

Editorial

How to say it?

It used to be that we writers and editors at Jewish newspapers knew what we could say.

We did not use profanity.

We did not use contractions, we did not use slang, we did not use nicknames. We wrote everything out in very long form. We wrote in the third person. (If we could have, we would have written in the 93rd person.) We were pompous, perhaps even ponderous, but we also were polite. Very very polite.

Things have changed. We use contractions. We use slang. We use short sentences. We write in the first person singular (even though here I'm writing in the first person plural – but whoops!). We try not to be pompous. We try not to be ponderous. We might not always succeed, but we try.

Despite all that, we do hope that we're still polite.

But how are we supposed to report on the world around us?

Yes, this part is about our president.

How do we report on what he said? What do our readers want? We could use asterisks to replace some of the letters in the four-letter word he used, or we could call it the place that a barnyard epithet could fall into (or, in the alternative version, the place where the barnyard epithet lives).

We're a weekly, so we know that all our readers and all their reading-age children will have read the unvarnished, un-asterisked, un-gussied-up version of what he said, so in some senses our decision matters less. It's the daily media, the up-to-the-second online news sources, that really have to worry about that decision. And it's the on-air reporters and podcasters who have to figure out exactly what to say.

So really we could skip it.

But there is something that we really do have to say. That is that our ancestors – our parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents – came from those s-hole places. They came from obscure villages in the Pale of Settlement, in central and eastern Europe, where life was hard and it coarsened the people who lived there (and yes, Jews could be coarse too).

You look at pictures of some of the Jews

of eastern Europe, and you see dirt and desperation. You look at their eyes and you see the same despair that you see now in the unwanted immigrants from Africa; fear and hope fighting hard with each other.

When they got here, they were not welcome. They were among the unwanted who were told dismissively not to bother applying for jobs.

They often brought children with them – those were our parents or grandparents or great-grandparents – who were too young to remember much about the old country, too young to have any choice in where they were taken. Those children grew up to be citizens of the United States. They were the Dreamers of their day, and we should not forget that.

They were the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to be free that the Statue of Liberty welcomes with her lamp.

Had they been sent back, many of us would not be here. That is a simple and incontrovertible truth.

We also think of the irony that it was not one of those s-hole countries that created and carried out the Shoah. No, it was a clean, efficient, well-educated, thoroughly modern state. Germans were welcome here.

It is the immigrants from poor countries, who come here fueled with desperation and hope, who are determined to make their way here, to learn and to earn, and have good lives, or at least give good lives to their children – immigrants like our ancestors – who have succeeded here, and who have given birth to us. It is something we owe them to remember.

Here at the Jewish Standard we try not to be political – it is far too divisive – and we will continue that attempt. We know that the immigration laws need a great deal of revamping. But we look at the attempt to turn away the immigrants who need us, who are drawn by this country's promise, by its founding ideals, who might not resemble our ancestors physically but who have the same ambitions, needs, goals, and dreams as they had, and we hope that they are allowed to enter and then to stay in this golden, golden land.

Editorial

Ban assault weapons

I cannot know what the parents of the 15 students or two teachers killed at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School are feeling now.

But the parents of the 20 children and six staff members killed at Sandy Hook in 2012 do.

And so do the parents of students killed at other, smaller-scale school shootings, and of victims at malls and movie theaters and nightclubs.

But I do know what it feels like to be the parent of a dead child and dear readers, I desperately hope that none of you ever has to know what I know. Ever.

Let me tell you just a little of what it feels like, although of course words fail. It is black misery. It is being at the bottom of an airless, lightless, slime-lined hole, where you feel that you never will be able to breathe again, never will be able to see again, never will be clean again, and you can't imagine ever caring about any of those things again.

It is a feeling of utter hopelessness, of complete despair, of the certain knowledge that nothing you've ever believed was true, that even the most solid ground you've ever walked on was an illusion, and that hell, the black slime pit, was just beneath it all along, waiting for you.

And then that feeling sometimes turns into red-hot, blue-hot, melting rage.

But my daughter, my beloved Shira, died by accident, at the hands of a careless driver on a confusing traffic circle. No one wanted her dead.

My husband and I know that we don't feel what parents of children dead of disease or substance abuse or suicide feel. Each of us has our own special and specific and distinct hell.

But the deaths of children slaughtered by someone who wanted them dead? And not even dead for themselves, because of who they were, but as bit players in their killers' own horrific psychodramas? As real-life Rosencranzes and Guildensterns?

It is unthinkable.

There is one advantage that those parents have, however. They can take their rage and aim it. There is a real target. They, like the extraordinary student survivors whose outrage has encouraged us all, can work toward change.

