



Welcoming the Stranger  
to the Land

A Supplement to the  
Passover Haggadah

Jewish Social Policy Action Network

This Haggadah Supplement brings modern stories and commentary about immigrants in America to the ancient Passover Seder service. Additional readings and suggested points in the Seder to introduce them are provided.

The Passover Seder is a composition of fifteen events. If your family hangs on every word of the “official Haggadah,” continuing to all hours as the children fidget or snooze, keep this for another night of Passover. Otherwise follow the suggestions below to intersperse the new with the old.

***JSPAN, the Jewish Social Policy Action Network, a non-profit organization, is a progressive voice in our community established for the achievement of social justice and the protection of civil rights and religious freedom.***

***JSPAN supports the reform of our immigration system, most recently through endorsement of the reforms contained in the proposed DREAM Act in 2012. We look forward with the hope, this Passover, that our leaders in Congress will achieve the advancements contained in that earlier Bill. And at the conclusion of this booklet we invite you to join our effort.***

Our thanks to Jeffrey Pasek, Esq. and these contributors to our Haggadah Supplement (in order of appearance):

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## *Foreword*

In Hebrew, the word for “immigration” (hagirah) comes from the same root as the word ger, a word that can mean stranger, foreigner, or other. The word is used frequently in the Torah\*, most often in mandates to treat strangers living in our midst with respect and decency since we ourselves were once strangers in the Land of Egypt. Indeed, throughout history, the Jewish people have so often been in the position of the stranger, and much of Jewish history can be characterized as a history of constant migration, forced and voluntary relocation, and resettlement. ... Jews have been no strangers to immigration, and each year, as we retell the story of the exodus from Egypt, we are reminded of our own immigration stories, and how each of us arrived in the United States.

We know that although most of us struggled at first to earn a living and find good jobs and social acceptance, as a community we ultimately were able to integrate into American culture and society. Many of us whose families came here from Eastern Europe in the beginning of the 20th century can still visit Ellis Island and see our families’ names inscribed on the memorials there.

**We are here in the midst of a heated and extremely contentious debate about how we treat immigrants in America.** Much of the debate is focused on the question of national immigration policy. The inflamed rhetoric of this partisan debate has hindered consensus on possible solutions, and sadly, we have not been able to change the way our lawmakers debate and discuss the issues. But we do have the power to address how we are treating the immigrants already living in our communities.

We are here tonight to learn more about the immigrants who are living in our neighborhoods ...

How are immigrants struggling? Why are immigrants struggling? And what can we, as a Jewish community, as a social justice community, and as a community of concerned activists do to ensure the just integration of immigrants into our society? We hope that as we move forward and begin to understand the issues and the stakes, we can truly honor the strangers living among us and ensure that we are not mistreating the gerim, the immigrants in our midst.<sup>i</sup>



*Our History – to be read with Kaddesh, the opening Seder prayer*

**The wonder and majesty of the Haggadah** is the timelessness of the lessons it conveys. The story of Joseph's involuntary immigration to Egypt, followed by his family seeking to live and thrive in their adopted country, is repeated in America every day. It is as fundamental a Jewish precept as there is that we are to welcome the stranger in our midst as we were strangers in a strange land ourselves. And we, as a people, know what that feels like and can personally empathize with that condition. - *Howard D. Scher, Esq.*<sup>ii</sup>

**"When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."**  
(Leviticus 19:33-34)

The idea of being instructed to be welcoming is not foreign to the religious community. In fact, the most repeated command in the Jewish tradition is to “love the stranger.” The question that we grapple with today – as a Jewish community, as a faith community, and as a broader American community – is what does this “love” look like? How do we translate our desire and our duty to “love the stranger” – an ambiguous and even impossible request – into concrete action?



Dreamstime

For us, the first step toward love is identification. We Jews have a long and troubled history of persecution, and remember well the essential role the American immigration system played in our survival as a people. Most groups, most families, in our country have and know their own immigration history. Remembering these stories will instill in us the sort of compassion and recognition we need to proceed with a just and humanitarian reform process. Another facet of “loving the stranger” involves procuring and ensuring safety and opportunity for those who are in need. This means enacting immigration reform to create a system that is humane, fair and practical. We need a framework that balances enforcement with justice, balances restoring the rule of law with protecting workers, and balances enhancing security with reuniting families.

The last crucial aspect of “love” that we hope to exhibit toward the strangers and immigrants in our midst is equality. Equality in the sense of being formally recognized by the law, and also in the sense of being expected and required to be full contributing members of our broader society. Equality is also welcoming all equally without regard to protected categories of identity,

including the LGBT community that too often faces restrictions. Creating a system in which all new immigrants can better American communities through paying taxes, adding to the workforce, and participating in civic society will be a true manifestation of our love for and commitment to those who are strangers coming from abroad, as well as those who are strangers in our own United States.

