

## **Rosh Hashanah 5767**

### **Immigrants into the New Year**

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In 1939, a Viennese Jewish man enters a travel agent's office and says, "I want to buy a steamship ticket."

"Where to?" the clerk asks.

"Let me look at your globe, please."

The man starts examining the globe. Every time he suggests a country, the clerk raises an objection. "This one requires a visa. This one is not admitting any more Jews. The waiting list to get into that one is ten years."

Finally the Jewish man looks up. "Pardon me," he says, "do you have another globe?"

Out of that question, the state of Israel was born. Not another globe, but another country. It is for this reason that Israel is a country of immigrants, welcoming Jews from across the globe. It is for this reason that Israel itself is an immigrant country, creating not just a home for Jews but a Jewish home. It is for this reason that its anthem is called *Hatikvah*, 'the hope'. Israel holds the hope of making the desert bloom, yes; of a democracy and peace in the Middle East, yes; but for most of the people who go there, it holds the hope of home. Russians coming from the chaos of the Former Soviet Union. Ethiopians fleeing famine.

And yes, Americans, looking for an extraordinary place in which to live ordinary lives.

It is that hope which was jeopardized this summer, in the conflict with Hizbollah. As with the intifadas before, the war this summer raised a grim possibility: that Jews are safer out of Israel than inside it. That the hope of making a home there, of living a life there, is misplaced.

We experienced something similar nineteen hundred years ago. In the second century, the Jews who lived in the Land of Israel faced persecution by the Romans. Rabbi Nathan, a rabbi from that time, asks what God means by the phrase “those who love Me.” He then goes on to explain:

...[this] refers to those Jews who live in the Land of Israel, and in consequence put their lives in jeopardy when they keep the commandments. “*Ma lekha yotzei lehareg? Al she-malti et b’ni*”. Ask a Jew in the Land of Israel why he may be killed tomorrow, and he will tell you, ‘for nothing more than circumcising my son’. “*Ma lekha yotzei lisaref? Al she-karati ba-Torah*”. Ask him why he may be burnt up tomorrow, and he will tell you, ‘for nothing more than reading a book of Torah’. “*Ma lekha yotzei litzalev? Al she-akhalti et ha-Matzah*”. Ask him why he may be crucified

tomorrow, and he will tell you that it is for nothing more than eating Matzah.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, these Jews were not doing anything extraordinary beyond trying to live ordinary lives – in the land of Israel, and as Jews. Rabbi Gordon Tucker has written his own midrash based on this one, following the events of this summer. Asking who these Jews are now, he writes:

One of them could be an Argentinian Oleh going to a Bar Mitzvah in a bomb shelter in Kiryat Bialik, who, if he didn't quite get to the shelter in time, would be in danger of being consumed by a rocket's fireball. "Why might you be burnt tomorrow? For nothing more than wanting to be present for the reading of the Torah." Or she could be an American immigrant who works as a nurse at the hospital in Nahariya. "Why might you be killed tomorrow? For nothing more than going to work to tend the sick." Or, it could be a Moroccan family from Kiryat Shemoneh doing whatever we do when we are just at home. "Why might you be shot tomorrow? For nothing more than staying in our home in the Land of Israel."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael, Beshallah.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Temple Israel of White Plains, Rosh Hashanah 5767 (shared at the New York Board of Rabbis sermon seminar, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006). I am indebted to Rabbi Tucker for bringing the Mekhilta text to my attention.

It is no accident that all these examples are of Jews who have made *aliyah*. There is something extraordinary about all of these Jews, who have come from the four corners of the earth to make a better life in Israel, for themselves and for their people. There is something extraordinary about the fact that the largest single immigration from Jews in the West came to Israel just this summer, in the midst of the war with Hizbollah. On August 16<sup>th</sup>, the largest group of immigrants in the history of Israel came from North America and Europe, undeterred in their desire to make Israel their home. That is no less than extraordinary. And there is something extraordinary about each and every one of Rodeph's Sholom seventeen teenagers who went to Israel this summer – not to mention their parents, who did not put them on the first flight back to New York when that first Katushya hit.

