

Pharoah undoubtedly possesses a very complex psyche. Read the text of the Torah carefully and one may glimpse the contradictory impulses that pull him in opposite directions. Clearly he fears the Jews and is concerned lest they become a kind of Fifth Column. As we read in *Sefer Sh'mot*, the book of *Exodus*: “וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל עַמּוֹ הֵנָּה עִם בְּנֵי שְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעִצּוֹם מִמֶּנּוּ -- הִבֵּה” -- נתחכה לו פן ירבה והיה כי תקראנה מלחמה ונוסף גם הוא על שנאינו ונלחם בנו ועלה מן הארץ -- And Pharoah said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and leave the land’ (*Exodus* 1:9-10).

In these two brief verses the ruler of Egypt not only offers a rationale as to why the Israelites are cause for concern, but also a proposal as to how they should be dealt with. Yet upon closer examination, Pharoah’s words hardly make sense. Since their arrival in Joseph’s time, the Israelites had been loyal citizens; there is no indication that they offered any threat to the Egyptian monarchy -- far from being a remedy, surely a policy of disenfranchisement and delegitimation would create an enmity not in existence! And if Pharoah feared war with his neighbors, would it not have made more sense to cultivate the loyalty of his Jewish subjects rather than provide them with good reason to join his foes? Equally puzzling, it would seem that if Pharoah were truly concerned about the Israelites sizeable population, he would have called for their immediate expulsion -- yet instead he expresses anxiety lest they choose to leave the land. In short, Pharoah creates a problem that isn’t there by proposing a solution that achieves nothing but the exact opposite of his goal!!

As the story of the Exodus unfolds it becomes ever clearer that Pharoah is absolutely unwilling to let the Israelites go forth from Egypt; though he suffers because of his obstinacy and expresses enmity and disdain time and again, it is only when threatened by overwhelming devastation that he finally relaxes his grip and commands their departure. From a psychological standpoint it is clear that the presence of the Israelites in Egypt fulfills a deep-seated need for Pharoah; yet the very existence of that need occasions loathing and hatred for the very people whose enslavement he so desperately needs.

Last night and this evening yet again we are directed to read the *Haggadah* as a mirror of contemporary society, to reflect upon the fact that Egypt is not only a geographic locale, but a set of perceptions of self and society that have as much resonance to our lives today as thousands of years ago. Against this background I cannot help but think of the intense debate taking place on Capitol Hill and the streets of Los Angeles regarding illegal immigration to the United States. There is a more than passing resemblance between the Passover story and current events, if we take the time to look into the mirror of religious text and time.

On the one hand, there are many voices raised in resentment and anger against those who make their way into the U.S. illegally -- and not without good reason. Sovereign nations certainly possess the right to define the terms on which individuals may lawfully enter, obtain gainful employment and settle. To cross an international border without permission is to make one's very being an illegal presence in the country to which one has arrived.

Of course, what concerns so many is that a violation of immigration law in some abstract sense, but rather the sheer number of those who enter the U.S. illegally. "These people are too numerous for us," they say. "As they have undermined our borders, so in time they will substitute their culture for our own and adulterate our national identity. Come let us deal shrewdly with them". . . by building impregnable walls on our borders, by making it a felony to teach or feed them, by denying their children access to education, by closing the doors of our emergency rooms to their illnesses.

There are many adversaries of illegal immigration . . . outnumbered only by the millions of marginal jobs performed by the millions illegal aliens north and south, east and west. There are the hotel maids who work without social security benefits; the dishwashers and busboys who labor off the books, the small scale sweatshops in Chinatowns across the nation who operate sewing machines at significantly lower pay than the minimum wage. There are migrant workers who pick fruits and vegetables, there are unskilled day laborers, they mow the lawns, and dry the windshields of America's car wash customers. It would seem that we offer much work to the very folk whose very presence in our midst is condemned.

Yet ironically, it is their illegality that makes foreign workers so attractive and irresistible to employers. You need not offer decent wages when a call to INS, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, will silence employee complaints; you need not pay an employer's share of social security or offer workman's compensation to those who are working illegally.

And so the attitude of American society is not unlike that of Pharaoh - we condemn the presence of so many illegal aliens in our midst, we bemoan the social costs of their presence . . . yet simultaneously ensure that they continue to flock to America to assume the millions of unskilled positions that we have created expressly for them, and from whom we derive enormous benefit because of the low cost of their labor.

Were we to be truly honest with ourselves as a nation, we would ask -- Is it the porous character of our borders that has created the problem of illegal immigration, or is it the desirability of having an abundance of cheap labor that has created the porous character of our borders? I often suspect that the latter is closer to the truth.