Let us reaffirm our proud American history of not simply welcoming but actively inviting the stranger into our midst. We must join together and heed the call for comprehensive immigration reform. - *Rabbi David Saperstein.* <sup>iii</sup>

*During Maggid, the portion of the Seder that tells the story of Passover, the door is opened for strangers and the prayer Ha lachma anya is recited, concluding “next year may all people be free.” Follow with this reading:*

**“You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”** (Exodus 22:20)

**The historic status of the immigrant:** [A]ccording to the views of other nations, you had no right to be there, no claim to rights of settlement, home, or property. Accordingly, you had no rights in appeal against unfair or unjust treatment. As aliens you were without any rights in Egypt, out of that grew all of your bondage and oppression, your slavery and wretchedness. Therefore beware, so runs the warning, from making rights in your own State conditional on anything other than on that simple humanity which every human being as such bears within. With any limitation in these human rights the gate is opened to the whole horror of Egyptian mishandling of human beings. - *Rav Shimon Rafael Hirsch.* <sup>iv</sup>

**But that is not freedom, and we as Jews cannot accept that practice in America.**

*Later during Maggid, the telling of the story, after recitation of the Ten Plagues add these modern plagues:*

Today the 11 million undocumented immigrants among us face their own plagues.

### **Dangerous working conditions.**

In 1995, a Thai worker escaped a sweatshop in El Monte, California that virtually imprisoned women who were sewing clothing for major clothing manufacturers. In June, her boyfriend wrote a letter detailing the premises of the factory and describing the offenses taking place in it, making it possible for the Department of Industrial Relations to raid the site. 72 women were freed and eventually the owners of the factory were convicted. While the El Monte story ends on a note of justice, sweatshop labor around the world persists. On February 23, 2006, in a story reminiscent of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, a fire raged through KTS Textile Industries factory in Chittagong, Bangladesh. The main emergency gate was illegally blocked, and the building lacked fire safety equipment, despite the fact that fires had already occurred in the past. The death toll is still uncertain.<sup>v</sup>

### **Separation of families.**

The men gather everyday at 4 a.m. at Newark, New Jersey's busy Five Corners intersection. Some are teenagers; others could be grandfathers. Regardless of the weather, anywhere from 20 to 100 men stand and wait for hours, each one hoping he'll find work that day.

Jorge Flores (not his real name) is a day laborer, one of the regulars at Five Corners. He came from Ecuador in 2001 without documentation and considers himself an economic refugee. Following Ecuador's economic collapse in the late 1990s, the value of money there plummeted. "Everything we had in the bank disappeared, so people had to find other horizons," Jorge says in Spanish. "Now there's no work, no way to feed our families, no medical care or education for the kids. I looked to the U.S. because there's the American dream.



When he can get work, it varies from construction to cleaning to selling flowers or ices from mobile street carts. "We live day to day," Jorge says. "If we don't work, we don't eat."

Meanwhile, Jorge hasn't seen his family since he left Ecuador, which has put a tremendous strain on his marriage. He sends money home when he can, but it's never much because his wages—typically \$60 to \$80 a day—have not kept pace with his cost of living. - *Willie Colon Reyes*.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Inadequate wages.**

My mother took me to work with her every day. The agency she worked for did not like it, but she had no choice but to take me with her. After all, she could not very well leave me home alone. On her day job at the nursing home, she cleaned up after bedridden old people. Some of the people were my grandmother's age, but could neither eat nor clean themselves alone. My mother removed their bed pans and washed their underarms and legs, then fed them



at lunchtime. . . The night job was much better. The old lady was asleep when my mother got there and took over the shift from someone else. My mother would go into the living room and open a cot for me to sleep on. Most nights, she slept on the floor in the old lady's room in case something happened in the middle of the night. . . I felt so sorry for her. She looked very sad. . . "I wish I could help you do one of your jobs," I said. "But I want you to go to school. I want you to get a doctorate." - *Edwidge Danticat*<sup>vii</sup>

### **Economic vulnerability.**

Immigration was a difficult time in my family's history and there wasn't much room for pride. It feels vulnerable to write about the sacrifices one's family has made even during immigration. My grandmother, who was a well-regarded high school teacher in Belarus, found work sewing in a factory. My grandfather, a highly educated man and a mining engineer worked as (though it's tempting to say "became") a hotel janitor. My aunt, a highly trained music teacher, cleaned houses. My father, a computer programmer, worked at house construction sites briefly. At nine years old, my mom remembers me sticking up for her at a grocery store. Paying with food stamps and unsteady English made her a target for a mean-spirited cashier. Language, socio-economic, and cultural barriers play a role in keeping many new immigrants from mainstream society, but all it takes is one good job to [overcome] many of those obstacles. To this day, when I see someone working in the service industry, I am reminded of my family's early struggles to pay bills. Everyone has their freedom story.viii

### **Inability to function without assistance.**

Life in America is very tough for me because I'm old. I'm sixty-five now and I can't do anything. I would rather go back if I had the choice. I have been here so long, but I have not learned how to speak English or write. I tried but it was not easy. It wasn't like when I was learning to play the bamboo pipes. I don't know—I

guess as you get older, things just appear harder to learn or something. I am very frustrated. I thought by coming to America I would find a new life. I did—but it is harder than in Laos.

