

"Caligula's Heirs": On CECOT and Christian Nationalism

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In his book *Living the Letters*, Rabbi Michael Marmur shares a cryptic midrash:

"A man brought two ships, tied them to anchors and iron weights, stationed them in the middle of the sea, and built a palace upon them. As long as the two ships are tied together, the palace stands firm. Once the ships are separated, the palace cannot stand."¹

Rabbi Marmur sees this midrash as "a reflection on political life."² The palace represents the state. The two ships on which it stands signify the foundations of a civilized society: law and core values.

The point is simple and terrifying: When a community's laws are detached from its core values, the palace collapses.

Marmur says this midrash was almost surely inspired by the notorious Roman emperor Caligula, who once ordered a pontoon bridge like this built so he could ride his horse across it wearing the armor of Alexander the Great.

In addition to his flamboyance, Caligula is remembered by history for his extreme cruelty.

I thought of him a couple weeks ago when I watched the unauthorized 60 Minutes story about the U.S. government sending Latino migrants to the notoriously abusive CECOT prison in El Salvador.

Thanks to internal miscommunication at CBS, millions of people saw the contraband story online, and what it reveals is deeply disturbing.

We see prisoners chained together, led around by batons across their necks and forced to sit on their knees. The prison warden proudly showcases the inhumane conditions, acknowledging that the lights are kept on 24 hours a day to deprive the men of sleep and sanity. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem speaks on camera inside the prison, with dozens of inmates behind her, thanking El Salvador for letting us send them there.

The cruelty is chilling, and yet tragically consistent with what we've seen from ICE and the bravado with which our leaders speak about the human beings they're deporting.

Witness the statement by White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt: "These are heinous monsters," she declared. "Rapists, murderers, kidnappers, sexual assaulters, predators, who have no right to be in this country, and they must be held accountable."³

Human Rights Watch and other investigators dispute those claims, but let's assume for the moment that she's right about these men.

The United States has immigration laws, and it has the duty to enforce them. But does enforcement have to mean sending these people to suffer lifelong torture in a place that proudly calls itself "hell on earth"?

As the midrash teaches, a civilized society's laws must be bound to its core values.

Whatever our politics, we should all be able to agree that condemning human beings—even criminals—to such unimaginable cruelty violates American values.

Those who implement and celebrate this policy are, to borrow Rabbi Marmur's words, "Caligula's heirs."⁴ Their behavior is "an offense against decency."⁵

One factor that might explain it is a political ideology known as "Christian nationalism," which some prominent officials today explicitly affirm.

In their book *The Flag and the Cross*, sociologists Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry show that Christian nationalism holds "a particular understanding of freedom, order, and violence with deep roots in American history." It's a hierarchical view of society, with white men at the top.

"The general principle," they say, "is this: White men must sometimes exercise righteous violence to defend (their) freedom and maintain social (and racial) order. It is freedom for 'us' and authoritarian social order for 'them.'"⁶

Journalist Tim Alberta, who has written extensively about Christian nationalism, quotes a churchgoer who complains about illegal immigrants streaming across the border. "'They're spreading all over the country, and they're carrying all kinds of diseases, and they're being moved under the cover of night,' she said."⁷

Researchers find that the more strongly people identify with Christian nationalism, the more they tend to believe that "illegal immigrants from Mexico are mostly dangerous criminals," that "refugees [are] potential terrorists," and that "American birth, American ancestry, ability to speak English, or lifelong residence are 'very important' for being 'truly American.'"

And, perhaps not surprisingly, the more they identify with Christian nationalism, the more they "view [...] Jews as a threat."⁸ (More on that in another sermon.)

Parashat Vay'chi begins with the Hebrew word meaning "to live." Caligula's heirs speak endlessly about "Christian values," but if we don't re-tether our laws to core values like "love your neighbor as yourself" and "do unto others as you would have done to you," the society we imagine ourselves to be will not live very long. And I'm not optimistic about what might emerge in its place.

As citizens who care about decency and dignity, may we do our part to repel the sadism and cruelty that's taken hold of our country.

1 Sifrei Devarim 346, translated and quoted by Micahel Marmur, *Living the Letters* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2025), 108.

2 Ibid.

3 Leavitt made this statement from the podium in The White House briefing room. Video of her statement is included in the 60 Minutes story.

4 Ibid., 116

5 Ibid., 115

6 Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry, *The Flag and the Cross* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 7.

7 Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory* (Harper, 2023), 151.

8 Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back for God* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 117.