

# THE JEWISH JOURNAL

OF GREATER LOS ANGELES

OPINION

2007-03-30

## Seders: A great time to discuss immigration

By Simon Greer

One year ago, as Jews across the country sat down at Passover seder with their friends and family, immigrant communities and their allies were standing up.

The impetus for these mass mobilizations, the likes of which we have not seen in a generation, was an attempt by Republicans in the House of Representatives to criminalize undocumented immigrants and those who provide them with any form of assistance, including humanitarian relief.

After the House passed legislation in December 2005, the rallies began in earnest. By Passover, they had hit their stride. Two days before the first seder, millions participated in demonstrations staged in 102 cities and towns across the United States. In California, which has the largest number of immigrants, including many undocumented Mexican laborers, the rallies were particularly strong.

Then on May 1, hundreds of thousands of immigrants left work to create a "day without immigrants." The goal of that day was to demonstrate how vital immigrants are to the nation's economy; that many of the same people who demonize immigrants rely on these men and women.

Following months of activity by advocates on all sides of the issue, the House bill died in the Senate, which failed to pass any legislation to address the need for comprehensive immigration reform. In November, some of the most outspoken anti-immigrant members of Congress lost their seats, and the Republicans lost control of both houses of Congress.

Today, a year later, comprehensive immigration reform that would provide a pathway to citizenship for most undocumented workers has fresh momentum. The biggest obstacle to reform -- the Republican majority in the House -- is gone. And a broad coalition, from religious leaders to businesses to immigrant advocates to labor unions, would like to see legislation passed.

A majority of the organized Jewish community is a part of this coalition. Last year, a diversity of Jewish groups were brought together by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Jewish Funds for Justice in an informal partnership to support comprehensive immigration reform. In Washington, D.C., the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the National Council of Jewish Women and the Jewish Council on Public Affairs, among others, have been active supporters of the Senate bill.

At the local level, groups like the Progressive Jewish Alliance in Los Angeles, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in Chicago and chapters of the Jewish Labor Committee were bringing a Jewish

voice and presence to the demonstrations and rallies. And many of the immigrant groups at the center of the mobilizations, including the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, were receiving support from the Jewish community through the grant-making program at Jewish Funds for Justice.

Where did this outpouring of support come from? After all, the great majority of Jews are now second-, third- and fourth-generation Americans. Is it simply nostalgia for our Ellis Island past that compels us to stand up on this issue? No: as Jews we have compelling reasons to defend and support the rights of today's immigrants.

As we have become more comfortable in the United States, Jews, like other Americans, have become increasingly reliant upon the labor of immigrant workers. Particularly in cities like Los Angeles, with large immigrant workforces and substantial Jewish communities, our institutions and individual lives are bound in a web of interdependence. Mass deportation, which remains the preferred solution of many conservatives, would create a labor shortage our community would experience acutely.

During the Passover seder, as Jews retell the story of our exodus, we are asked to imagine that we ourselves are experiencing what our ancestors experienced. This has rarely been difficult.

"For we were strangers in a land not our own" has resonated generation after generation for a community accustomed to being gerrim or strangers. In the United States, we may not be strangers, but we remain a people apart. We are correct to follow our communal instinct that sees greater safety and comfort among the diversity immigration brings, rather than the homogeneity of a white, Christian America.

Lastly, if Jews do not stand for justice, what do we stand for? As Rabbi Jill Jacobs notes in her new haggadah supplement, on "multiple occasions, the Torah explains a humanitarian law by commenting, 'For you were strangers in the land of Egypt.'" Immigrants in the United States, regardless of their status, are here fleeing economic, religious or other forms of persecution. If we turn our backs on these immigrants, we reject the values at the heart of who we are as a people. That would truly be a crisis of continuity.

My hope is that this year, we engage in conversations at our seders about immigration, conversations that are at times contentious, personal, inspiring and enlightening. Whether we come to Jewish justice issues from a halachic, prophetic, self-interested or combined perspective, we must ask ourselves the hard questions.

We must use this time to tackle myths about our own immigrant experiences, myths that claim that we were deserving, while today's seekers of freedom and the American dream are undeserving.

As a community, we sometimes forget that without the relative absence of federal immigration restrictions before 1924, most American Jews would not be here. And many Jews trying to flee Nazi Germany died as a result of the immigration restrictions put in place after that time.

In the year that follows, the Jewish community will need to draw upon these conversations to be productive participants -- even leaders -- in the national discussion on immigration, a conversation that threatens to turn increasingly divisive and partisan as the presidential election gets under way.

*Simon Greer is president and CEO of Jewish Funds for Justice.*