

A Message From The Baltimore Board of Rabbis

Immigration Reform: Questions? Dilemmas? Solutions? Values? Issues?

No people has been more affected by the experience of migration than the Jewish people. Our history since ancient times has involved frequent relocation and renewal, often because of the hostility expressed by native groups in places where we lived. Our collective experience has sensitized us deeply to the feelings of others who have also sought to find freedom, acceptance and opportunity, especially in this country. Not surprisingly we Jews have a deep love for America in part because our safety has been assured by faithfulness to the rule of law, applied equally to all its citizens.

Not only our history but also our theology has inclined us to sympathize with the plight of the immigrant. The Torah reminds us that “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him since you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:20). As a result, our community has been inclined to support public policies that welcome new citizens to America, many of whose personal values and resources further strengthen and enrich American culture.

However, we now live in a time when the status of immigrants and the policies governing them are in a state of chaos. Millions of people live among us in a state of illegality. Our borders are porous such that thousands continue to cross them without documentation every day. Many immigrants come seeking relief from the oppression of their nations of origin. Some also come to do damage to America.

Many of the “illegals” strain our national resources, needing health and educational services. Those who come outside of normal legal immigration are often subject to economic exploitation, whose “benefits” we citizens also shamefully accept by allowing immigrants to subsidize our living costs. There have also always been American “nativists” who resent “foreigners” and whose attitude towards “strangers” is rooted in prejudice.

These problems concern all Americans, and are the subject of political maneuvering in an election year. Some politicians advocate expelling all illegal immigrants, a policy which could greatly divide our nation; others favor sealing off our borders, a goal that seems to be elusive. Others point to the fact that many “illegals” have children born here who are citizens, and that deportation of their parents would separate (even grown) children from their families, something painfully reminiscent of the world of ante-bellum slavery.

Still others seek to punish those who employ “illegals,” forcing businesses to hire more costly labor. This would raise the prices we all pay. Others advocate policies providing paths to citizenship for “illegals” thus (in the views of some) rewarding them unjustly when others from their lands of origin have stood in line for years waiting to become Americans under our present quota system.

So, what is to be done? Some possibilities include:

- Enforcing the immigration laws we now have or changing them to reflect current realities.
- Dealing seriously with the issue of border security.
- Avoiding “solutions” rooted in heartless efforts to divide families.
- Working with neighbor nations to create living conditions that would give their citizens faith in a future in their own countries.
- Creating a category of “guest-workers” to enable people to return regularly as circumstances allow.

Not one of these ideas begins to approach a comprehensive solution to the immigration dilemma. Nor should any strategy be based on a desire to close the borders of this great nation, thus depriving us of the blessings of diversity. America must continue to be a nation that welcomes strangers and turns them into productive citizens, seeing in every such person a blessing and a hope for a better future for them and for our nation.

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