



OP-ED

Shavuot lesson: Jews must champion cause of strangers in a strange land

By Rabbi Jill Jacobs

NEW YORK (JTA) -- As Shavuot approaches, Congress again seems poised to take up the question of immigration reform.

Frustrated by last year's stalemate on the subject, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid earlier this month announced his intention to bypass the normal Judiciary Committee process and take an immigration bill that the Senate passed last year straight to the floor for debate.

The bill, S.2611, is not quite the bill for which immigration advocates had hoped. It would provide additional visas for prospective immigrants; create a means for some of the 10 million-12 million immigrants here illegally to change their status; speed up the family-reunification process; and guarantee that those who provide social services to immigrants will not be prosecuted.

Unfortunately, it also would create a complicated, three-tiered legalization process that probably would leave millions unable to adjust their status, and would include "touchback provisions," which require immigrants already in the United States to leave the country in order to return legally.

Critics of these touchback provisions worry that this requirement will constitute a financial and bureaucratic disincentive for immigrants to go through the legalization process.

The White House is backing a different bill that essentially would end the family-reunification system, which keeps families together by giving immigration preference to close relatives of U.S. citizens. The bill also would create a guest-worker program in which workers could receive three-year legal status through their employers.

We should think about these bills as we read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot. Fittingly, the book begins with a double migration: fleeing the famine in Canaan, Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons leave for Moab.

The sons eventually marry Moabite women and, in short order, father and sons die of unexplained causes. Naomi returns to Canaan with Ruth, one of her daughters-in-law. Without any way to earn an income, the women fall into poverty.

We might imagine each of the central characters feeling simultaneously at home and out-of-place at each critical point in the story: Elimelech and his family are at home in Canaan, yet find their land betraying them by failing to produce sufficient produce. In Moab, where the family should feel out-of-place, the sons find wives and establish households.

Upon returning to Canaan, Naomi finds herself distanced from her former community and dependent on her foreign daughter-in-law to provide for her. Finally, Ruth finds her real home in Canaan, far from her family and within a new community and religious tradition.

This narrative of place and displacement finds a parallel in the central event of Shavuot, the re-enactment of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. In the biblical story, the Israelites flee slavery in Egypt on the promise of becoming a sovereign nation in their own land. The people soon arrive at Sinai, where they formally establish themselves as a covenantal community in relationship with God.

While the people find their place in the cosmos, so to speak, almost immediately after being liberated from slavery, it takes another 40 years and the death of an entire generation for them to claim a physical home as well.

Throughout all of this the people complain, paradoxically, that they felt more at home in Egypt, where they were officially and permanently relegated to outsider status.

Jewish history and memory are full of such stories of displacement, interrupted by the periodic discovery of home. We have formed our collective identity around the assumption that we are destined always to be wanderers.

In America, Jews have found a greater level of stability than at virtually any other point in our legendary wanderings. While we still tell our families' immigration stories, they increasingly have become folk tales told by and to those born too late to meet the immigrant subjects.

Despite our power and security, we continue to identify ourselves as the still-vulnerable descendants of poor immigrants who somehow managed to scramble their way into the middle class.

For generations, our immigrant history has driven American Jews to champion the rights of others who wish to settle in the United States. Opinion polls routinely show that American Jews hold more positive views of immigrants than does the general population; virtually every mainstream Jewish organization with a domestic agenda has passed a position in favor of maintaining the United States as an immigrant nation; and more than 20 local and national Jewish organizations, convened by the Jewish Funds for Justice and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, have spent the past year collaborating to garner Jewish support for immigrants and for an immigration-reform bill that would make it easier for newcomers to build a better life here.

On the other hand, some Jews have argued that an influx of immigrants will threaten our ability to maintain our place in the middle and upper-middle class. Others worry that immigrants from Muslim countries pose a security risk to Jewish communities. Still others shy away from immigration issues out of ambivalence about the presence of an undocumented Israeli immigrant community.

As the memory of our own immigration begins to fade, and as we feel increasingly at home in America, some of us begin to see strangers only as a threat to our comfort and not as mirror images of our own immigrant relatives. We reinvent our own coming-to-America stories, imagining that our families came through the appropriate channels and worked their way to the top without any outside support.

Unlike Ruth, Naomi and the Israelites who stood at Sinai, we can feel entirely at home in the place where we live. As a community we have acquired significant wealth and influence; we mostly are able to care for our own community's basic needs; and we can live, attend university and work wherever we want.

Our growing comfort in America threatens to make us less likely to protest when cities pass ordinances prohibiting landlords from renting to "illegal" immigrants, or when employers forbid immigrants from speaking their native languages on the job. We differentiate ourselves from the immigrants who enter America illegally, forgetting that many of our own families were able to enter the United States only by virtue of the open-border policies of the first part of the 20th century, and that millions of Jews died as a result of the visa system established in 1924. We complain that today's immigrants are draining our public resources, ignoring the fact that our own entrance into the middle class was made possible by the public education system.

According to one oft-cited midrash on the Book of Ruth, Elimelech and his family leave Canaan not because they're starving as a result of the famine, but rather because they're wealthy and wish to hide their own food stores from the desperate masses. This selfishness prompts God to punish the family through the deaths of Elimelech and his sons.

The irony of the story, according to this midrash, is that Elimelech flees Canaan in order to protect his own wealth, only for his wife and daughter-in-law to find themselves back in Canaan destitute and dependent on the generosity of the wealthy.

The point of this midrash is clear: Our own success should make us more, not less, sympathetic to those immigrants who differ from us only in the language they speak and the decade they arrived in America.

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