Hospitality is more important than Torah study, because [the Mishnah first] said "Because of guests" and then later said "Because of the cancelling of Torah study." Rav Yehudah taught in the name of Rav: Hospitality is more important than receiving the Divine Presence, for Abraham interrupted his visit with God (Gen. 18:3) to greet guests.

"This isn't about politics, or the First Amendment. This is about our faith. We felt that based on our own history, as immigrants, as refugees, as survivors of the Holocaust, it would be sinful for us to remain silent. We understand what the risks are, but the risk of not acting is much more perilous."

— RABBI MONA ALFI, CONGREGATION B'NAI ISRAEL, SACRAMENTO, CALIF., ON HER CONGREGATION BECOMING A SANCTUARY SYNAGOGUE; MAY, 2017.

