

The Social Justice Seder

From the Pardes Beit Midrash to your seder table: a Pardes Passover Haggadah insert.
Dr. Meesh Hammer-Kossoy, Director of the Social Justice Track



Passover: the Jewish Social Justice Holiday

Love the stranger because you were strangers in Egypt.¹

From the Haggadah

A person is obligated to see himself
as though he went out of Egypt.

חַיִּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא
יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם

I remember clearly the testimonies of African refugees during the first annual Pardes Social Justice Track trip to South Tel Aviv. Six years ago, students could not provoke asylum seekers to criticize Israel.

"We were running out of the fire into the darkness, and tough as it was, we found not only physical safety but a community that helped us settle," said one. "It was the first time I met a soldier who did not kick me," said the other.

Now in 2014, these positive experiences are mixed with other sentiments as well. The combination of deteriorating socio-political conditions in Eritrea and Sudan and the relative accessibility of Israel led to an unprecedented flood of refugees from those countries by way of Egypt.

There are now more than 53,000 African refugees in Israel, with the vast majority competing for jobs and apartments with each other and already vulnerable Israelis in a few square kilometers in South Tel Aviv. The government grasps for ways to stem the tide.

What started out as an opportunity for Israelis to prove ourselves as "doers of kindness from a long chain of doers of kindness" (B.Ket.8b) has become a major societal challenge for a Jewish and democratic state.

While the formulation of a coherent state policy on this issue is of the highest priority, seder night is perhaps better spent on the related existential questions raised by this challenge.

Table Topics

Discuss

How does our encounter with recent trekkers through Egypt to Israel offer us a unique opportunity to inform and be informed by our own experience as strangers and refugees?

"Out of Egypt"

Lyrics by Alma Zohar

There is always war in Africa
Our luck that it's far away
That from here, we don't see it or hear of it
I also walked once upon a time
On the paths of suffering
From Egypt to Jerusalem
In the desert, for many days
With no water
With the same question in my eyes
I also encountered evil
That slaps with no distinction
People who are innocent
People who are defenseless
Who have no home
With small children in their arms
They knock on your door
They weep a weepy cry
Don't say: What are these people to me?
These are foreigners
Because in every generation
One must see oneself as one
who came out of Egypt

[http://makomisrael.org/blog/album/
selected-alma-zohar/#out-of-egypt](http://makomisrael.org/blog/album/selected-alma-zohar/#out-of-egypt)

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Continued

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From the Haggadah

1 כָּל דֹּכְפִין יִיתִי וַיִּכְלֵךְ²

All who are hungry let them come and eat

As Rabbi Israel Salanter said, “The material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs.” The seder begins by symbolically opening the door to welcome in the needy and ends with opening it again for Elijah, the harbinger of the Messiah. In doing so, we are imitating God, (as we cite later in the Haggadah): וַנִּצְעַק אֶל יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, וַיִּשְׁמַע יְיָ אֶת קוֹלֵנוּ “We cried to the Lord, God of our fathers, and He heard our voices.”

When we open ourselves to hearing the cries of the needy as God does, we become deserving of Elijah and final redemption. But there are potentially millions of refugees from Africa, and the Talmud is clear that, “the poor of your own city take precedence” (B.BM 71a). Most of the African refugees have chosen to settle in South Tel Aviv. As a result, the relatively socio-economically weak population of that area has suffered many consequences: more intense competition for low paying jobs and the accompanying erosion of salaries, higher rents and less safety on the streets.

Can we really open our gates to all of them? And at what price to the already vulnerable Israeli population in South Tel Aviv? Is it fair to dismiss the residents of South Tel Aviv as racists? The local Bialik-Rogozin school is full of children who have been raised here as native Hebrew speakers. At what point do these people qualify as “the poor of [our] own city”?

2 וַיְהִי שָׁם לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, עֲצוּם וְרַב³

We became a huge, strong and numerous nation there.

It was demographic fear that Pharaoh used to justify the enslavement of the Jews (Exodus 1:9). Of course we are concerned with the numbers of refugees flooding our borders, but how should our experience in Egypt inform our discourse?

3 מַצָּה זֶה שֶׁאֵנוּ אוֹכְלִים, עַל שׁוּם מַה?...וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְהַתְמַהֵמָה⁴

Why matzah? Because we could not tarry.

Why were we in such a rush to leave Egypt that we could not wait for the bread to rise? Or HaHayim (Exodus 3:7-8) teaches that as strangers in Egypt, the Jews were at rock bottom. Had God waited any longer, we would have sunk to depths of immorality from which there was no return. Rabbi Eliezer suggests that this behavior is characteristic of the stranger: “סוֹרוֹ רַע” what we might call “at-risk” (B.BM 59b). Precisely to avoid this potential downward spiral, says Rabbi Eliezer, the Torah repeats thirty-six times the imperative of caring for the foreigner.

Some have accused the African refugee population of reducing safety by bringing crime, violence and alcohol to South Tel Aviv. Without affirming or denying the accusations, can our past experiences as strangers in a strange land help us find compassion for the refugees in our midst? How does their experience inform our understanding of our own exile?

What's Next?

- Attend a seder with asylum seekers:
http://www.panim.org.il/p-12_news-1784
- Learn more and help:
<http://hotline.org.il/en/main>
- Watch a film:
<http://www.strangersnomoremovie.com>

1. Deuteronomy 10:19; 2. Haggadah; 3. Deuteronomy 26:5, Haggadah; 4. Exodus 12:39, Haggadah