

The Immigrant Experience as Jewish Paradigm

One of defining features of the American Jewish experience is a shared, collective realization that all of us come from somewhere else. For some, the connection to the generation of immigration is more distant. For others it is a personal story, a memory shared of displacement and strangeness in a new land. American Jews are united, however, in knowing that we are from another place.

If you want to understand the diversity of Jewish life, just start talking to people. One of our congregants was born in Amsterdam. In May 1940, when he was 12-years old, his parents were on a business and pleasure trip to Paris. That week the Nazis invaded Holland, precluding any possibility of their return to Holland. They fled across the Pyrenees into Spain, but their son and daughters they had to leave behind. Only by dint of personal connections did that young Jewish man eventually take a train to Nazi Berlin, then to Rome, on to Portugal and eventually, many months later, making it to New York. In the intervening time his father died. I recently met someone who lived in Iran as a young man. When he joined the army in 1978 he served under the Shah. 18 months later, after the Islamic Revolution, he finished his army service under the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, and was lucky enough to be smuggled out with the clothes on his back. Jews were being accused of being Zionists," he told me. "Some were roughed up. Others had their businesses taken from them. Some were killed. I was lucky to get out." My *machatunem* (my son-in-law's father) was born in Tripoli, Libya to a well-to-do and well-connected Jewish family. Many Jews were forced out in 1948 and 1956 in response to Israel's wars with Arab countries, but his family stayed. In 1967, however, they felt that the time had come to leave. Fluent in Italian from the days before the Second World War when Libya was an Italian colony, they ended up in Rome.

The stories of these three could be repeated in some variation or the other - I would venture to guess - by almost any Jew living in this land. To be sure, many who came here did not have to leave because of a revolution or oppressive regime. With few exceptions, however, Jews came to this country knowing the challenges of coming here as a stranger, if not refugee.

It is not in the last 150 years alone that we Jews have known the heart of the stranger. Our foundational identity as being wanderers (refuges, if you will) is at the heart of the opening verses of our *parasha*. The Torah speaks to a people still in the wilderness, but anticipates a time when they will be settled in the land, prosperous, comfortable and secure. At such a time, the Torah commands, the people of Israel were to take the first of their harvest and bring a basket of the fruit of the land to Jerusalem. Then, they were told to speak ritual words of remembrance:

My ancestor was a fugitive (or, perhaps, wandering) Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and lived there ... The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us ...

We cried to the Eternal, the God of our ancestors, and the Eternal heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The Eternal freed us from Egypt ... (and) brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Thus, I now bring the first fruits of the soil that You, O God, have given me.¹

In these verses it becomes evident that one of the most important defining characteristics of the Jew is that we are – all of us – immigrants. To be the outsider, then, is not just part of our recent historical reality as Jews. We are paradigmatic immigrants – our history replete with stories of wandering from one land to another.

Given this, an identity as immigrants and sense of understanding for the challenges inherent with the immigrant experience, is a defining characteristic of Jewish thought and values. We speak of the Exodus from Egypt every Shabbat during *Kiddush* – a reminder of when we were strangers and had to flee. The radical result of this is the Biblical insistence that even we are settled in our land – or maybe *especially* when we are settled and comfortable – that we remember what it is like to be a refugee. No less than 36 times in the Torah we read that we are to help those who are strangers (the immigrant) because we know what it means to be one. This is not just an act of compassion, but of shared experience. As the Torah says, "you know the feelings of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."²

"My father was a fugitive, my mother a refugee" is a call not for just empathy or pity. More than this, it is a statement of solidarity. Those who leave their home – for economic

¹ Deuteronomy 26:6-10

² Exodus 23:9

betterment, fleeing oppression, - are not merely “strangers”. They are, the Torah makes a claim, those who live our own story.

A wave of immigrants, including many refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Libya, is finding its way through the Balkans into Europe. Others are crossing the Mediterranean in rickety boats, which all too often sink. A photograph of 3-year-old Syrian boy, Aylan Kudri, washed up on a Turkish beach this week and face down in the sand, captured world attention. He, along with his brother and mother, drowned as they sought to flee to Greece. In Austria, more than 70 bodies of dead immigrants were found in the back of a truck. This year, more people are on the move as refugees than at any time since the end of the Second World War.³ Nearly 4 million have fled the fighting in Syria alone – another eleven of Syria's 22 million have been displaced in that civil war. In this country, immigration is being used as a political prop – a fear of being engulfed by those who will destroy us (all this at a time when the unemployment rate in this country is at its lowest level in a decade). If only we build walls strong enough and high enough we can keep those dangerous strangers at bay.

It is possible to steel oneself to say, “It's not my problem”, or “This is the result of political in-fighting in the Middle East or Africa” or it's just “politics to attack illegal immigrants.” Perhaps a hardness exists in the heart where one might say, “The Syrians all hate the Jews anyways. Better they fight and kill each other.”

To such thoughts I say, “Shame!” How dare we as Jews say such things? How can we decry the world that turned its back on those Jews who sought to leave Nazi Germany and deign to say those fleeing the fighting in Syria? We Jews rightly denounce a world that stood aside as six million of our people were slaughtered. And so now, any Jews has the audacity to say, “The Syrian refugees are not our problem”?! We have the *chutzpah* to claim that Hispanic immigrants are “rapists” and criminals?!

No, the Torah demands. Say the words, “I am a wanderer” – and so know the heart of the refugee, the one who must flee for her life. Take heed of your history. Remember that in 1908, here in New York, the police commissioner, Theodore A. Bingham, claimed in an article published in *Harper's* that 50 percent of all criminals in the city were Jews. He wrote

³ <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>

that Jewish ignorance of English and the poor physical constitution of Jewish immigrants made them unfit for manual labor and so a drain on society's resources. Impugning others because they are different has ever been the resort of the bigot. Your security today is a gift, but a tenuous one. Know from where you come and so be one with one who, like you, is also an immigrant.

To identify with those running through razor wire and across cornfields in Hungary or putting their lives at risk in rickety boats, is not a call for specific policy. It is, however, the foundation out of which political policy will flow. Refugees and immigrants are not just outsiders who threaten our way of life. They are our grandparents. They are us.

“My mother and father were wandering Arameans.” And so must I know that those who come from that same land – the modern area of ancient Aram – are connected to my story. The immigrant is not the enemy. It is the hardness of heart that Pharaoh knew.

Knowing this is not a solution, but it is foundation from which one will come.