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Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778: Immigration

Embedded in the Torah, from the opening chapter to its final words, is an ever-present theme, hidden in plain sight. It first appears in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve, expelled from their home, are forced to make their own way through the world. It continues with their son Cain, who is condemned to become a ceaseless wanderer. A short while later it appears with Noah, who sets off with his family on an ark, headed towards an uncertain future.

It is the integral moment in our first encounter with Abraham, as God calls him to leave his native land, depart from his birthplace, break ties with his family, and travel to an unknown land. Although his son Isaac never leaves his homeland, his wife Rebekah does. She is a foreign-born bride who travels far from home. And their son Jacob is also a wanderer, sent back to the “old country,” where he lives for decades and establishes a family before returning home. And then there’s Joseph, who is taken away by force, never to return. He must face the challenge of creating a life in another people’s land. In every generation, there’s a wanderer.

And that, my friends, is just the book of Genesis. The bulk of the Torah recounts the wanderings of the children of Israel who, despite spending 430 years in Egypt, continue to be regarded with suspicion and fear. And the Torah’s “title” character, Moses, could best be described as a man of no land at all. During his childhood, he grows up in an Egyptian palace, but is still considered

an Israelite. As an adult, living in Midian with his wife and her family, he is called the Egyptian. And when he returns to Egypt to free the Israelites, he's seen as a meddling outsider.

Moses spends the last forty years of his life shepherding the Israelites through the wilderness. And when the time comes for him to depart this earth, a wanderer he remains. He dies outside of the land, is buried in an unknown place, in an unmarked grave. Tell me, is there a more apt description of a wanderer than this?

Just as the theme of "wandering" is embedded in the Torah, it's also a hallmark of our people's experience in the world. From our exile in the year 70, until today, to live as a Jew was to be insecure. Whether it was Babylonia or Persia, Greece or Rome, Egypt or Spain; whether it was living among Christians or Moslems, Arabs or Europeans, in the distant past, or the very real present, our lot has been unsettled. We were, and for some Jews, still are wanderers, who weren't accepted and didn't belong where we lived. And just in case we tried to forget how precarious our living conditions were, there were Inquisitions, Crusades, Pogroms, the Holocaust, and the ever-present scourge of anti-Semitism, to remind us of reality.

You want to know something that's truly interesting, if you look beyond those family stories to the teachings of the Torah you'll also find a strong fascination with the wanderer. We're instructed, no less than 36 times, on how we should treat them. It's almost as if the author of the Torah knew what our future would be, and wrote these laws on *our* behalf, so that when

the nations of the world ruled over us, we could ask them to treat us with the same measure of respect as our tradition expected us to treat others.

Listen to the words from the book of Leviticus that we'll read on Yom Kippur and you'll see what I mean. It says: "When a stranger resides among you in your land, do not oppress him/her. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens. You shall love him/her as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am Adonai your God." (Lev. 19:33-34)

You know, a couple of weeks ago, I couldn't stop thinking about this passage. When I heard the news reports coming out of Houston during Hurricane Harvey, as rain poured down and the waters rose, as roads and then homes began to flood, as structural engineers released water from overfilled dams into neighborhoods to prevent catastrophic failure, as the Mayor and Chief of Police shouted from rooftops, urging people to leave their homes and head to shelters, there was one group who refused to go: Houston's wanderers.

Those residents who work and live in the city were trapped, caught in a vise, unsure of which brought more risk to them and their families, the rising flood waters or the enforcement agents stationed at the shelters? How they must have longed to hear the words of Leviticus spoken to them. How relieved they would have been if in America, "the stranger who resides among us was treated like a citizen. How grateful they would have felt if we would love – no, not love, if we would respect them and their humanity, as we respect ourselves.

These last years have been an increasingly difficult time to be a stranger in America. And as Jews, we should be paying attention. After all, it wasn't so long ago when it was our families, our grand and great-grandparents who were wandering from place to place, looking for a country that would take them in; a place that would give them a reason to hope for a better future. They packed their bags, boarded ships and headed to America. They were fortunate, and we were blessed when she took them in.

Of course, we Jews weren't always so fortunate. America didn't always take us in. There's the famous story about the St. Louis, a German ocean liner that set sail for Cuba in 1939; a ship filled with Jews, desperate to save their families from Hitler.

When the boat arrived in Havana, there was a problem. Only 28 of the passengers were allowed to disembark. The other 908 were turned away because of suspicions that their passports were forged. Those suspicions were probably true. But what would you do if you were in their shoes, your family trapped in a hopeless situation with no way out? You'd do whatever you could to escape. And so did they.

When the St. Louis departed Cuba it headed East, hoping that America would open its doors to 900 doomed souls. But America said no. The passengers were refugees traveling on forged papers. And besides, our quota for Germans was already full. Our gates were closed. The passengers were sent back to Europe.

As it happened, a little later on that same year, Congress started working on a bill to bring 20,000 German Jewish children to America. But the bill died in committee. The children didn't arrive. The quota was already full. And the Jewish community was silent.

As the years passed, we learned our lesson. And in the 1970's American Jews spoke out for the Russian Refusniks, and the Save Soviet Jewry campaign was launched. During these years we would no longer be silent. We worked with Congress to bring freedom to our people who were trapped behind the Iron Curtain.

