

## Caring for the Strangers in Our Midst

In July, my family lost our cousin, Irene. Her passing was, in many ways, a major milestone for the Markleys as she was the last remnant of the generation who came of age in Europe before the war. She and her husband, Leslie, survived dark days in their small town of Uzhhorod. They were strong and courageous in ways that I can only admire and stand in awe of from afar. Irene managed to escape from the ghetto in which her family was being held and then chose to return there to help others. She escaped again. She lived in hiding, separated from her family until she was miraculously reunited with her brother.

She and Leslie arrived in New York in 1949, seeking, like so many, a land of safety, freedom, and opportunity. Neither of them spoke any English, and they needed some basic groceries. With what little money they had, Leslie left to buy milk and a little food for them and their newborn baby, and Irene suggested that he look at the street sign outside of the apartment so he would have a landmark to find his way back. An hour passed. Then a second, a third, and a fourth. Irene was panicked by the time Lesley returned with the groceries. It turns out that the street sign he consulted as a landmark was a “One Way” sign, and he had spent the past several hours following every one that he laid his eyes on.

And they were not the only ones with immigrant experiences like these in our family. My father’s parents, Ludwig and Martha, *zichronam livracha*, narrowly escaped the Holocaust by boarding a boat to Ecuador where they spent several years before arriving in the US to be reunited with their loved ones here.

My mother’s father, Aram, of blessed memory, was similarly persecuted in his birthplace on the island of Crete. He and his family fled through olive groves by the cover of night until they arrived at the boat which brought them to New York City. For Aram, the image of the Statue of Liberty on the horizon as he floated up the Hudson River towards Ellis Island was forever imprinted upon his heart. It made such a lasting impression, in fact, that in spite of spending the rest of his life in Massachusetts...where he naturally rooted for the Patriots and Celtics, when it came to baseball, he was always a Yankees fan. That team remained symbolic of the gift of freedom that he had received when he first arrived in New York.

These stories are not mine alone...they, and so many others like them, belong to all of us. For ours is a nation of immigrants. Whether the tale of your family’s journey here belongs to your generation, or your parents’, or your great, great, great, great grandparents’...almost none of us started here. We are all the benefactors of someone’s decision to seek a new life – perhaps a better life, a more just, safe, and hopeful life, in these United States.

That is why I choked back tears in March when I listened to a woman named Zacil address my colleagues at our rabbinical conference in California. Zacil was brought to the US by her parents when she was five years old. She always knew that she was

undocumented and kept her status a secret from her friends at school for fear of being ostracized. And while she received good grades and even made the varsity cheerleading team, she often feared that her life would forever consist of cleaning houses with her mother and being chased off the streets by police. She recalls feeling, "...like a bird behind a cage looking on as all the other birds got ready to extend their wings to take flight."

And then an even worse reality beset Zacil and her family when they received a phone call that her brother, still in Mexico, had been killed. She and her mother could not return there for his funeral without risking being forever exiled from the home they had made here for well over a decade. Five years after his death, they have yet to be able to visit his grave.

Different versions of Zacil's story are shared by more than 11 million people who currently live in this great nation. People who are working, contributing to our society, and are guilty of wanting no more than what we and our own ancestors wanted...an opportunity to create a secure and dignified home for themselves and the family they love in a land where the hope of a brighter future need not only be a dream.

We ought to care about their struggles, their lives so often lived beyond our sight. We ought to lament their inability to seek out support from the police when they are the victims of violence and crime for fear of deportation. We ought to deplore their forced separation from family and their inability to access the basic services afforded to all the people of this great land.

We should care because these are our stories. So many of our forbears lived these very experiences upon arriving in this country. And these are our stories because, as Jews, we are the quintessential immigrant community. When we retell the narrative of our people at our Passover seders we begin with the words, "My father was a wandering Aramean," and that, indeed, has been our fate for the overwhelming majority of our history. We moved from place to place constantly for countless generations looking for a land that would allow us to contribute meaningfully to our community and to live in peace.

Sometimes we got lucky, but most often we were not so fortunate. It was we who lived every day in fear of arbitrary persecution from those with power. It was we who stood on the outside of society looking in. It was we who woke up every morning wondering if today was the day we would be forced from our homes, and our lives, and our loved ones.

So, how can we stand idly by as so many of our neighbors suffer these indignities today? We can sometimes be prone to judging those who now experience the struggles that we once did. "Well," we may be tempted to say, "I know things were hard for them at home, but they are, after all, in this country illegally." True, but when we retell the stories of the *Aliyah Bet* to Israel between 1946 and 1948, we often do so with great pride as we celebrate the illegal immigration of some 60,000 Jews from war-torn

Europe to Palestine. Those immigrants increased the population of Palestine by 10%<sup>1</sup>...roughly the equivalent of inserting 31 million new people into the US population today.<sup>2</sup> We rightfully see their actions as laudable, even heroic as they sought improved lives for themselves. Shouldn't others be afforded similar consideration?