The problem is not unique to America. Foreign workers have been widely employed in Israel since the 1980s. By the early nineties, after Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin barred most Palestinians from working inside Israel, foreign workers began to arrive in large numbers. Much of the work they perform is termed derisively *avodah aravit*, "Arab labor" -- unskilled and unpleasant jobs with low wages and few benefits. Due to the closures and security concerns associated with the first and especially the second *intifada* -- which made ingress and egress of Palestinians into the country a rather cumbersome and unreliable process -- Israeli contractors and industrialists gained a labor force from abroad willing to work for even less money than Palestinians.

Today In Israel there are thousands upon thousands of foreign workers (some estimates run as high as 300,000). More than half of them are there illegally. In a survey of 1,400 upper-middle class families in 2004 by the Israeli newspaper, *Ha-aretz*, 98% of those surveyed admitted to employing foreign workers without the proper permits and papers. 55% of these illegal aliens were employed as house cleaners, 32% as home builders or in renovation work, 9%

as movers, 2% as nannies. They come from places like the Phillipines and Ghana, Eastern Europe and Thailand; they are there to earn money to support families in their homelands. They make the journey because they will earn better wages in Israel than in their places of origin; they are permitted to stay because they constitute a kind of permanent underclass from which cheap labor may be safely derived while the government looks the other way.

What if an employer is dishonest, refuses to pay or honor conditions of employment? What if he or she subjects a worker to physical abuse? In Israel foreign workers have no legal right to quit or change jobs without immediately losing their legal status, risking arrest and deportation. And while foreign workers do have the right to request a special permit from the Interior Ministry to change jobs, the permit request is irreversible. If denied, there is no appeals process; the worker is required to leave the country immediately. That such a system lends itself to exploitation and abuse should not surprise anyone.

But the most poignant aspect of the dilemma finds expression in the children of illegal immigrants. Several years ago, Israeli television aired a documentary about the progeny of illegal workers entitled, *Do They Catch Children, Too?* “ In it, a frightened Filipino boy named Ryan asks the interviewer. “Do the police arrest the children, too? Do they also put them in jail?” This 10-year-old boy is one of many born and raised in Israel, who go to school, read and write only in Hebrew, light candles on Friday night with their Jewish peers, and dress in costume on Purim, etc. In the film, we see Ryan and his Filipino friend, Nato, doing their homework in the kitchen while Nato’s mother is cooking. They are learning about Passover and happily sing a new song they’ve learned in class: “Ekhad Mi Yodeah.” Later in the film, Ryan innocently asks his mother: “Where were you during World War II? Were you also in the gas chambers?”

More than a century ago, Theodor Herzl wrote, “Build your home in such a way that a stranger may feel happy in your midst.” Yet an even more ancient text commands our conscience: לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂק שְׂכִיר עֲנִי וְאֲבִיוֹן מֵאַחֶיךָ אֹו מִגֵּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצֶךָ בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂק שְׂכִיר עֲנִי וְאֲבִיוֹן מֵאַחֶיךָ אֹו מִגֵּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצֶךָ בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ -- You shall not abuse a needy or destitue laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in the midst of your land;

remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment” (*Deuteronomy* 24:14, 18)

The annual celebration of Passover is intended not only to cause us to give thanks for our freedom; it is also a reality check as to the extent to which we internalize the lessons of the past; for us to chant “*avadim hayinnu* -- we were once slaves” affirms that our ancestors were not the overseers, the taskmasters, or the henchmen of Pharaoh. And if we are commanded to look upon ourselves as having personally come forth from Egypt in each generation, it is for the purpose of looking at the society in which we live to ascertain whether we have kept faith with our ancestors, or have, God forbid, gone over to the side of Pharaoh. It is not enough for us to say that Jews are just like everyone else, *ki gerim hiyeetem b’eretz mitzrayim*. We were slaves unto Pharaoh and know that ultimately bondage is neither a failure of bureaucracy nor of adequately patrolled borders, but one of humanity, a failure of decency, a failure of compassion. If we cannot feel this and see the plight of those who live at the margins in our midst, whether here in America or in Israel, then we have not yet been liberated from slavery. May all who labor at the margins of society, in the words of the *Haggadah* be brought forth from “מעבדות לחרות, מיגון” -- from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to festivity, from darkness to light, and from bondage to redemption. ונאמר לפניו שירה חדשה -- Then we shall sing unto God a new song. Halleluyah!”