Many of those teenagers were taking part in the Reform movement's summer teen experience. The program starts not in Israel but in Prague, and from Europe, they take a boat to Israel; even our tourists are immigrants. The teens re-enact the 1947 voyage of the Exodus, which carried a boatload of Jewish refugees from the death camps of Europe to Israel's shores. The catch, of course, is that Israel was not yet Israel; it was ruled by the British, and so, unlike the Argentinian and American and Moroccan *olim*, immigrants, of the past half century, these European refugees were illegal immigrants, law-breakers who had to be stopped. The British rammed the boat when it got near Haifa, and in the fighting that ensued, one Jewish mother said, "I'm going to

stay alive so my child won't be burned in a gas chamber. I'm going to live in decency without being afraid. There are no frontiers to Jewish hope.”<sup>3</sup>

*There are no frontiers to Jewish hope.* ‘Od lo avda tikvateinu’, say the words of Hatikvah, our hope is not yet lost: to be a free people in our land. Look in your high holiday bags for information about our Israel Emergency Fund, and the projects we are asking you to support. If Jews can keep streaming into Israel looking for a better life, it is incumbent on us to help them find it.

*There are no frontiers to Jewish hope.* It is not hard to be sympathetic to that mother holding a baby in her arms, demanding to live in decency without being afraid. It is more painful for us to remember that refugees from the Holocaust pounded on Israel’s doors because, as the story about the travel agent tells us, there was not much room on this globe. In Canada in those years, when a prominent politician was asked how many Jews the country could take, his response was: “None is too many.” And here in America, quotas on Jewish immigration continued in full force during the war, and were not lifted until 1965. In the late 1930s, 83% of Americans were staunchly opposed to opening the country’s gates to any more immigrants, never mind Jews.<sup>4</sup> That woman on the Exodus was among the lucky ones; despite deportation

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth Gruber, *Exodus*.

<sup>4</sup> This statistic, and the background information on the St. Louis, below, is based on the on-line Holocaust Encyclopedia article, “The Voyage of the St. Louis,” from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005267>).

of the the refugees back to Germany by the British, when Israel was established they could find a place to call home. Not so the refugees on the St. Louis, which left Hamburg for Havana in 1939. 937 Jewish refugees held visas for entry to Cuba, but that entry was refused. They tried to gain entry to the United States off Miami, and again they were refused. And so the St. Louis, with no other globe to choose from, was forced to return to Europe. Almost all of its passengers died during the war. God knows that is not a journey that we want to re-enact.

There were boats then, and there are boats now. Now the boats go from northern Africa to Southern Europe, from Cuba to America, from any place where people are desperate for a better life to any place they hope to find it. All these migrations are different of course. Two things, though, connect them all: all are illegal according to the laws of the time, and second, the hope for a life that is better than the life that has been left behind. *There are no frontiers to human hope.*

This summer, while the immigration debate was raging in the papers, I got my green card in the mail. My experience of the immigration process was, relatively speaking, a cakewalk. I had almost every advantage, except for that of a marriage recognized by the powers that be. But the process was empty of dignity, and with nary a mention of hope. I answered countless questions – am I a Communist, am I a terrorist, do I plan to become a polygamist – and underwent a battery of medical exams. Even with the help of a lawyer and with English as my

first language, I found the process and the paperwork almost impossible to understand. At no point, though, was I told: this is a country of immigrants. You are part of a fine tradition. Welcome. And at every point, until I held that green card in my hand, I felt fear: fear that I might be separated from my family, fear that I might not be able to do travel to Israel with our day school's 8<sup>th</sup> grade, fear that my life, my home, everything I have built could be taken away in an instant. Receiving mail from the Department of Homeland Security will do that to a person.

