

Jewish Values Require Us To Support Immigration Reform

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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
Glow 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!"

Emma Lazarus wrote that poem in 1883, for a campaign to raise money to build the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty.

Emma Lazarus was not a recent immigrant to America. She was instead a member of a Sephardic Jewish family originally from Portugal. Her family had lived in New York since Colonial times.

The statue very soon became the quintessential welcoming figure for the many immigrant ships that passed beneath that outstretched hand and torch on their way to Ellis Island and to the promise of America.

Since those days more than a century ago, our country has repeatedly changed its policies on immigration. Sometimes we welcome immigrants. At other times we impose strict restrictions on immigration.

We are now engaged again in Congress and in the press and among the voters in the same great debate: how shall we approach the issue of immigration to America?

This morning I pose that question to us as Jews. What can we learn from our history and from Jewish law to help us decide our own views on immigration?

I begin with three reasons I care about this issue.

The first reason is my gratitude to my immigrant ancestors.

Like Emma Lazarus, I am not a recent immigrant. Far from it.

My immigrant ancestors are Jan van Cleef in my mother's family and George Lanckton in my father's.

Jan van Cleef came to America long before it was the United States of America. He came here in 1653 from Holland and settled in New York. Seven generations later, in 1884, my maternal grandmother, Rebecca Van Cleve, was born. She and her husband, James, had six children. My mother was the fourth.

George Lanckton was the immigrant in my father's family. He came to America from England in 1630, settling first in Watertown in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Over the course of the next century the Lanckton family moved westward, settling finally in Springfield, Massachusetts.

I am in the ninth generation of descendants of Jan van Cleef and the thirteenth generation of descendants of George Lanckton.

So it's not because I am a recent immigrant that I care about this issue. Rather, I am so grateful to my immigrant forebears. I love America. I am here only because they made the brave decision to come here.

I care about immigrants for a second reason. I spent about a decade of my childhood, between 1945 and 1954, living primarily in four countries: Bulgaria, Greece, Lebanon and Turkey. My father worked as an executive of an American oil company with operations abroad. Our family moved with him when he was on foreign assignment.

We were a distinct minority as Americans in those countries. We were often also a despised minority because Americans had so much more wealth than the natives of those countries in those post-war years.

I recall feeling marginalized and even concerned for our safety. Those childhood memories help me to empathize with the feelings of immigrants living here in circumstances where they might be deported and where they may feel quite unwelcome.

The third reason for my concern to treat all immigrants with dignity and respect flows from the strong moral claim of Judaism that we must do just that.

The mitzvot to love the stranger, to treat the stranger fairly, to have one law for ourselves and for the stranger, to be fair to the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Egypt, appear in the Torah no fewer than 23 times.

There are about 320 million individuals living in America. Of these, perhaps 15 million are Native Americans or the descendants of Native Americans. This means that about 98% of the people in America came here from elsewhere or are descendants of those who did. We are almost entirely a nation of immigrants.

The present population of America includes nearly 50 million people who were born in another country. Fewer than a third of the foreign-born are what are known as “illegal immigrants.” The rest are mainly naturalized citizens or legal permanent resident aliens.

I just used the term “illegal immigrants.” I don’t like that term. It suggests that the people themselves are illegal. I prefer the term “undocumented.”

When I began thinking about immigrants and preparing to talk about this today, I had five questions:

How many undocumented are there?

Who are they?

How did they get here?

Is the economic activity of immigrants a good thing or a bad thing for America?

Finally, what is the morally right way to consider the policy proposals now being debated concerning immigration generally and the undocumented in particular?

The answer to the first question is easy. The estimated number of undocumented is eleven million. That’s a big number, but relative to the 320 million people living here, it’s really not such a big number. People speak about the undocumented as though they present a huge problem. In reality, though, they are less than 3.5% of the population.

So who are they? How did they get here?

There are lots of stereotypes about the undocumented. Jeff Passel, senior demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center, says the one he hears the most is “a single young man who’s working in day labor.” That man is probably from Mexico, where he probably snuck across the border.

