

Melanie Lidman Passover Talk 2018

As Jews, we know what it is to be a stranger. It is written into the core of our being, the story we tell each Passover. Judaism's compassion for the stranger reaches deeper than just a shared experience.

It's stated clearly in the Torah:

“You shall not oppress or mistreat a stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt.

The mitzvah of loving the stranger is the commandment repeated the most in the Torah. It is written no less than 36 times in different iterations.

In Hebrew, it's written even more intimately

כי ידעתם את נפש הגר

(ki yedatem et nefesh hader)

which translates into “knowing the soul of a stranger.”

Beyond the spiritual commandment to love the stranger, there is our shared history during the Holocaust, when we were strangers in a hostile land, and thousands of people, despite grave danger to themselves and their families, risked their lives to protect and love the stranger. Israel was founded on the idea of welcoming strangers – welcoming fellow Jews from all over the world, from countries near and far, that make up the colorful hodgepodge of Israel today.

Today, the strangers in Israel that most people are concerned about are the 40,000 African refugees, mostly from Eritrea and Sudan. They came, fleeing brutal dictatorships in their home countries, through perilous crossings, and wandering through the Sinai desert to reach Israel. Does that story sound familiar?

Rather than welcoming these strangers in our midst, vulnerable people who have fled great danger and are seeking safe harbor in Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is pushing a plan to deport these asylum seekers to a third country. He is giving them a stark choice: \$3,500 in cash and a plane ticket to Rwanda, or indefinite imprisonment in the Saharonim prison.

Immigration is a tricky issue in any country, and especially in Israel. On the one hand is the biblical idea of welcoming the stranger and the memory of the Holocaust weighing on our conscious.

On the other hand is the reality. Israel doesn't have enough resources to support an unlimited number of refugee seekers, no matter how heartbreaking their stories. Israel is concerned with maintaining a demographic Jewish majority, and some people are concerned that addition of any non-Jews to the state is a threat to the country's Jewish character.

South Tel Aviv, the area where more than 80% of the asylum seekers live, was already strained and impoverished before they came, adding 40,000 refugees didn't help the situation.

This is where I live, as well. My neighborhood, planned for 5,000 and home to 60,000, is crumbling. There aren't enough schools or kindergartens or health clinics or parks. But there are plenty of liquor stores and places to score synthetic heroin, an easy escape for the thousands of refugees who are denied work permits or a chance to support themselves. The situation is not sustainable. South Tel Aviv needs help.

But I've also been to Rwanda and Uganda, where approximately 4,000 Eritrean and Sudanese refugees were deported over the past years, before the government began this rapid-fire attempt to deport the majority of the refugees within a year. I have heard the stories of heartbreak, murder, rape, poverty. I have seen these asylum seekers, now in their third or fourth country since fleeing their home, become victims of extortion or thrown into prison with no trial, because they don't have the right documents, because Israel does not provide them with such.

Countries around the world are struggling with what seems to be a never-ending flow of refugees. Israel's challenges are not unique – every country is dealing with these problems. But Israel is in a unique position because, since building a wall on our southern border with Sinai, there are no new refugees. Refugees that previously tried to come to Israel are now fleeing through Libya to Europe.

This is not the case in many of the other countries around the world, which are still dealing with oncoming waves immigration. There are some weeks that

Uganda absorbs more South Sudanese refugees in a week and a half than the entire number of the refugees in Israel.

The fact that Israel's refugee population is stable – except for the birth rate – gives us an opportunity to start to deal with the existing situation.

Netanyahu and the Population Authority hold that the asylum seekers are economic refugees who came for better economic opportunities, and they are not “true” refugees fleeing from persecution and strife. But we've been in that position as well: Jacob was an economic refugee when he led his family to Egypt, forced by famine and drought to find better pastures in Egypt. Jacob never wanted to stay in Egypt, he just wanted to survive.

