

**Welcoming the Stranger: America's Responsibility to Immigrants**  
***Shabbat Vayera 5778***

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The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum describes the criminal tragedy: "On May 13, 1939, the German transatlantic liner *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba. On the voyage were 937 passengers. Almost all were Jews fleeing from the Third Reich...The majority of the Jewish passengers had applied for US visas, and had planned to stay in Cuba only until they could enter the United States...After Cuba denied entry to the passengers on the *St. Louis*, the press throughout Europe and the Americas, including the United States, brought the story to millions of readers throughout the world....Sailing so close to Florida that they could see the lights of Miami, some passengers on the *St. Louis* cabled President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for refuge. Roosevelt never responded. The State Department and the White House had decided not to take extraordinary measures to permit the refugees to enter the United States... Quotas established in the US Immigration and Nationality Act of 1924 strictly limited the number of immigrants who could be admitted to the United States each year. In 1939, the annual combined German-Austrian immigration quota was 27,370 and was quickly filled. In fact, there was a waiting list of at least several years...Public opinion in the United States, although ostensibly sympathetic to the plight of refugees and critical of Hitler's policies, continued to favor immigration restrictions. The Great Depression had left millions of people in the United States unemployed and fearful of competition for the scarce few jobs available. It also fueled antisemitism, xenophobia, nativism, and isolationism...Following the US government's refusal to permit the passengers to disembark, the *St. Louis* sailed back to Europe...Great Britain took in 214 passengers[, with the rest going to the Netherlands, Belgium, and France.] 254 died [in the Holocaust]."<sup>i</sup>

American Jewish history is an immigration success story, beginning with a tiny number of Jewish colonials, continuing with significant numbers from Germany in the mid-1800's, and reaching an apex with a larger wave of immigration from Eastern Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Our Bat Mitzvah is here this Shabbat, celebrating her Judaism in freedom, because America opened its arms to her parents, brother, grandparents, and other relatives, among many others, after the fall of the Soviet Union. All of our American Jewish ancestors came to these shores seeking opportunity unavailable to them overseas. Few faced perils comparable to the fate of *St. Louis* passengers,

but almost all suffered anti-Semitism in their nations of origin. Anti-Semitism has ever been present in America, too.

At our people's hour of greatest need, America's door was largely slammed shut. Adolf Hitler celebrated the fact that nobody wanted Germany's so-called "Jewish problem."<sup>ii</sup>

We, the Jewish people, were strangers – not only in Egypt, or in Inquisition Spain or in Nazi Germany, and not only in the Soviet Union – we were strangers in nativist America. Right here in these United States. Perhaps that's why the Torah bids us thirty-six times<sup>iii</sup>: "Remember the heart of the stranger." We, who have so often been unwelcome foreigners, know the consequences all too well, at least thirty-six times over.

American Jews have responded. HIAS stands for "Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society," and is well known for helping Jewish immigrants coming to this country since 1881. HIAS continues to assist Jewish immigrants, but its vision is much broader today: "HIAS stands for a world in which refugees find welcome, safety, and freedom."<sup>iv</sup>

That mission was never more critical than it is now, late in 2017. Nearly a century since nativist impulses restricted immigration in a way that would facilitate Hitler's murderous plan, America seems eager to turn its back on refugees and other immigrants once again.

DACA, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, is set to expire on March 5, 2018, unless Congress adopts the Dream Act to make its protections permanent. DACA has secured the status of young people who came to this country without proper documentation, but by no fault of their own, having arrived as children. DACA shields from deportation only those with clean records and educational or military achievements, granting them work authorization.

Having been strangers in the Land of America, we must act. Our Reform Movement has designated November 6, this Monday, as a national call-in day to support the Dream Act. Information has been distributed to you. I urge you to call Senators Boozman and Cotton and Representative Hill on Monday. Lest there be any question about which script applies, none of our Arkansas Senators or Congressmen is a Dream Act co-sponsor.

Instead, Senator Cotton has filed a bill that would cut in half the "annual distribution of green cards," work permits for permanent resident aliens. Cotton's

“RAISE Act” “calls for reductions to family-based immigration programs, cutting off avenues for the siblings and adult children of U.S. citizens ... to apply for green cards...The bill would [also] create a point system based on factors such as English ability, education levels and job skills to rank applicants [for green cards]...In addition, [Senator Cotton’s proposal would] cap annual refugee admissions at 50,000 and ...end a visa diversity lottery that has awarded 50,000 green cards a year, mostly to applicants from African nations.”<sup>v</sup>

If you think that sounds like the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1924, which prevented Jewish refugees from escaping the Holocaust, you are correct.

Senator Cotton’s proposal cruelly targets the “tired..poor...huddled masses” offered a safe haven by our Statue of Liberty, specifically barring them from the shores of American freedom.

Senator Cotton claims to be acting in defense of American workers. Employment stagnation is real in this country, threatening the livelihoods of millions. Modern mechanization, replacing people with machines, is among many causes more significant than immigration. Populist politicians have targeted immigrants, correctly calculating that voters are easily persuaded when a scapegoat is identified. For evidence, see Germany’s federal election of 1933.

Like the tragic tale of the *St. Louis*, our Torah portion warns that rejecting the stranger is perilous. Unfamiliar visitors come to Lot’s home in Sodom. Like his Aunt Sarah and Uncle Abraham, Lot eagerly invites them inside for a meal. The people of Sodom will have none of it, demanding that Lot turn his guests over for cruel mistreatment. Sodom is destroyed. Torah isn’t specific about the sin of Sodom, the way it is about the flood in Noah’s day,<sup>vi</sup> but our sages explain: “Because of their wealth, the people of Sodom became haughty. They said to one another, ‘Since gold and silver come from our land, why should we allow strangers to visit our borders, eat our food, use our resources, and share what is ours? They will only take what we have, and there will be less for us. Let’s keep them from entering, and let’s drive out those who get in as soon as possible – especially the poor or the sick ones.’”<sup>vii</sup> The ancient rabbis teach: Sodom was destroyed for the nativist sin of hoarding their blessings, ascribing impure motives to newcomers, and shutting the door to foreigners.

Let us reject Senator Cotton’s proposed immigration restrictions, lest we imperil America’s soul just as the Sodomites sealed their city’s fate. Let us follow the example of Abraham, Sarah, and Lot instead. Abraham and Sarah kept their

tent open on all four sides, ever eager to welcome the stranger. The Dream Act is a good place to start, an opportunity to say to young people who are American in every way except legally, “You are not strangers; you belong here, in the only home you know.” Only then will we have discharged our duty to remember the stranger, having been strangers even here in America. Only then will America be faithful to the promise of our Statue of Liberty.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005267>, accessed November 3, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Adolf Hitler’s Speech to Nazi Party Congress at Nuremberg, September 12, 1938, N.H. Haynes editor, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April, 1922-August, 1939*, Oxford University Press, 1942, Volume I, pp. 719-20.

<sup>iii</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.hias.org/mission-and-values>, accessed November 3, 2017.

<sup>v</sup> David Nakamura, “Trump, GOP senators introduce bill to slash legal immigration levels,” *The Washington Post*, August 3, 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> Rabbi Stephen S. Pearce, Ph.D., “Judge a Society by Its Hospitality,” *Ten Minutes of Torah*, Union for Reform Judaism, October 30, 2017.

<sup>vii</sup> Tosefta to Sota 3 and Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 109a, as offered by Rabbi Chuck Briskin, “Sermon Starters for Parashat Vayera,” provided by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism for Justice Shabbat, November, 2017.