

Undocumented Immigration---A Jewish Response---July 12, 2006

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The Jewish people in America, like most Americans, are immigrants from afar and our story as participants in this culture demands that we take very, very seriously the dilemmas facing new immigrants here, documented or undocumented. We have wandered the world more than many. We have a strong connection to immigrants and the dangers and concerns that accompany immigration.

What does our tradition say about the treatment of immigrants? In much of our history we didn't have control of our own land and the Jewish people did not have a chance to test their reason and their ethics related to the subject.

However, during the time of the Torah, the prophets, and the kings, Israel did develop a code of conduct in relation to *strangers*, a term that likely referred to immigrants living in the Promised Land. The Bible does not issue a forecast about the huge number of undocumented Hispanic immigrants in America in 2006, at least not one I can discern, but, interestingly enough, it does set out some guiding principles that may benefit those of us trying to deal with the situation we are facing today.

The Israel of the Bible was made up of immigrants and strangers from a myriad of places and cultures, many of which had no connection to the Jewish faith. The general world-view of the period did not demand full-scale empathy. However, that was not the case in Israel.

In Biblical society the sojourner was called the *ger* in Hebrew, or the *stranger*. It is unlikely that there were any immigration laws at all. People from other societies just got there. From the time of the Exodus mixed multitudes traveled with the Jews through the desert. They were called *strangers* and G-d made commands about their treatment. These *strangers* in the Torah were not diplomats or foreign business magnates living the high life in Israel. They likely were very poor. Historians believe that the 'strangers' in the Torah were generally rural, from cultures far and wide. They were not much different than the poor documented or undocumented immigrants that are here in America today.

The commands about how to treat them are unambiguous. The Bible says over and over again that we must "love the stranger." Unlike some of the commandments or mitzvot, the reason is not hidden. We must love the stranger because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt. The Torah considers this law something we owe to our history. We know what occurs when strangers are ill-treated. After all, we felt the lash of the Egyptians and we, of all people, should know better. Over and over again the Torah emphasizes that we must treat the stranger decently, with love, and with fairness.

The immigrant stranger is considered to be like the widow or orphan, vulnerable and in need of protection and care. When Ruth, the Moabite immigrant who is the progenitor of King David, came to Israel with her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, she is given the right to pick the gleanings from the field of Boaz, just like citizens who are poor and in need. Over and over again the Torah emphasizes that we must treat the stranger decently, with love, and with fairness. Scholars insist that the Bible states not only that we must treat the stranger well but also that we must offer positive feelings to the stranger living in our midst. So, we even need to work on ourselves and our psyches.

Deuteronomy actually states that G-d loves the stranger. If G-d loves the stranger and, as Genesis says, all humans are made in the image of G-d---we had certainly better find ways to love the stranger or immigrant. It is true that once the Jews were no longer in control of their own land the term *ger* had other meanings, such as one who converted to Judaism, and did not refer to immigrant sojourners. But in the days of the Bible, the term *stranger* was pretty close to the idea of immigrants in America today.

It is hard to read our texts and not hear this powerful mandate from heaven. I remember my Bible professor at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College saying that the one principle that seemed to separate us from the other nations of the ancient Biblical period was the absolute insistence on social justice, most exemplified by the myriad of commands on how to treat the stranger amongst us.

I am a lawyer and a rabbi, and I speak on behalf of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, an organization that serves as an umbrella for many national and local community relations organizations in Jewish life in America. I do not think that Jewish tradition justifies the rights of immigrants to break the law and just come into America without any responsibility to our nation and its legal requirements. I do think, however, that the empathy shown by those who want to find ways to allow the undocumented to meet certain requirements so that they have the possibility of living here is the same kind of empathy that the Bible shouts at us when we read its mandates.

As a people who have suffered greatly by persecution and economic downturns throughout the world, and who came to America to resolve our problems, we look with deep love towards the immigrant. Our tradition demands a particular concern for the faultless children and dependents of immigrants who have settled here. Judaism, as I comprehend its values, insists that Jews be understanding and open-hearted to the immigrants on our shores.

Our rabbinic tradition often speaks to us in story. The stories are called midrash and the rabbis use these stories to expand on the themes and values they find in the Torah. One of my favorite stories from the rabbis is a story about an old man in Beersheba during the time of Abraham. Abraham was keeping house, living alone, and the man, maybe 280 years old (people lived long lives back then), came to the door late at night. Abraham, as was his custom, asked the old man in to spend the night and said that he would offer him up some lentil stew. The old man was sitting in a corner and Abraham looked over with a smile. Suddenly, he saw that the old man was worshipping Baal, an idol. Abraham said to the old man, “what are you doing”? The old man said “I am worshipping my idol.” Abraham did not take kindly to the old man’s words, and said to him “You are doing what”?!!

He shouted “I am Abraham; I am the world’s first monotheist. Put that idol away”! The old man said, “Abraham, I have worshipped this idol for 280 years. I cannot stop worshipping it now.” Abraham lost it, yelled at the old man, and kicked him out into the streets of Beersheba in the middle of the night.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Abraham opened the door, and there at the entrance was G-d. In rabbinic stories G-d sometimes shows up. Abraham was quite happy and invited G-d in. G-d said “Abraham, where is the old man”? Abraham said to G-d “Oh, that old man, I couldn’t handle him. I couldn’t deal with him. He kept taking out that idol, Baal.” G-d said to Abraham, “So, what did you do”? “I couldn’t handle him. I kicked him out,” Abraham said. G-d said, “You did what? You kicked an old man out in the middle of the night”?

“I couldn’t deal with him.” G-d looked at Abraham and said “Abraham, I have had to deal with that old man for 280 years; couldn’t you have handled him, taken care of him for just one night”? Abraham ran out into the streets of Beersheba and found the old man and brought him back and treated him with love and compassion.

Perhaps the old man was not necessarily an immigrant stranger living in Israel but his story reflects the way the Jewish tradition responds to strangers, to those in our midst. How we treat the twelve million undocumented who are here in many ways colors who we are as Jews. How we react to those who want to enter our borders and become part of our country says a lot about how well we remember our own stories when we were immigrants looking for a safe haven, a place to rest and live and prosper. We have a duty to law, to our borders, and to our country but, no matter what else we think or do, we must act with our hearts and our souls when we confront those who live amongst us and those who want to live amongst us.

In my mind the Torah and our history point to both law and to equity, to both strength and to compassion. To me Judaism asks us to dig deep and find ways to give those who are vulnerable among us, the undocumented immigrant here in our country, a chance to find the peace and prosperity and happiness that fortune and G-d have bestowed upon us in America.