

Morning Prayers 9/16/19
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Two years ago, one afternoon in March – right on the eve of the Passover holiday, as it happened – an envelope arrived by mail at my home, containing my Green Card, granting me status as a Lawful Permanent Resident in this country.

The message emblazoned on the paper to which the card was affixed – “Welcome to the United States” – was the culmination of a process, in this country, of more than six years of filings, with round after round of responding patiently, and often repetitively, to supplementary requests for evidence, a global criminal background check, the expensive involvement of a skilled immigration attorney, and finally the intervention of a U.S. Congressperson — not to mention the pair of Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers who arrived at Harvard Hillel one morning with the express assignment of verifying not only that I was, as per the application, a clergy person, but also that Harvard was in fact a University. (I kid you not – Harvard keeps copies of its articles of incorporation on hand for just such occasions.)

Now, I stand here grateful, and I respect a thorough process, and the egalitarian principle by which it is zealously applied even to an instance so benign as myself – a Canadian rabbi working at Harvard. But the huge quantity of time and of resources dedicated to my own rather lucid case, as the whole thing wore on and on, I confess, did begin to remind me of the joke about the intoxicated person hunting under a lamppost for a set of misplaced keys. Comes along a stranger and helps to search assiduously for a long time before thinking to ask, “Are you sure this is where you dropped them?” to which the drunk replies “No, but this is where the light is.”

More seriously, of course, what I am getting at is that, even from my personal inside view of the process, I can only imagine the odysseys – and very likely the sense of forsakenness – among applicants in much more desperate and disadvantaged situations, ones without the resources of a Harvard behind them, or whose backgrounds officials may consider more threateningly exotic.

And as we see demonstrators making a showing at the Democratic Party candidates' debate – in fear that the Supreme Court may soon strike down the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA or “Dreamers” Act – it is poignant to consider the chapters of Deuteronomy that, in our ages-old Jewish calendar of readings, are being chanted in synagogues throughout the world this week.

Our reading in the Torah this week prescribes that, each year, every Israelite, upon bringing first fruits up to the Temple, should recite a brief capsule-version of the story of our Exodus from Egypt – the story of fleeing hardship and persecution to find safe harbor in a promised land.

An Aramean on the verge of perishing, my parent...

Went down into Egypt, few in number...

There was persecuted...

Cried out, was rescued...

And at long last came into this land, flowing with milk and honey...

And now, behold, I have brought the first fruits of the Land....

Not only does our Torah insist that each of us, generation after generation, remember and recite this narrative of our ancestors in the first person, as being still personally our own— It is one of the most grievous sins possible on our part, according to the lore and the law of our people, if any of us deem this story to be only someone else's.

“What is this service *to you?*” asks the ‘wicked child’ at the Seder Table, according to the *Haggadah*, the ritual script for the Passover holiday evening.

In saying “what is this to you” and not “*to us,*” the *Haggadah* explains, this child denies a fundamental tenet of our tradition, and – in that way excluding oneself from the collective narrative of the people – the *Haggadah* goes on to say, had such a child been in Egypt, such a one would not have been redeemed.

If one denies being oneself part of the story of refugee journey and grateful arrival, one has, says the Haggadah, “denied a fundamental tenet” – “*kafar be’ikar*.” To deny that the experience of the Exodus is one’s own is, quite literally, to miss the point of our religion – or, worse, to abnegate it.

And there is no place more appropriate than Harvard Yard in which to observe how the biblical story of the Exodus is integral not only to Jewish tradition, but to the conception of this country as well.

This week the Torah gives us an horrific account of what will befall us, heaven forbid, if we forget who we are and how we have come to be here, and in so doing forget the imperatives of care that are therefore incumbent on us.

For more than fifty excruciating verses (I know – our egalitarian student worship group has assigned them to me to read from the scroll this coming Sabbath) our Torah pronounces curses so venomous and devastating that longstanding tradition prescribes that they be read aloud only in a brisk, hushed undertone – they are just so hard to hear. (I rarely preach fire and brimstone, but herewith a sampling—)

<hushed, quickly—>

Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed in the field...

Cursed your basket and your kneading-bowl...

The Eternal One will send imprecation, discomfiture, and rebuke in everything to which you put your hand...

The heaven that is over your head will be brass, and the ground under your feet iron...

The Eternal One will cause you to fall before your enemies – by one way shall you go out against them, and by seven ways shall you flee before them...

The Eternal One will smite you with madness, and with blindness, and with bewilderment of heart...

Your sons and daughters will be given as slaves to another people, and your eyes will look and fail with longing for them all the day – and there will be nothing in the power of your hand....

Heaven forbid. And let us forbid it, too – by doing the right thing – by caring for the stranger in our midst, as we ourselves were once strangers in Egypt, or, for that matter, right here – by understanding such care to be the lesson of our own familial stories, and the most sacred of commandments – as all of us gathered here this morning are, I hazard to say, descended from migrants.

Every time we come together for a festive Jewish meal, traditionally, we recite, at its conclusion, as a prelude to our blessings of thanksgiving, the Hundred and Twenty-Sixth Psalm. Every time – every time we share a Sabbath dinner, as we did in the huge tent outside the Yard on the Science Center plaza, more than nine hundred strong, from all around the world, this past Friday evening—

Shir Hama'alot – “A Song of Ascents”

Beshuv Adonai et Shivat Tzion –

“When the Eternal One returned the captives of Zion...”

“Then our mouths were full of song, and our tongues full of rejoicing...”

“Then” — says the Psalm — “we were as Dreamers.”

My prayer for us all this morning is that we never forget it.