

Mishpatim 5778/February 10, 2018
Thou Shalt Have Empathy for the Stranger
Rabbi Michael Mishkin

Shabbat Shalom.

I have been very fortunate to study in Jerusalem two times—once before I was in rabbinical school, and once while I was in rabbinical school. The first time, I studied at The Pardes Institute—a co-ed Yeshiva. Pardes is located in a Jerusalem neighborhood called Talpiot. Talpiot is a wonderful place—it consists of a nice mix of Sabras (native born Israelis) and Jews who made Aliyah. It is also the home to secular, Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox Jews.

Talpiot is built on a hill, and at the top of the hill is The Diplomat Hotel. While studying at Pardes, I also volunteered, serving as a big brother to a 6 year old boy from Ukraine. This boy and his parents were one of many families from the former Soviet Union, who were living in the Diplomat Hotel.

For decades, the Diplomat Hotel has served as an absorption center for Jews who made Aliyah. One of my favorite stories about Israel takes place at the Diplomat Hotel in the mid-1980s.

In November and December, 1984, Israel was engaged in a covert airlift, called “Operation Moses.” This operation was a cooperative effort between the Israeli Defense Forces, the CIA, and others, and it successfully evacuated 8,000 Ethiopian Jews from Sudan during a civil war that had caused a famine.

At some point during this operation, a person living in Talpiot learned that one of the flights with Ethiopian Jews would be landing in a few days, and those immigrants were going to be settled in the Diplomat Hotel. This person excitedly started telling his friends and neighbors about the new guests who would be arriving. The day they were to arrive was a Friday, so groups in the neighborhood decided they would cook extra food and welcome the Ethiopian Jews with Shabbat meals.

Friday morning came and went. Friday afternoon passed by and no one had showed up. Then Shabbat started, and there was no sign of the new immigrants. Finally, late Friday night, buses pulled up to the Diplomat Hotel. The residents of Talpiot went running to the hotel to welcome their new neighbors with open arms. Eventually they brought over the food they had prepared and they began singing and dancing—to celebrate this miracle. The miracle was that a group of Jews who had been disconnected from World Jewry for millennia, had just been covertly airlifted out of a Muslim country and brought to the land of Israel.

This story makes me smile, every time I think about it. Of course, the fact that the Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel was an amazing thing. But so was the way these Ethiopians were welcomed as they arrived to their new home.

The Ethiopians looked different and—in many ways—acted differently from their new neighbors. The Ethiopian Jews had come from a 3rd World country and did not know about some of the most basic things that exist in Westernized countries. They had never seen a telephone, a credit card -- or even a lock and key.

These Ethiopian immigrants could have been shunned. There could have been anger in Talpiot that so many strangers were being settled in their community. But the response was the opposite—there was singing, dancing, and celebration.

This story speaks to the power of Jewish Peoplehood. And it also speaks to the power of the State of Israel, what it means, and what it stands for. Israel was created as a Jewish country to accept any Jews, from anywhere in the world, at any time, especially during times of danger.

So while Peoplehood and Zionism are strong bonds, connecting Israelis to Jews all over the world, a question arises: how would Israelis respond to African asylum seekers, who aren't Jewish?

Today, literally—right now—an answer is playing out, and I want to share it with you. It's both bad and good.

The bad news first, as reported by Rabbi Daniel Gordis in Bloomberg News.

“Earlier this week, the Israeli government officially began notifying thousands of North African immigrants and asylum seekers that they are now going to be forced to leave the country.

These migrants, who came to Israel illegally, are being offered \$3,500 plus a plane ticket to depart; those who refuse to leave “voluntarily” will be jailed, the government's Population and Immigration Authority has said. What the government has not told these presumptive deportees, who migrated to Israel via Egypt years ago across a then poorly guarded border, is where they will be sent. . .

While the deportation orders did not name the destination, the Israeli press widely assumes that Rwanda and Uganda are, indeed, what is planned. Rwanda and Uganda, however, have explicitly denied that they have reached a deal with Israel to accept the migrants.”

(Rabbi Daniel Gordis, “Israel's Conscience and 35,000 Migrants,” February 9, 2018)

On one level, this is understandable. Most people feel empathy for others who are suffering, but that empathy is usually for people who are most like us—family member, friends, and neighbors. It's much harder to feel empathy for people who are very different from us. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "Fear of [people who are not like us] is capable of disabling the empathy response."