They all can work to rid this country of the scourge of assault weapons.

Yes, everyone says it can't be done – but no, actually, it used to be that everyone said that it can't be done. There seems, finally, to be some movement on the issue, although it easily could stall out and certainly it is not worth the price those murdered students and teachers and their families and friends have to pay for it.

Second Amendment, Second Amendment, Second Amendment, we are told, as if the Second Amendment to the Constitution, which reads, in its entirety, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed,” leads inexorably to the bloody slaughter of innocents. And really, what can we do? It's in the Constitution!

But the demand that 18th century Americans have the right to keep and bear arms in order to assure the health of a well regulated militia seems not to have much to do with the right of a deranged 19-year-old to burst into his old school – from which he'd been expelled because he was frightening, and because the school had no good way to deal with him, because we haven't devoted many resources to figuring out how to handle lost, damaged, dangerous people like this one – and kill anyone he saw.

The Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791, into a world without assault weapons.

It is safe to say that the Founding Fathers never imagined what their words would be twisted to allow.

We as Jews are familiar with the idea of halacha as coming from Torah laws, but as having been changed and adapted, often almost beyond easy recognition, to fit the circumstances in which the Jews who lived by them found themselves. To use just an obvious example, the path from not cooking a kid in its mother's milk to the elaborate rules governing kashrut is circuitous, although the goal – to fulfill God's law by eating in a way that accepts that everything we eat comes from somewhere, and that we take the life we need to allow ours to continue comes at a real cost, and must be done with respect and intent – is clear.

The Constitution and Bill of Rights, similarly, underlie all our laws, at least in theory, but without the idea that there is some guiding divine will behind them.

To have allowed the Second Amendment to warp into being seen as the right to keep and bear assault weapons seems to contradict the Declaration of Independence's demand that each of us Americans is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Tell that to the bereaved parents, whose ability to pursue happiness ended when their children's right to life was ended.

This is not what our Founding Fathers intended.

Editorial

Taking children from their parents

I've been thinking about the Kindertransport a lot lately.

In 2013 I interviewed Sig Silber of Paterson, who then was a successful, well-rooted, and happy patent attorney with an engineering degree from MIT, a thriving family, and a flourishing legal practice in Clifton.

He also was a man whose mother had put him, his older brother, and their baby sister on the Kindertransport. He never saw his mother again; he and his siblings battled the trauma of that separation for all of their lives. Mr. Silber's struggles seem to have been successful, but he was quite clear about the toll they took on him, about how that separation from his mother, and the other separations over the course of the next decade that took him from home to home as the needs of the people caring for him and the bureaucracies that lost and then found him changed him, made it harder and harder for him to attach to new people.

He stayed in Paterson long after he could have left, and everyone like him socioeconomically had left, he told me, because that's where he ended up in this country, and "I wanted to put down roots."

He was one of the very lucky ones. His sister, who had been seven months old when her mother had to give her up, never flourished, and died young.

That's not surprising. The kind of trauma that comes from the separation from a parent can actively reroute a young person's brain, scientists warn us.

I've often imagined what it must have felt like for parents who had to put their children on the Kindertransport, but then I make myself stop. It's not possible to imagine that level of fear and pain, and if it were possible it would be devastating.

We are so very lucky not to have to imagine that.

But the parents who are bringing their children up to the United States'

southern border don't have to imagine it either, because they are living it.

I know that we need immigration policies. We can't let everyone in. But I also know that most, by far most, of the people who come to our southern border are looking to escape the violence and fear and degrading poverty of their lives. They are not at all unlike our ancestors; all were drawn by the vision of the Lady in the harbor, with her torch shining on them. They were drawn by our talk of life and hope and prosperity and vast open spaces. Of amber waves of grain.

There are other questions about immigration, even if they pale in comparison to what we're doing with parents and children.

We need immigrants.

As much as we (we not being all of us, needless to say) talk about how immigrants take Americans' jobs, unemployment is low now, and the jobs immigrants take are the ones Americans don't want. They're day laborers. They're the guys on bikes with big bags of food, most visible when it's roasting hot or pouring rain and their lucky customers don't want to go out, so they do. They're the people who kill cows and then butcher them. (Remember Aaron Rubashkin, the Agriprocessors owner whose sentence President Trump commuted? His slaughterhouse, in Iowa – not exactly right over the border – employed many undocumented foreign workers. That's because almost no Americans want to work in such places – and the ones who do, the ones who want to kill, are the ones we really have to look out for.)

At this point, there is neither courage nor novelty in speaking out against the remarkably cruel and profoundly un-Jewish policy that has American immigrant officials taking children away from their parents. But until that practice is ended, every single one of us who has a voice must raise it. **-JP**