When the first asylum seekers in Israel received 60-day deportation notices on February 1, I looked at the calendar and couldn't quite believe my eyes. The deportations were scheduled to begin on April 1, the first day of Passover. Did you know 93% of Jewish Israelis participate in a seder? It's one of the most widely observed Jewish traditions in Israel. Regardless of your politics, there are so many parallels to the story of the African asylum seekers. And the day after the majority of the country sat down to a meal commemorating our flight from Egypt and liberation in Israel, the country wanted to start mass deportations of the strangers in our midst back to the places they had fled.

There are no easy answers to this issue. Finding the balance between compassion for the most vulnerable and pragmatism to protect Israel's character are real, messy questions that require discussion and debate. They require us to find creative solutions – like Rabbi Susan Silverman, who wants to turn the immigration detention center into a high-tech “Start Up U,” training asylum seekers in fields like solar energy and medical apps, so they can be recruited go to African countries as trained professionals and leaders rather than as victims of a government policy. Eritrean activists are trying to work with their own community to implement dispersal methods, so they are no longer concentrated in a few neighborhoods in South Tel Aviv. These solutions are difficult and require cooperation and understanding.

The deportations are now temporarily frozen pending the outcome of a High Court Hearing, which will take place after Passover on April 9. Slowly, Netanyahu and the Population Authority have started backing away from their proclamations: women, children, and married men are no longer at risk of deportations. Sudanese refugees from Darfur are no longer at risk of deportation. Eritrean asylum seekers who were imprisoned after fleeing service in the country's slave-like army, which has conscription that can last for decades, might be able to receive refugee status, which would protect them from deportations. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees is trying to find permanent resettlement solutions in countries they consider safe, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. Just before I left I attended a goodbye party for an Eritrean woman moving with her family to Montana.

As I said before, immigration is a tricky issue that the United States is also facing. I am sure there are a rainbow of opinions in this sanctuary about what the US should do, and I know even talking about this issue is more controversial than other things I could have talked about in this dvar.

When God first talks to Moses, in the beginning of portion Va-era, and says God will free the Israelites from slavery, God says "v'hotzati etchem mitchat sivlot mitzrayim" – I will take you out from the labor of the Egyptians. There is a Hasidic interpretation that "sivlot" connects to the word "savlanut" which means patience or tolerance. The worst part about slavery, this interpretation holds, is that the Israelites had become tolerant to their situation as slaves, and forgot what it is to be free.

We have now sat down with our family and communities twice this week, to retell the story of when we were slaves and then became free, after a harrowing escape and wanderings in the Sinai desert. It is easy to fall prey to the fear mongering of politicians and right-wing activists, to believe that Israel does not have room or resources to love the stranger in our midst. Yes, our resources are finite, and yes, we want to maintain a Jewish identity, but if 40,000 people threatens our grasp on both, our problems are bigger than any of us realize.

Few of the asylum seekers I've met want to stay in Israel. They are looking for a safe harbor to rest while their country becomes safe. When we say "next year in Jerusalem!" they have their own yearnings, next year in Asmara in Eritrea or Juba in South Sudan.

So I bless us, as we move through the Passover holiday and Israel begins to confront some ugly truths in our midst, that we shift the meaning of tolerance. That we refuse to become tolerant to bigotry, racism, misinformation, and fear.

That instead, we become tolerant to the fact that each one of us has a story of coming out of slavery. Instead of sending people right back into bondage we can think about ways we can work together, in tolerance and understanding, to come up with creative solutions.

Let's be tolerant to the fact that each of us has a different Jerusalem we are trying to reach. Let's be tolerant by working together to support each other on our journey, rather than placing stumbling blocks before the blind and most vulnerable.

Let's celebrate tolerance, not fear, as we join our hands together and say, with one united voice, L'Shana Haba'ah BYerushalayim. Next year in Jerusalem!

Addendum 5/30/18:

Bibi canceled the deportations last month, but the asylum seekers are still in legal limbo and no one knows what will happen.