It’s not that nobody fits that description, says Passel. Plenty do. But, he says, the stereotypes are “mostly wrong.” In reality the majority of the undocumented are couples with children. It’s estimated that 40 percent are women.

As for jobs, Passel estimates that a third of the undocumented work in service jobs, at places like restaurants, or as janitors or cleaners. Many are also employed in construction and food processing. But 10 percent are in professional positions, for example, working as computer engineers.

Then, there's the stereotype that all of the undocumented entered the country illegally by sneaking across a border. That's not true. The best available estimates say that about half or maybe up to 60 percent of them crossed into the U.S. illegally. But Steve Camarato at the Center for Immigration Studies says 40 to 50 percent came here legally, at least at first.

"Millions of people come in on temporary visas," Camarato says. "Tourists, guest workers, foreign students, that sort of thing, but they don't go home when the terms of their visas expire."

One place where the stereotype does get it mostly right, Camarato says, concerns the country of origin. An estimated 55 to 60 percent of the undocumented are from Mexico. Which makes sense, since Mexico is so close to us and its economy is so much poorer.

So that's who they mainly are, primarily how they got here, and mostly what they do for work.

My fourth question was whether immigrants are good or bad for the American economy and the American worker.

I found the most persuasive answers in a study by the Hamilton Project of the Brookings Institute. The project found that, on average, immigrants improve the living standards of Americans. They are not a net drain on the federal budget. They do integrate into the society. Between 90% and 95% of their children speak English well or very well. They start new businesses and file patents at higher rates than U.S.-born citizens.

I was most curious about the finding that immigrants improve the living standards of Americans. Why is that?

Immigrants boost wages. Immigrants generally do not compete with U.S.-born workers for the same jobs. Instead, many immigrants complement the work of U.S. employees and increase their productivity. For example, low-skill immigrant laborers allow U.S.-born farmers, contractors or craftsmen to expand agricultural production or to build more homes - thereby expanding employment possibilities and incomes for U.S. workers. In addition, businesses adjust to the presence of new immigrants by opening stores, restaurants or production facilities to take advantage of the added supply of workers. More workers translate into more business.

Immigrants also lower prices. Immigrant workers enhance the purchasing power of U.S. workers by lowering the prices of services typically provided by

immigrants, such as child care, elder care, gardening, hotel and restaurant work and cleaning services. By making these services more affordable and more widely available, immigrant workers benefit U.S. consumers who purchase these services.

My last question was this: what should be our policy on immigration in order to treat the stranger with the compassion and fairness that our Jewish values demand?

The answer is more complex and intricate than I can cover in a sermon. Instead I want to mention the four main ideas that both Congress and the President have identified. A bipartisan group of eight United States Senators formed last fall. They are actively negotiating the details to implement those policies. Those details are set forth in a draft position paper they issued in late January. I made copies and put them on the table in our vestibule. I encourage you to take one and to study these ideas.

Here are the four main ideas of these eight senators, ideas that are remarkably similar to the proposals by President Obama:

- Create a tough but fair path to citizenship for the undocumented, a path that is contingent upon first securing our borders and establishing systems that will track effectively whether legal immigrants have left the country when their visas have expired;
- Reform our legal immigration system to recognize the importance of characteristics that will help build the American economy and strengthen American families;
- Create an effective employment verification system that will prevent identity theft and end the hiring of future unauthorized workers; and,
- Establish an improved process for admitting future workers to serve our nation's workforce needs, while simultaneously protecting all workers.

What should we do about immigration reform?

We should read the proposal I've copied for us.

We should read our newspapers and pay attention to the broadcast news with special attention to the topic of immigration reform.

We should take responsibility for making up our minds on this issue.

We should tell our senators and representatives in Congress and our President that we agree with the need for immigration reform. We should tell them what new policies we want to see enacted.

We should care about this issue, first and foremost because we are Jews. We were strangers in the land of Egypt. We have been strangers in many lands.

We are enjoined by Torah to have one law for the stranger and for the home-born.

Let's make the immigration law of these United States a fair and compassionate law.

For this let us say, Amen.