



**For we were
strangers ...**

**Jewish Social Policy
Action Network**



www.JSPAN.org

For we were strangers: A short history

The story of Passover is a lesson in the oppression of strangers. Although Pharaoh welcomed Joseph's father and brothers to Egypt in a time of famine and gave them space to settle in the land of Goshen, the Israelites remained strangers. They were, after all, shepherds in a land of people who worshiped sheep. Their separation thus served to minimize religious and ethnic conflict.

Over time, the separation of the Israelites from Egyptian society became a liability. It was fear that these strangers would align with Egypt's enemies that led Pharaoh to impose slavery on them. The transition from protected guests to slaves reflects what we have seen too often in history – the tendency of all societies to oppress the stranger.

While we often boast that America is a nation of immigrants, our national story is replete with examples of fear, stereotyping and oppression of newcomers to our shores.

In the 1700s, the normally enlightened Benjamin Franklin warned his fellow Philadelphians that the immigrants in Germantown corrupted American society because they would neither assimilate nor learn English.

When they started arriving in large numbers in the 1800s, Irish Catholics were targeted for discrimination and infamous “No Irish Need Apply” signs were posted at many workplaces.

Later in the 1800s, America reacted to the “yellow peril” of the “inferior race” of Chinese immigrants. President Grover Cleveland described the Chinese as “ignorant of our constitution and laws, impossible of assimilation with our people and dangerous to our peace and welfare.”

Japanese immigrants were targeted with Alien Land Laws as politicians sought to save “California – the White Man's Paradise” early in the 20th Century.

Jews and Italians were described as “beaten men from beaten races, representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence,” who would “pollute the gene pool” with their dysgenic Southern and Eastern European stock.

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When Calvin Coolidge signed the immigration Act of 1924 imposing strict national origin quotas, especially on Southern and Eastern Europeans, he said, “America must remain American.”

Would I Break the Law?

AS part on the Seder ritual, we read about Shifrah and Puah, two midwives, who begin the defiance of Pharaoh by refusing to obey his orders to kill the children of the Israelites.

The Haggadah is unclear whether Shifrah and Puah were Jewish – whether they were Israelite midwives, or non-Jews who were merely midwives to the Israelites. But one thing is clear: we are to honor Shifrah and Puah for their compassion regardless of whether they were members of our tribes. We honor them for their willingness to break Pharaoh’s unjust law.

At your Seder this year, ask who among the assembled would be willing to break the laws of this country to perform a compassionate moral act?

If you need an example to start the discussion, you might start with Thomas Cardinal Mahoney, Archbishop of Los Angeles. He announced that he would be willing to break American immigration laws that he considered to be immoral. Specifically, Cardinal Mahoney was referring to a draconian enforcement-only immigration bill adopted by the United States House of Representatives. That bill would have required the deportation of all non-citizens currently in this country without legal documentation, widely believed to be many more than 12 million people. Fortunately, the bill died in the Senate.

What would you do if a law like that passed? Cardinal Mahoney proclaimed that he would provide sanctuary to individuals and families, even if he would be sent to jail for doing so. Like the old Hebrew National commercial, Cardinal Mahoney asserted that he and Catholics like him had an obligation to adhere to a higher standard.

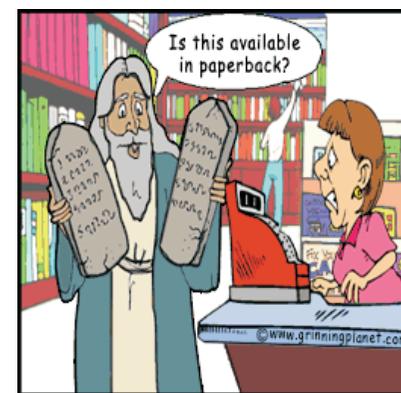
This is not the first time that American religious leaders have had to confront moral obedience questions relating to immigrants. In the mid-1980s, for example, refugees from Central America were threatened with deportation. These “illegal immigrants,” particularly those from El

course?” In the Biblical narrative the elders are punished by not being allowed to accompany Moses up Mount Sinai since they chose not to be present in confronting Pharaoh. Are there rewards for persistence? Courage? Leadership?

