

America and the Jewish People

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“Their arrival was not auspicious,” writes historian Karla Goldman, of the first Jews who came to the colonies that would become the United States, in 1654. When 23 Jewish refugees arrived in New Amsterdam, Goldman writes that Governor Stuyvesant “sent off a request to his superiors in Amsterdam for permission to expel immediately the ‘members of this deceitful race – such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ.’” In a classic understatement, Goldman writes: “The official welcome was not exactly warm.”

We have come a long way. Stuyvesant was rebuffed by his superiors in Holland. America has been good for the Jewish people, and we dare say, the Jewish people have made significant contributions to the United States. Our good fortune in this country presents us with a great responsibility, to share our American blessings with others. Our gifts to America may make us proud, and they also leave us a legacy: We, as American Jews, must continue to offer our special gifts to help sustain our country as the greatest nation on the face of the Earth.

In his plea that those first Jews be banished from New Amsterdam, Peter Stuyvesant wrote that, if the right to settle was granted to Jews, then the colony “would be unable to deny it to the Lutherans and Papists.” Stuyvesant was right. A few Jews would not be America’s only minorities. If Jews would come here, then people of a variety of Christian faiths, and ultimately of non-Christian religions or no religion, might find a home here. And we all have. Together, Protestants of every stripe, Catholics, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Atheists and others have built this great nation.

Sometimes, though, we Jews have a tendency to believe our own myths too well. We may imagine that we are somehow different from other immigrants who came to this land, seeking opportunity. We are tempted to think that we came only because of religious persecution.

The myth, of course is based on facts. Notably, refugees escaping the Holocaust were fleeing certain death. Those first 23, in 1654, were trying to stay a step ahead of the Inquisition. Having been expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, they went to Brazil, then a Dutch colony. By 1654, though, the Portuguese had conquered Brazil, bringing the hateful Inquisition with them. To this very day,

Jews come to America, seeking religious freedom. We need look no further than late 20th Century immigrants from the Former Soviet Union, who bless our community and others throughout the land today.

The truth, though, is that the large majority of Jewish immigrants came here for the same reasons that brought Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and so many others. Conditions in their native lands had become unbearable. For some, religious oppression was part of the problem. For others, strict class lines were holding them back, or politics was the issue. For all of them, including Jewish immigrants, economics was a factor. Whatever their land of origin, these refugees of every nation and religion came to America in search of a better future, for themselves and their children. Such is the American dream, is it not?

Today, we are besieged by talk radio hosts and extremist activists who would have us believe that allegedly unchecked immigration is America's greatest problem today. They are in good – or, should I say, bad – company. On this July 4, even as we celebrate our American freedom, we read from the Torah about a Moabite King, Balak, who feared even to let foreigners – in that case, the Children of Israel – pass through this land. Balak feared that his land would be overrun. In our own day, the complaints of anti-immigration demagogues' are sometimes cloaked in security issues, not all of them unfounded in a post-9/11 world. Still, the real fear is like Balak's, that America will be overrun. Supposedly here to take jobs away from "real" Americans, immigrants are charged with being a drain on an economy they actually bolster. Similar ugly sentiments were voiced against Jewish immigrants in early parts of the last century. Some anti-immigrant forces today even attempt to insist that, because our more recent immigrants are overwhelmingly Latino, they are changing the face of America in an un-American way, with their own language and customs. Would that these critics had visited the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the earliest decades of the 20th Century. They would have found a Jewish immigrant culture, much more foreign than the one that exists among Mexican-Americans today. The language was Yiddish, not Spanish, but it certainly wasn't English.

We who recall the American Jewish immigrant experience echo the words of Leviticus: "The foreigners who live with you shall be to you like citizens, and you shall love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Let us never forget our own difficult history. We have faced discrimination and anti-Semitism, even here in America. At one time, we were strangers in this land. Ever

mindful of the miracle that Jewish life in America has become, may we lift up our voices to affirm that America's newest immigrants are members of our very own family.

Even as we identify with every generation of immigrants to these shores, let us also recognize that the Jewish experience has been uniquely blessed.

I used to believe that Jews "made it in America," becoming relatively successful in the socio-economic arena, because our immigrant ancestors placed an unusually high value on education, and because they worked hard. Like most myths, there is kernel of truth to this one, too.

The whole truth, though, is more complex. Some of the greatest misfortunes our people suffered in Christian Europe paradoxically placed Jewish immigrants in an excellent economic condition when they came to America. You see, in Europe, Jews were almost entirely prohibited from owning or working the land, where farming was the only means of making a decent living. Instead, many Jews were forced into buying and selling, what we would call wholesale or retail, a road only to poverty in medieval Europe. In 19th Century America, though, with the Industrial Revolution in full swing, the experience that Jews brought with them prepared them beautifully for success. Yes, our people studied and worked hard; they were also very lucky. Let us, then, not be smug in the face of those who have not yet made it in America. Let us never ask: "My grandfather made it on his own. Why can't they?" The truth is that our ancestors came here uniquely prepared to succeed in America. Let us savor our good fortune, and never rest until every citizen of this great nation has plenty to eat, excellent education, adequate housing, and full access to the finest health care system in the world.

On this Shabbat and Independence Day, let us commit ourselves to being all that American Jews can be, in keeping with our glorious legacy. Let the disempowered and the disenfranchised in this country never be far from our thoughts, whatever their religion, whatever their nation of origin. Let us recommit ourselves to the words engraved at the foot of the Statue of Liberty, verse by that great American Jewish poet and heroine of the labor movement, Emma Lazarus:

"Here at our sea-washed sunset gates shall stand

A mighty woman with a torch,

whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning,
and her name
Mother of Exiles.
From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; . . .
cries she
With silent lips.
'Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!'"

On this Independence Day, may God bless the Jewish people. On this Shabbat, may God bless America.

Amen.