That is why the Torah tells us in this morning's Torah portion, "You shall not wrong or oppress the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt," (Exodus 23:9).

It's hard to feel empathy for the stranger, but here the Torah is providing us with an insight into how we can do it. We can summon empathy for strangers, because—having experienced it ourselves—we should know how they feel.

This goes for anyone who lives within our community and is politically powerless, like the stranger.

In addition to the many verses in the Torah, which tell us over and over again, to look out for the stranger and the vulnerable, because we were once strangers and vulnerable, we also have a whole holiday dedicated to this theme—the holiday of Passover.

To drive this point home--the Haggadah says—"In each and every generation, a person should see himself or herself as if he or she went out from Egypt."

We were politically powerless in Egypt, and no one came to support us, and because of that, we were exploited and persecuted for centuries. Knowing that about our history, we cannot let others suffer the same fate.

Similar to this line in the Hagaddah, today—post World War II—we could and should say: "In each and every generation, a person should see himself or herself as if he or she were in Nazi Europe, and no country in the world would open its doors to let us in."

Now the good news in Israel. Many Israelis, from all walks of society, are protesting this deportation order from the Israeli government and their protests are based on the values from the Torah, and from our historical experience.

Rabbi Gordis describes these words and acts of protest, saying:

"Perhaps the most powerful objections have come from Holocaust survivors, who are held in unique regard in a country which has always claimed that had Israel existed, European Jews would have had a place to which to flee and would not have been murdered by the millions. Numerous survivors, some pointing out that they only

survived because others helped them, have pledged to hide the African immigrants in their own homes.

'The Times of Israel' quoted one survivor, Veronika Cohen from Budapest: 'I always asked myself what I would have done if, during the Holocaust, I was on the other side — would I have been strong enough to do what the Righteous Among the Nations did? I feel that to do this is my humanitarian duty.'

Similarly, a group of El Al pilots announced that they would refuse to participate in transporting the migrants to African countries. . . Doctors, nurses and psychologists have also weighed in, saying that those the government is calling illegal immigrants are actually victims 'who have come to us in their flight from genocide, torture, violence and rape' . . . Rabbi Benny Lau, a leading Jerusalem Orthodox figure, recently wrote an impassioned column pleading for the government to back down: 'How can we continue life as it is while the works of God's hands are drowning in fear and uncertainty? What will we tell our children and grandchildren when they are old enough to ask us what we did on behalf of the African children who were living in Israel?'" (Rabbi Daniel Gordis, "Israel's Conscience and 35,000 Migrants")

While Israelis are advocating for the strangers in their midst, we as American Jews have a responsibility to advocate for the strangers in our midst. This includes immigrants and refugees.

The prohibition against wronging and oppressing the stranger—and the obligation to love the stranger as we love ourselves—are not mitzvot that are limited, geographically, to the State of Israel. No, these mitzvot apply to Jews all over the world, which means they apply to us.

This past Wednesday, the TBI Social Action Committee sponsored a powerful workshop by HIAS (The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society). Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer of HIAS reminded all of us that we must take the issue of supporting refugees (and I would add, immigrants' rights) very seriously.

We can't take in everyone, but we can take in more refugees—and most importantly—when thinking about these issues, we should always remember that we are talking about fellow human beings, created in the image of God, and therefore deserving to be treated with great dignity.

Let's make our voices heard regarding this debate in Israel. And let's also make our voices heard—here—in Port Washington, in Albany, and in Washington DC.

We have the power to help more people. We have the power to advocate for immigrants and refugees. Our advocacy will make a difference and save lives. Our advocacy will be a statement to the world that even though—throughout our history—

many people have turned their back on the Jews, we—the Jewish community—will not turn our back on others, who are in need.

To find out how you can be more involved in supporting refugees, please click on this link from HIAS –

https://www.hias.org/sites/default/files/welcome_campaign_make_a_difference_online.pdf

Please look at this webpage, follow its suggestions, get involved, and make a difference.

I also invite you to participate in our Social Action Committee. Please contact me or the synagogue office if you would like to get involved.

Shabbat Shalom.