A time for action

The Rabbis tell us the plague of darkness (Exodus 10:21) was so pervasive that it somehow could be felt. Have you experienced such darkness in your life, or could you imagine it? We need to dispel the plagues of darkness that are with us today. But our health care system has historically treated mental health issues as less worthy of coverage, and individuals have been discouraged by social norms from seeking help to remove emotional darkness from their lives. How do we change this to enable everyone to escape from narrow places we create for ourselves?

Next year in Jerusalem, but this year right here. We invite you to make a Passover resolution this year, to actively pursue the values you believe in, and to be ready to take up the challenges of our people and our nation. The progressive citizen voice in our community, the organization of people with the courage to lead and the willingness to sacrifice, is JSPAN.



We invite you to join the Jewish Social Policy Action Network, and to share our planning and our actions, Begin by registering to receive our communications at www.JSPAN.org.

punishment, but frogs are also a natural occurrence. The *Midrash* of Rabbi Hanina says, “Even those creatures deemed by you [to be] superfluous in the world... have their definite place in the scheme of creation.” How well do we apply this consciousness to the environment? In deciding to carry out a housing development, commercial center, plant construction, or a public works project, how well do we account for the needs of those creature that live on the land that may be selected for construction? How well do we take into account our own need for sustainable uses of the land?



And how do we achieve the true message of the ritual Jewish mitzvot? Kashrut, for example: a Hekhsher Tzedek is being developed by a renowned group of rabbis and food industry experts [this is also known today as “Magen Tzedek”]. The new standard will take into account not only whether an animal is slaughtered according to Jewish law, but also how the animals are treated beforehand. And this concern will be matched, just as importantly, with how the people doing the work are treated. This will provide consumers of kosher food with assurance that the food they are buying is produced by companies that embrace Jewish ethical values as well as ritual practices. *(Thanks to Rabbi Morris Allen.)*



Who will lead? And what are the costs of leadership? In Exodus 4:10, Moses is reluctant to accept the charge to go forth on behalf of his people. His comment is “I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue.” Are we reluctant to accept immense responsibilities or challenges? How difficult is it to consistently say Hineni, Here I am, ready to step forward?

Exodus 5: 1 depicts the change that came in the wake of determination turned to doubt as the elders (leaders) who accompanied Moses and Aaron to the gates of Pharaoh’s palace dropped out one by one as they approached the destination. How do we convince people to “stay the

Salvador, were escaping regimes that were supported by the government. Towns symbolically declared themselves as “cities of refuge,” drawing on the biblical term for places people could flee if they had violated the law but had not done anything wrong. Churches were providing sanctuary. In 1985, the Reform Movement went so far as to offer resources and moral support for congregations that joined in providing sanctuary.

The Talmud teaches, *dina demalchutaa dina*, “The law of the state is the law.” Our ancestors, who often lived under oppressive regimes, were obligated to obey the laws of their rulers. But the rabbis recognized that laws might often come into conflict with one another, with some laws taking precedence over others.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, a leading figure of Conservative Judaism, has declared that the call, “Never Again,” does not mean merely that the Jewish people will never again permit ourselves to be subject to the death and degradation that we faced under the Nazis. It also calls upon us to assure that no people anywhere is treated as a stranger, as one does not belong among us.

The matter is of deep Jewish concern. We cannot forget that because of nativist impulses of the type that plague our country today, large numbers of European Jews were denied admission to this country and perished in the Holocaust. Torah teaches us, time and again, to “remember the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.”

So, this year at Seder, ask the question, would you break the law? And prepare to answer it for yourself when the youngest one asks, “Why is this night different from all other nights?”