The moment that stands out in my mind, though, was a cold February day. I had received notice to appear at the Bronx offices of the Immigration and Naturalization Services for my biometrics – fingerprinting and a photo. I was afraid that I would not be able to find the right building on the Grand Concourse, but I needn't have been concerned: I could see the place I was going from blocks away. It was the building with a long line of people snaking down the block. Each person clutched a piece of paper like my own, telling them when to appear; and each person stood, like I soon did myself, shivering outside in the bitter cold. Yet none of us would have stepped out of that line for an instant.

As I stood in that line, I thought of the immigrants before me in my family, how they come from Poland and Russia and the Ukraine; my Zaide, an orphan, who came not knowing a soul; and my Bubbe's

father, who left a shtetl in Eastern Europe to become a fur trader in the Canadian north. Then I thought of the immigrants standing beside me in the line, people from all around the world, some carrying children, some leaning on canes in the cold. With all of them, I shared that basic hope: the hope of making a home. *There are no frontiers to human hope.*

It cannot be that there is such a divide between those of us with our official papers standing in that line, and those who come without papers, driven by the same dreams. Who am I to say that I would not do the same, in search of a better life for myself and those I love? I am not defending illegal immigration; it is one of the most complicated issues of policy in our times. I am not saying we should have no concern for the stability of our economy, the safety of our borders, or our national identity. I *am* asking that we have sympathy, even empathy, for the desperate desire to make a better life. I am asking that we treat those we encounter with dignity, and call on our government to do the same. I am asking that in the midst of all the policy, we remember that there are people on the line.

We do not need to look far to find support for this in our tradition. The words on the base of the Statue of Liberty are Jewish words: Emma Lazarus' "New Colossus," calling on us to extend our arms in welcome – "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Thirty-six times, the Torah reminds us: we were

strangers in the land of Egypt. And Abraham, whose journey we recall on Rosh Hashanah, is the paradigmatic immigrant, risking everything he has, leaving everything he knows, in pursuit of a dream.

When he is on the way to the *akedah*, to sacrifice Isaac his son, a midrash tells us that Abraham asks: What is to become of the promise? Has he made this whole journey only to lose that which he holds most dear?<sup>5</sup> And God answers him by keeping Isaac alive. God answers him by insisting that his journey will continue, that all need not be lost.

Abraham did not expect it to be easy, any more than the people who stood beside me in that line. A welcome mat need not be rolled out, but some sacrifices should not be asked. Migrants from Mexico should not be dying in the desert, trying to reach the border. Teenagers from China should not be in this country on their own, terrorized by the snakeheads who smuggled them here and threaten their families, too frightened to ask for help. Gay and lesbian families should not be torn asunder because their relationships are not recognized. Widows of restaurant workers who died on 9/11 should not be kept from visiting their families in their homelands, afraid that they could not return to the country where they lost the one they loved. There must be some other way. Until we find it, this country will keep missing opportunities, moral and economic alike. And until we find it, people will die.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on Genesis Rabbah 56:2.

In 1892, Anzia Yeziarska, came as a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe to the United States. In her essay, “America and I,” she writes:

...I saw America – a big idea – a deathless hope – a world still in the making. I saw that it was the glory of America that it was not yet finished. And I, the last comer, had her share to give, small or great, to the making of America, like those Pilgrims who came in the *Mayflower*.

...Great chances have come to me. But in my heart is always a deep sadness. I feel like a man who is sitting down to a secret table of plenty, while his near ones and dear ones are perishing before his eyes... all about me I see so many with my longings, my burning eagerness, to do and to be, wasting their days in drudgery they hate, merely to buy bread and pay rent. And America is losing all that richness of the soul.

The Americans of tomorrow, the America that is every day nearer to coming to be, will be too wise, too open-hearted, too friendly-handed, to let the least last-comer at their gates knock in vain with his gifts unwanted.”<sup>6</sup>

*There are no frontiers to human hope.* We have a lot for which to be grateful, as Jews in this country; we have reached a point where our gifts are received with open arms. But it was not always so. Not one of us sitting here can claim to have always been here. All of us either

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<sup>6</sup> Anzia Yeziarska, *The Open Cage*, p.33.

came here ourselves, or come from ancestors who immigrated so we could be born in this land, people who sacrificed so we could succeed. May we have what it takes to welcome others into the American dream.

