

## Message for *Parashat Re'eh*

2 September 2016: Immigration and Love of Strangers

Beginning next Shabbat, we will turn our thoughts to the month of Elul and the preparations for ushering together a New Year. As you might have noticed, I have used this time during Erev Shabbat to share with you some of passions and what makes me “tickle.” So, I have spoken about *chesed*, Israel, music, gardening, gymnastics and change. The time has come to share my passion for social justice.

Welcoming the stranger is inscribed in the DNA of the Torah and by extension of the Jewish tradition. We are reminded of our humble beginnings so that we remember to be empathic towards migrants. Whether we ourselves came to this country as immigrants or we have been here a few generations, we tend to forget that at one point in our history someone left a distant land because things were not working out for them there.

Many times the Torah teaches us how to treat the “stranger” residing among us. In Ex. (22:20) we read, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” In the Holiness Code, in the book of Lev. (19:33-34) we read: “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am Adonai your God.

And in the book of Det. (10:19) we are taught: “You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

I could go on quoting verses but, my friends, you understand the point.

Granted: The Torah is not about politics, but sometimes, the teachings we find in the Torah CLEARLY leads us in one direction. The direction towards which the Torah bends is in favor of welcoming immigrants and TREATING them with kindness. As an immigrant from a Latin American country myself, I have the recipient of many kindnesses by people who understood the meaning of the Biblical teachings. I have also experienced harshness and plain discrimination based on my national origin and my accent, coming from Jews and non-Jews alike. I know that we still have much work to do to teach empathy and compassion towards migrants and refugees.

A couple of years ago, I attended a session at the CCAR Convention about immigration and why it should matter to us as people who embrace a religious and spiritual practice. To my delight, it was not another effort to lobby on behalf of this or that piece of legislation –important as that may be. It was rather about the human side of immigration.

All the participants were invited to share their personal story about immigration. Some of us told of our own journey to America, others told the story of their parents or grandparents, some others told the stories of their house keepers and gardeners. It was very powerful to hear those stories, without judging the legality of their journey, without politics. For the very first time, it showed me a way to humanize the immigration issue; it was not

about the numbers or the policies, but about all of us, and I mean, ALL of us, and about our journeys to this very moment in time. Perhaps we should try that here at Beth Torah and hear each other's immigration story ...

In the meantime, there is something "fun" you can all do: You should visit the web site called **entrydenied.org**. It is a website sponsored by a few Jewish organizations, where you can check if your ancestors would have been admitted to the US under CURRENT immigration law. I did it for my Italian grandmother, who had she chosen to apply TODAY, - would have been denied. It is not that she had a record or anything, but like millions of immigrants, she was an unskilled worker, and wanted to leave her native Italy so that her children, and grand-children, would have a better future.

Now that I am an adult and an immigrant myself, I realized what she went through and I am thankful for her hardship and for her courage to leave everything behind and move to South America at age 24, the same age when I left Argentina.

Millions of American Jews have grown up with a defining family immigration story. Sadly, some forget that most of our immigration stories would not be possible **at all** under today's immigration laws. The immigration system is much changed today, with few options for people seeking to come to America to find opportunity, enjoy political freedom, or escape persecution. There are strict quotas, years-long waiting lines, and much paperwork ...

Learning about our immigration stories, however, should not awaken in us the depressing feelings that our immigration system is broken and needs fixing, but it should make us understand how difficult it is to come to America and teach us empathy for the other, for the stranger, for the foreigner, for the differently able, and for whomever we perceive as different and “queer.”

We learn empathy both from our own experiences and from hearing and sharing what other had gone through. Ours is a tradition that teaches that the experience of the slavery in Egypt MUST lead us to identify not with the taskmasters, but with others who might find themselves in the situation we once were. The truth of this teaching is that it is not bound to a place and time.

I believe that hatred directly towards immigrants, especially Muslim and Mexican immigrants, is the issue of our time. Each generation must make the teaching of “welcoming the stranger” REAL for themselves. Those who spread misinformation and fear about immigrants should be confronted with the Biblical teachings, and reminded that if we are indeed a Nation based on those teachings, we should show compassion and empathy and treat immigrants as we would treat “the natives.”

Our central holy day, Passover, is the quintessential immigration story. At the Seder, we teach it to the next generation and imagine that it is **we** who are fleeing Egypt. With the sea parted in front of us, we walk alongside our ancestors on their journey from slavery to freedom.

*Elohei hano'seim*, God of all sojourners, help us imagine walking alongside the more recent migrants, escaping poverty or persecution as they make their way to America. Help realize that they need our understanding, our empathy and our support so that we grow in appreciation of our own freedom. Bless us of God, with the gift of learning empathy for all of those who live in fear as they seek their own promised land by coming to America. And may we welcome them with a willing heart.