

## The Immigrant's Gratitude

### *Shabbat Ki Tavo 5779*

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Mount Herzl, Israel's answer to Arlington National Cemetery, is not on every itinerary. It is always on mine. There, among graves from the War of Independence section, one sees row upon row of young adults, many of them still teenagers, who sacrificed their lives to establish the first sovereign Jewish land in two millennia.

The headstones are 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish history lessons: "Born in Poland. Died defending Latrun in the War of Independence. Age 19....Born in Hungary. Died on the road to Jerusalem in the War of Independence. Age 22." And so forth. One can only imagine the specific story of each individual young soldier buried there. Survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, some were smuggled into Palestine during the waning days of the British Mandate, with little time for military training before independence and war. Others' immigration attempts were thwarted, and they found themselves in British concentration camps on Cyprus until the Mandate ended, arriving in newborn Israel barely in time to have rifles thrust into their hands, free for only days or weeks, but dying as free men and women.

Anticipating their deaths, even before the State was established, the poet Natan Alterman wrote:

"The earth grows still  
The lurid sky slowly pales over smoking borders.  
Heartsick but still living,  
a people stand by  
to greet the uniqueness  
of the miracle.

...

Then soon,  
A girl and boy step forward,  
And slowly walk before the waiting nation;  
In work clothes and heavy-shod

They climb in stillness.

Wearing still the dress of battle,  
The grime of aching day and fired night  
Unwashed, weary unto death,  
Not knowing rest,  
But wearing youth like dewdrops in their hair.  
Silently the two approach and stand.  
Are they of the quick or of the dead?  
Through wondering tears, the people stare.  
‘Who are you, the silent two?’  
And they reply,  
‘We are the silver platter  
Upon which the Jewish State was served to you.’  
And speaking, fall in shadow at the nation’s feet.  
Let the rest in Israel’s chronicles be told.”<sup>i</sup>

Immigrants—refugees, like Holocaust survivors who became soldiers, and more ordinary immigrants seeking a better life—are often most grateful to their adopted homelands. Israel is not the only nation whose liberty has been served up on the “silver platter” of immigrants so grateful for their new lands that they have been willing to join forces with the native-born, risking their lives in the armed services of their adopted nations.

The Bipartisan Policy Center reports: “During World War I, around 500,000 immigrants served in the [U.S.] military—approximately 18 percent of all soldiers...Over 300,000 immigrants served in the armed forces during the Second World War, 109,000 of whom were noncitizens...In 2016, there were approximately 511,000 foreign-born veterans of the armed forces residing in the United States...”<sup>ii</sup>

This week’s Torah portion speaks of a less dramatic offering by new immigrants—refugees, we may well call them—Israelites entering the Promised Land after liberation from Egyptian bondage and forty years of desert wanderings.

In that case, a basket of fruit, the first produce of the land, was required, along with a declaration of gratitude for the journey and for the gift of a land of their own.

A week ago today, New York *Times* columnist Bret Stephens wrote: “A woman and her daughter, no older than 6 or 7, are shopping for groceries in a corner store of a bombed-out city. It’s ... 1947. The war is over, the Germans are gone, the Gestapo is no longer hunting Jews...The mother speaks with the trace of an accent. As she reaches for her wallet to pay, the grocer says, ‘Why don’t you people go back where you came from?’”<sup>iii</sup>

The trouble, which Stephens details, is that the woman and her daughter, like most Holocaust survivors, have nowhere to go. “To go back to the Soviet Union would have been suicidal. Israel did not yet exist...America’s doors were mostly shut.”<sup>iv</sup>

Then, in 1948, everything changed—yes, Israel was established, becoming home to many. Also, “Harry Truman signed the Displaced Persons Act.” As Stephens concludes, he tells us what the careful reader has guessed: “The mother and daughter whose story I told at the beginning of this column are...my own grandmother and mother. I thank God it was Harry Truman...who led America when they had nowhere else to turn.”<sup>v</sup>

Stephens is far from the only American Jew filled with gratitude that America’s doors were open when our ancestors immigrated here, though I hasten to remind us of Stephens’ words about 1947: “America’s doors were mostly shut.” The same was true throughout the Holocaust. Nativist immigration laws of the 1920s and wartime xenophobia kept Jews and other threatened people out of this country. How many could have been saved had America’s golden gates been open wide when our people needed this country most?

Still, the unprecedented freedom and prosperity we Jews enjoy in America would not have been possible without this country’s welcoming immigration policies before the 1920s. Among those of us here whose ancestors were Jewish, the vast majority arrived between 1850 and 1910. Many of us count several generations of native-born Americans before us. More than a century later, American Jews continue to cherish a self-perception that ours is an immigrant community, blessed to have found freedom here and not eager to shut the door behind us.

Jews are not the only grateful immigrants in this country. In November of 2016, a young man—tenuously protected by DACA, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, because he was just a child when his family immigrated from Peru without legal documentation—wrote of his family’s first Thanksgiving in this

country: “That day, we gave thanks to God for so much: Mrs. Turtle, my sister’s and my teacher at Vickery Meadows Elementary School in Dallas, Texas, who with patience, games, and stories taught us our first words in English; Dad’s plentiful work; our apartment and the furniture we had been able to secure through donations or our hard work; our health; and so many other small yet meaningful events that had happened during our first year in the U.S. You see, when you’re an immigrant, you feel gratitude for every step you’ve taken towards building a new life.”<sup>vi</sup>

On this Shabbat, as we read about our immigrant ancestors’ thanksgiving offerings upon their arrival in ancient Israel, let us renew our own gratitude to America, which has opened its arms to us. We know enough to rebut the false stereotype of the immigrant, prone to laziness and violence. Instead, we know that, even today, immigrants to this country are grateful. Why else would they wish to remain among us? Let us add our voices to those who seek to keep America’s doors open. Then, let us give thanks, for America will again be the land of the free.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Translator unidentified. Provided by the Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, [https://hartman.org.il/SHINews\\_View.asp?Article\\_Id=117](https://hartman.org.il/SHINews_View.asp?Article_Id=117).

<sup>ii</sup> Jeff Mason, “Immigrants in the Military: A History of Service,” *Bipartisan Policy Center*, August 16, 2017, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/immigrants-in-the-military-a-history-of-service/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Bret Stephens, *Blessed Are the Refugees*, the *New York Times*, September 13, 2019.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Pierre R. Berastain, “Undocumented Gratitude: An Immigrant’s Reflections on Thanksgiving,” *Huffpost*, November 24, 2016.