And when we recall the story of the SS St. Louis, carrying 937 German Jewish refugees seeking sanctuary from the Holocaust on these shores, we do so with scorn towards the United States government that was unwilling to take in those precious souls, instead turning the ship back to Europe where so many of them lost their lives in concentration camps. If our people deserved asylum here in those days, why do others languishing in insufferable, violent, and untenable conditions not deserve the same now?

We may convince ourselves that those who seek green cards in our country today are existentially different from ourselves...that they are somehow not like us. They do not look like us...they do not speak our language...they don't belong here. Of course, such generalizations are also folly.

My colleague and friend, Rabbi Esther Lederman, was born in Canada and came to the US 15 years ago. Two years ago she was finally able to apply for permanent residency, but there was a problem. The synagogue where she works, Temple Micah in Washington D.C., does not have a 501(c)(3) number...something which the IRS did not require of any religious organization in America. Because of this technicality, the Department of Immigration decided that Temple Micah is not a real house of worship and that she, therefore, did not have standing to apply for citizenship as an employee there. Her application for a green card was denied.

She shares her story as but one example of what, in her words, is "the ridiculousness of our immigration system." When she applied to be legally recognized in our society, she was a rabbi with financial means, a native English speaker with top Washington attorneys working on her case. If that was her experience, we can imagine what navigating the bureaucracy of this process must be like for all those who do not begin with the advantages that she did. How can we be blind and deaf to their struggles?

The Torah tells us that we cannot. In ten days, on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, we will read The Holiness Code...the heart of the Torah which outlines what it means for us to live as Jews...as a people dedicated to bringing light into our world. Our community will, in fact, read these words from our *sefer Torah* which is, itself, an immigrant to this nation...rescued from the clutches of the Nazis following World War II.

It's words are forceful and clear: "When strangers live with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."<sup>3</sup> This is by far the most often repeated commandment in all of Torah. Some

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<sup>1</sup> From Elihu Bergman (sailor participating in the Aliyah Bet) as appears at Jewish Virtual Library

<sup>2</sup> US Census Bureau

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:33-34

thirty-five times the text reminds us to take care of strangers in our land – those who are disenfranchised, on the margins of society, who may not know the language and the customs, who require some added support to survive. Our responsibility is to insure their wellbeing, for we have walked in their shoes. We were strangers too...not only once in Egypt but over and over again throughout the world - outsiders unable to find a stable and free home for ourselves and our families. Now that we experience such freedom, how could we, with clear conscience, allow it to be denied to others?

And often, these others are not so far from our homes and our hearts as we might sometimes imagine. Beginning in 2000, Leandro served as the leader of Temple Beth Shalom's custodial team. He had come to the US at age 17, and in 2008, when it came to light that he did not have working papers, and he needed to cease working for the company that employed him to serve our community, Temple Beth Shalom sprang into action. With the support of the Board of Trustees, and with Sandy Hain's leadership, we undertook the process of sponsoring Leandro for working papers.

By February of 2009 Leandro's application had been officially submitted to the Department of Immigration...and we are still waiting...some fifty-five months later. All this time the U.S. government has known that he is here. All this time they know that he needs to earn money to live and that he has no legal way of doing so. What a very broken system. Thus he, like so many thousands of others who are trying to abide by the immigration process currently in place...has to exist – for now - in the shadows, out of sight and constantly at risk. I am delighted that he has chosen to be here with his extended community tonight to, once again, welcome a new year with us.

And this will be no ordinary year for the 11 million souls like Leandro in our country whose fates hang in the balance. In June, the US Senate passed a bipartisan bill calling for so many of the needed changes to our immigration system, including a path to legal status for the undocumented immigrants here today, a renewed commitment to clearing systemic backlogs, a plan for processing future flow of immigrants, and a reasonable approach to enforcing these laws. The bill is now awaiting consideration by the House of Representatives, and we must raise our voices to insist that its final version reflects our nation's – and our Jewish tradition's – noblest values.

I urge each of us to call our Congressional Representative to share our commitment to common sense immigration reform and to communicate that we expect them to fight for the legislation that has come through the Senate. I know we don't live in his state, but that shouldn't stop us from calling the office of Representative Kevin McCarthy of California's 23<sup>rd</sup> district. He is the Majority Whip in the House and will have great influence over whether or not this proposal is allowed to come up for a vote, and this is legislation that deserves its time on the floor. Tell him that we, as a Jewish community, care about this issue. Of course, our efforts can also be local and direct...offering to assist the strangers in our own midst. Jewish Vocational Service of Greater Boston is just one of many organizations providing volunteer opportunities that transform the lives of new immigrants and refugees.

Given our people's history of homelessness, it is not surprising that, in 1883, it was a Jewish woman named Emma Lazarus who penned the words that would come to adorn that statue on the Hudson River whose image was forever a source of hope to my grandfather and to millions of others like him.

"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-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"<sup>4</sup>

Over the next ten days we will implore God to keep the gates of repentance open for us...just long enough to prove ourselves worthy of another year – one filled with goodness and blessing. May our efforts to keep the gates of freedom, justice, dignity, and hope spread wide for the newest generations arriving on these shores inspire God to do the same for us, and may 5774 be a year of liberty and justice for all in this great land. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus, 1883