

## I. MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT LARA PUTNAM



Dear friends,

A calendar year is drawing to a close, celebrations at hand. An electoral cycle has concluded with loud enthusiasm. Through it all beats—for me—the stark and steady drum of failure.

This summer I was asked by the United Steelworkers to give a talk to union leaders on Central American migration. As the family separation crisis engineered by the Trump administration burgeoned, drawing renewed attention to the border and those who seek to cross it, the topic became even more timely. To frame my words for a public audience I dived into recent opinion polls, something I realized I should do more often.

For the numbers I found were chilling. They captured the pervasive acceptance of a series of claims any scholar of Central American migration knows to be not just wrong, but egregiously distorted.

Readers of this newsletter do not need to be told that MS-13 is a criminal network anchored in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, born of El Salvador's civil war and the fraught Los Angeles streets its refugees were thrust into, whose US presence numbers 10,000 at most. You know, too, that the violence enacted by MS-13 is directed almost exclusively at fellow Central Americans: most of all, within those home countries; secondarily, among migrants traversing Mexico; finally, in small but tragic numbers, in the victimization of Central American immigrants or their children in a handful of US counties (Suffolk County, New York; Fairfax County, Virginia; Montgomery County, Maryland). Highest estimates claim that several dozen deaths annually within the US may be linked to MS-13: far fewer than the number of Americans killed by lightning, for instance, every year.<sup>1</sup>

Yet in July 2018, fully 51% of Americans who had voted for Donald Trump described themselves as either "somewhat" or "a great deal" worried that a member of their own family would fall victim to

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<sup>1</sup> [www.propublica.org/article/ms-13-immigration-facts-what-trump-administration-gets-wrong](http://www.propublica.org/article/ms-13-immigration-facts-what-trump-administration-gets-wrong) ; [www.nytimes.com/2018/11/09/opinion/trump-caravan-migrants-criminals.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/09/opinion/trump-caravan-migrants-criminals.html)

MS 13. Fully 41% of registered Republicans believed MS 13 posed a "somewhat serious" or "very serious" threat to their local community.<sup>2</sup>

Again, these numbers are from polling in July. False fears were this high even before October arrived and a whole swathe of politicians and media allies chose to make the supposed threat of a "caravan" of asylum seekers a thousand miles away the focus of closing campaign pitches. Claims linking Jewish philanthropist George Soros to what the US president loudly labelled, at rally after rally, an "invasion" became ever more prominent in campaign ads and cable news as the month wore on.

In mid-October, my congregation joined others nationwide celebrating a "National Refugee Shabbat," part of a Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) initiative highlighting our obligation as Jews to step forward for those fleeing persecution and violence.

On Saturday morning, October 27, my daughter's best friend called. There's an active shooter at the synagogue, she said. Don't leave the house.

"HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people," Robert Bowers had posted on Gab not long before, we would learn. "I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in."

Investigators say he carried an AR-15 assault rifle and three handguns.

Two people were shot in the hallway where my six-year-old hugs her Hebrew School teacher goodbye every week. Half a dozen more in the blue stained-glass chapel steps away. Eleven lives ended; others shattered by injury, terror. Grief.

Teaching about Latin America is what I do: have I done enough? We give public lectures, we write op eds. We show up in class every day with passion to share accurate information about the Americas' complicated and conjoined past. Yet basic facts are being drowned by fearmongering and distortions, not in some hidden corner of the internet but in plain sight on cable news and rally stages and twitter feeds.

What now?

In solidarity,  
Lara

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<sup>2</sup> [big.assets.huffingtonpost.com/athena/files/2018/07/13/5b48edece4b0bc69a7870876.pdf](https://big.assets.huffingtonpost.com/athena/files/2018/07/13/5b48edece4b0bc69a7870876.pdf)