Friends, we stood up and fought for freedom when our brothers and sisters were in need. The Torah calls us to stand up for the dignity and humanity of the stranger as well.

In today's world the problem of refugees is greater than ever before. Right now, there are millions of people from countries like Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and South Sudan; in total 65 million people, who have become refugees because of war and famine. Most of these people are "internal" refugees, meaning that they still live in their country, even though they cannot go back home. But there are some 23 million people who have fled to other lands.

Right now, for instance, there are around a million Syrians living in Jordan, and nearly as many in Turkey. Unfortunately, these countries are ill equipped to provide refugees with the most basic of needs: like food, clothing and shelter. And when conflicts linger on for years, and stays in refugee camps stretch out to a dozen years or more, those basic needs are not enough.

People want to make a life for themselves, find a job, earn a living, send their children to school so that they can have a better future.

Imagine if you had fled your country and landed in a refugee camp, where you were living a hand to mouth existence, and had no hope for a better future for yourself or your children.

Would you stay, or look for a way to move on? Want to know why we hear so many stories of refugees drowning in the sea? Because they made the same decision as many of you just did.

They took a chance to try to find a better future.

But we also know that not all “strangers” live overseas. There are those undocumented workers in Houston, who were afraid to go to the shelters, and are now afraid to look for work. It’s ironic, actually. NPR reported that there’s such a shortage of construction workers in Houston that the city is lobbying Congress to place a moratorium on deportations so they can rebuild.

Perhaps it’s not ironic at all. There’s a shortage of construction workers in many parts of our country, as there is in the agricultural sector, where farms rely upon immigrants to do their harvesting. The truth is that the immigrant population in America has been serving vital needs for decades. They work in the food and hospitality industries, provide nursing, companion and health care services, do landscaping work and housecleaning. They open businesses, pay taxes, rent apartments, purchase homes. They get married, have children, raise their children to have a better life than their own. And many of those children do. They become well educated professionals, who contribute to their community, who follow in the footsteps of other

American immigrants, who weren't always so well accepted when the first generation arrived. But look at them today. Look at *us* today. Look how far we've come. We've done pretty well in America, and I think it's safe to say that America has done pretty well by us.

A few years back we had a speaker at a JUF brunch named Larry Smith, who is known for publishing his Six Word Story books. The inspiration for these books came from a story about Hemmingway, that he was sitting in a bar and a man sitting on the stool next to him made a bet that he couldn't write a six-word story. Hemmingway thought for a second, took the bet, picked up a cocktail napkin, and this is what he wrote: For sale: Baby Shoes, never worn. The man sitting next to Hemmingway bought him a drink. Larry believes that you don't have to speak for a half hour to share something of substance. That if you're careful, six words are enough.

Larry came out with a new book recently, called *Fresh off the Boat: Stories of Immigration*. Inside the book are hundreds of stories, all 6 words long. Some by people you've never hear of, and others by those who are famous. Here are some of those stories.

My stowaway forefather wasn't deported... whew – Ron Howard.

Even after internment, still love America – George Takei. (Star Trek)

Every immigrant's journey is truly incredible – Aziz Ansari.

Immigrant son proudly dresses First Lady – Narcisco Rodriguez.

Mom left Scotland at ten. Forever – Julianne Moore.

A better life for our children – Mila Kunis.

In 1948, I was a refugee. – Madeleine Albright.

Zeiger too ethnic. How about King? – Larry King.

Escaped Odessa, Holocaust, Great-Granddaughter named Odessa – Tiffany Shlain.

If not native, you're an immigrant. – Sarah Jones

I don't know the background to these stories. I don't know if their parents had valid visas when they came to this country, or if they came illegally. But what I do know is that like the vast majority of those who come to this country, they came for a better life for themselves and their family, and as they and their children prospered, they brought prosperity to America.

Back in January, I had the chance to hear a politician talk about nationalism. He said:

“Sometimes, during times of war or danger, the needs of the nation come first. But respect for human rights and universal values must still be present. Nationalism must not contradict the ethics or values of society. In our country,” he said, “the Left has tended to focus solely on human rights, and the Right, on nationalistic values. I am trying to bring these two values back together again.” The speaker? Israel's longest serving member of Knesset, son of a former Prime Minister, 74-year-old Benny Begin.

Begin said that his father often quoted Theodore Herzl, who spoke about two types of nationalism. A positive nationalism that arises out of love for others, and a negative nationalism which rises out of hatred for those who are outside of your country. Begin ended his remarks to us by saying that he hopes to re-kindle Herzl's flame of positive nationalism, so that Israel might

turn away from xenophobia and re-assert the vision of our prophets who called for a society based on the biblical values of justice and peace.

Friends, I think it's about time for America to follow this same path. We've spent enough time with negative nationalism to know that it doesn't end well. Not for others; and not for ourselves. When it comes to issues of immigration in America, it's time for us to see the dignity and humanity of the wanderer, the stranger, the immigrant. It's time for us to live up to the values that are inscribed near our country's busiest port of entry, on the base of lady liberty, written by a young Jewish immigrant, Emma Lazarus.

The New Colossus

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*