Four Questions for this Passover

More Jews attend a Passover Seder than participate in any other ritual. The themes of Passover resonate deeply within the Jewish soul and are designed to make us uncomfortable with the status quo. This year, we at JSPAN have four questions that we hope you will intersperse in the discussions at your Seder. We are interested to know what kind of reaction they draw.



“Let all who are hungry come and eat.” Six million children in the world under the age of five die every year as a result of hunger. Here, in the richest country in the world, 36 million Americans are “food insecure,” meaning that members of the household have no food and cannot afford to buy any, adults in the household skipped meals or ate less because there was not enough money for food, or the family worried that the food on hand would run out before there was money to buy more. Yet, 40% of those eligible for the Food Stamp Program are not receiving benefits. The problem is obviously much worse for the children of those who are living in the country illegally. Even if the children were born in the United States and can claim full citizenship, their parents often let them go hungry rather than claim food stamp benefits for fear that they will risk being deported. Besides making an individual contribution to Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger, what can we do after we leave the Seder to address this issue?

“They made life bitter for them with harsh labor.” The history of slavery in Egypt is reflected in numerous Biblical references to the importance of economic justice, including the treatment of employees and the payment of wages. Today, the federal minimum wage stands at \$7.75 an hour, or less than \$15,080 a year for someone who works full time, 52 weeks a year and takes no vacation. The real value of the minimum wage – adjusted for inflation – is less than it was 30 years ago. An estimated 430,000 single parents with children under 18 benefitted when the minimum wage was last increased. A single parent with two children earning 21% above the minimum wage would still be below the federal poverty level. Many illegal immigrants are willing to work below the minimum wage and unscrupulous employers are willing to exploit them in this manner. Critics say that only by enforcing the labor laws on behalf of illegal immigrants can this practice be stopped. How should lawmakers respond?

“We were strangers in the land...” These days, our national xenophobia has centered on Latinos. We have seen the proliferation of “English only” laws that appear to be facially neutral, yet attract some support because they have a discriminatory impact on other racial or ethnic groups.

Anti-immigrant laws have sprung up at the local level at the same time that the Southern Poverty Law Center has documented an alarming rise in hate crimes against those who appear to be foreigners. Lou Dobbs used his bully pulpit on CNN to whip up anti-immigrant hysteria. Politicians

like Hazelton, Pennsylvania’s mayor Lou Barletta have ridden the wave of nativist sentiment to try to build their own political careers. In 2009, about 1500 immigration-related bills were considered in all 50 state legislatures, and 21 states enacted employment-based immigration laws, bringing the total to well over 200 laws that are mostly hostile to immigrants.

What is a Jewish response to these developments? *Various civil rights groups have filed challenges to these laws and JSPAN has been active in assisting with several of the friend of the court briefs.*

Should the nation tighten its borders? *While JSPAN does not condone illegal entry into the United States, we do not believe that closing the borders solves the immigration issue.*

Are we treating the immigrants who are already here – said to number 12 million – properly? *JSPAN urges a comprehensive approach, creating a path to citizenship for those people who are in this country, dealing in a compassionate manner with questions concerning family unification and work authorization, and above all, treating these questions at the national level, to avoid setting policy in pockets of local xenophobia.*

JSPAN also supports laws to prevent hate crimes and discrimination against people who appear to be foreign, whether they are in this country legally or not.



“And you shall tell your child on that day.”

The Seder represents perhaps the most powerful intergenerational tool for transmitting to our children the values of those who we are and what we believe is as a people. Each year we leave the Seder feeling as if we had been personally redeemed from the narrow place of bondage in Egypt. As we move from darkness to light, slavery to freedom, and sorrow to happiness, we commit ourselves anew to work, speak out, strive and fight for the redemption of all people. What actions will each of us commit to take to repair the world in the days and weeks ahead?

Repair includes the physical world as well as human affairs. Moses warns Pharaoh of the plague of frogs (Exodus 7:26-27). This is a