Nostalgia connects us to the immigrant story, but all of us here are immigrants on this night/day. Rabbi Alan Lew teaches that that the journey is what these Days of Awe are all about:

This is the journey the soul takes to transform itself and evolve, the journey from boredom and staleness – from deadness – to renewal... It is the journey from little mind to big mind, from confinement in the ego to a sense of ourselves as a part of something larger. It is the journey from isolation to a sense of our intimate connection to all being.... The journey home. This is the longest journey we will ever make, and we must complete it in that brief instant before the gates of heaven clang shut.<sup>7</sup>

And so the immigrant story is our story too, and we too dream a dream on this Rosh Hashanah. Certainly, some of us in this room are immigrants to this country, having uprooted ourselves to learn a new life. Some of us are immigrants to Judaism, brought here by determination and hunger and hope. But *all* of us are immigrants into the year to come. Each one of us is here, at the border of the New Year, hoping to make a better life. Each one of us is waiting to discover what

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Lew, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, p.8.

5767 will hold. None of us knows for sure. But we know that we need to leave the old year behind, and knock on the door of the new.

Some of you are coming from extraordinarily difficult years; others are coming from years overflowing with joy. All of us, though, are together on this night/day in that mixture of fear and hope – it reminds me of nothing more than standing together with other immigrants in that line, not knowing who would be let in and who would be sent back. Who shall live and who shall die, who shall be humbled and who exalted. We do not know, as we enter this new year, who will be standing here beside us when the next year comes. We do not know which marriages will be renewed and which will fall apart; which children will flourish and which will struggle; which jobs will be kept and which will be lost. All we know is that we are looking for the Promised Land; that we hunger for milk and honey; that we want the gates to be open to our pleas. But the story of Israel and the story of immigrants to these shores tell us nothing if they do not reflect Herzl's timeless words – *im tirzu, ein zo agada* – if you will it, it is no dream. Do we control everything that will happen in this year to come? Absolutely not. That's why on Yom Kippur we will say Kol Nidrei – even at the beginning of the year, we know there are promises we will not be able to keep. But it *is* in our hands to have the will, to dream the dream, to leave what we know and search for what we need.

There are those in this world that tell us not to try to move, not to try to change. Be happy with what you have; make the best of it; just make do. That is not the message of our history, and it is not the message of Rosh Hashanah.

Go back, some would say to the Israeli, leave the Middle East, give up on Herzl's dream. Go back, some would say to the immigrant, give up on making a better life, give up on finding a country where your children will breathe freedom like air. Go back, some would say to us all, go back to a broken relationship, a stifling job, thwarted dreams. I cannot believe this is what God wants. God wants us, like Abraham, to move. God wants us, like Abraham, to go to a land we do not know.

There is a woman in our congregation who is an immigrant to the United States from Mexico, an immigrant to Judaism, and, along with the rest of us, an immigrant into the new year. Her name is Cristina Ross, and in her conversion statement, she wrote:

One of the meanings of the word "Hebrew" is: "dust raiser" because Abraham kept moving from land to land with his animals and clouds of dust would announce his presence. That is my personal wish for myself and the Jewish family I will raise... I wish for us to be Hebrews and raise dust wherever we go; we will announce who we are with pride, we will raise dust for social justice and the acceptance of the marginal, we will stir the

passion of our community and we will wake up the world to peace and love.<sup>8</sup>

No one can tell me we are not blessed to have such an immigrant among us, to remind us who we should be. As Cristina stated so beautifully, God wants us, like Abraham, to raise dust wherever we go. We stand here on the border of a new year, and we insist on a promised land. There is no other globe; only the one we inhabit. In Israel and in America, in this synagogue and in synagogues around the world, we enter the New Year and proclaim: *There are no frontiers to our hope.*

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<sup>8</sup> Cristina Ross, conversion statement, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006.