



Why Immigration is a Jewish Issue

The story of American Jews is the story of immigration.

Many of us have grown up with a defining family immigration story, most often rooted in the late 19th or early 20th Century, hundreds of years earlier for some, decades later for others. Because we understand what it means to be strangers in a new land, and because justice is a core principle in Jewish tradition, we believe Jews must press for a just and fair immigration system.

Jews' connection to immigration goes back to our very origins. The story of our ancestor Abraham begins with his own migration, first to Canaan, then to Egypt. In the Torah, thirty-six times we are reminded to care for the *ger* (sojourner)—more than any other Biblical commandment—for we were once sojourners in the land of Egypt.

*Adonai said to Abram, “**Go forth from your native land** and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1).*

***When a ger dwells with you in your land, do not oppress him.** The ger who dwells with you should be like one of your citizens; **love him like yourself**, for you were gerim in the land of Egypt. I am Adonai your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34)*

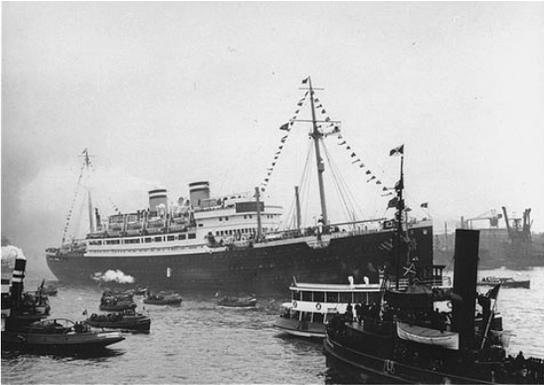
We are also supposed to view ourselves as if we had personally gone out of Egypt. We retell this story every year as part of the Passover seder, that “my father was a wandering Aramean...”

In every generation, we are obligated to see ourselves as if we left Egypt ourselves. As it says (Exodus 13:8): “Tell your son on that saying ‘It is because of this that God acted on my behalf when I left Egypt.’” (Mishnah Pesachim 10:5)

*My father was a fugitive Aramean. **He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there**; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to Adonai, the God of our fathers, and Adonai heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. **Adonai freed us from Egypt** by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. (Deuteronomy 26:5-10)*

Although we immigrated to America in large numbers in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Jews have been here since colonial times and helped found the country. Initially denied entry by Peter Stuyvesant, Dutch Governor of New Amsterdam, Jews from Recife, Brazil eventually landed in what is now New York in 1654.

Governor Stuyvesant, asking for permission to deny entry to Jews, wrote in a letter in 1654: "The Jews who have arrived would nearly all like to remain here, but learning that they (with their customary usury and deceitful trading with the Christians) were very repugnant to the inferior magistrates... fearing that owing to their present indigence they might become a charge in the coming winter, we have, for the benefit of this weak and newly developing place and the land in general, deemed it useful to require them in a friendly way to depart."



The MS St. Louis surrounded by smaller vessels in the port of Havana, June 1939.

Many years later, in the early 20th Century, perhaps in response to the waves of Jewish immigrants who had arrived in the preceding decades, the United States restricted immigration, making it exceedingly difficult for Jews to find refuge from the Nazi regime. This is most famously exemplified by the case of the MS St. Louis, a ship that arrived from Europe with over one thousand Jewish refugees that was turned away from Cuba and then the United States. The ship was forced to return to Europe and a majority of the ship's passengers were killed in the Holocaust.

In the later part of the 20th Century Jews continued to immigrate to America from Iran and the Soviet Union, fleeing persecution and in search of a home where they could feel safe, practice their religion freely, and find economic opportunity.

Jewish tradition and communal history is one continuous story of migration and overcoming obstacles. Therefore we should support an immigration policy that protects immigrants and their families from harm, and does not unduly burden new Americans.

Ultimately, we must remember that we all share the Divine spark and we must strive to create laws that respect the humanity in all people.

And God created human in God's own image, in the image of God, God created him; male and female God created them. (Genesis 1:27)