You see, in America, everything is confusing. They have red lights, yellow lights, green lights. I have just barely learned what these mean. Then, you see, they have a crosswalk. . . You cannot cross anywhere you want. You have to find the crosswalk. You have to watch the red light, yellow light, green light. . . I want to go somewhere, and I would like to just walk there. But I'm afraid. There are many streets that are so alike, and I might not find my way back. — *Boua Xa Moua* <sup>ix</sup>

### **Risk of deportation.**

Jorge Salazar tells us “I was born in La Paz, Bolivia. After an election, my father was placed on a black list for belonging to the ousted party. In order to provide a future for us, my parents decided they had to move. I was 6, and my sister was 8 months old. My parents worked at my grandfather’s business, all the time paying taxes.



“I was an honor roll student, and the number one seed on my schools’ chess team. In high school, I joined the soccer team, made friends, and everything seemed normal. My senior year, I asked [my parents] for my Social Security Number [for college applications]. My mother broke down in tears and told me that we didn’t have a social security number, we had overstayed our visa. Almost as soon as we arrived, my father had hired an immigration lawyer. It wasn’t until years later that my parents learned that the lawyer had filed their paperwork improperly. By this time our visa had expired; we had made a life in this country.”

Even though at any moment, immigration officials may decide to deport him, Jorge lives in a place of hope rather than despair. He volunteers each week, counseling younger undocumented youth and urging them to think about the possibilities for meaning and purpose in their lives. <sup>x</sup>

**And yet some succeed and maintain a positive view.**

I came here in 2000 from Liberia looking for a better life. Liberia is a war-torn country, and it's hard to find jobs. In 1990, when the war broke out, I had to walk for three weeks with my 9-year-old daughter from Liberia to Sierra Leone. We had to sleep on the floor or look for open boxes to sleep in, and we had to live off what the UN came and provided for us. If one person comes here from overseas, they can support their whole family back home. If I didn't come to America, I couldn't have educated my daughter. Coming here made it possible for her to go to college. People leave their kids, husbands, and families to come here for a better life. The biggest challenge is finding a job in a field that you already know. In Liberia, I worked for an architect, but when you come here, you have to start all over. My sister-in-law was a registered nurse in Liberia, but when she got here, she had to go back to school and retake all of her tests so that she could work. We both work as nurse's aides today. <sup>xi</sup>

Carlos was born and raised in Guatemala. When Carlos was 14, his mother died, and he and his younger siblings went to live with their paternal grandmother. She beat and starved them. When he was sixteen, Carlos came to the U.S. in an attempt to help himself and his younger siblings. He was detained and placed in deportation proceedings because he did not have a visa. HIAS Pennsylvania took on his case and helped him become a permanent resident under immigration laws protecting abused immigrant youth. Carlos is now finishing his second year at Montgomery County Community College. He remains committed to bringing his sisters to join him despite the legal and other difficulty of doing

so. Meanwhile he is courageously building a new life for himself and finding ways to serve his new community.<sup>xii</sup>

**Consider these immigrant plagues and their impact:**

The immense disabilities faced by so large a population as 11 million have to affect not only the undocumented, but others as well. What are the effects of the “illegals” on our American society, our culture and economy?



K. Myers

***With Nirtzah, the closing service:***

As observers of the Passover traditions, let us remember this, like Moses’s son, Gershom, we were strangers in a strange land. We should strive to remember this in every season notwithstanding the fact that now we have been settled in this country for generations. We must welcome the stranger in our midst, Jews from all over the world – evacuees from Europe; Russia; and elsewhere, and non-Jews from Vietnam, Somalia, Bosnia, and Iraq, wherever there is turmoil and there are people’s lives disrupted by war or other disasters, we welcome them. Whether they are Jews, or Christians, or Moslems or atheists, we welcome them. That is what our traditions, our Haggadah, instructs. - *Howard D. Scher, Esq.*<sup>xiii</sup>

**“Next Year in Jerusalem,”  
our traditional closing,  
also calls on us to work  
for a better world here.**

**What we can do now:** in the debate in Congress over immigration reform, our voices must be heard. Call or write your federal representatives and tell them that immigrants already in this country deserve a path to legal status and ultimately citizenship. Those who have fought in our armed services and those who have completed school here ought to have a path to citizenship open to them. And we need to support family reunification as a humane American value.



**Contact your legislators:**

*In Pennsylvania contact:*

Senator Robert P. Casey Jr.  
(202) 224-6324

[www.casey.senate.gov/contact/](http://www.casey.senate.gov/contact/)

Senator Patrick J. Toomey  
(202) 224-4254

[www.toomey.senate.gov/?p=contact](http://www.toomey.senate.gov/?p=contact)

*In Delaware contact:*

Senator Christopher A. Coons  
(202) 224-5042

[www.coons.senate.gov/contact/](http://www.coons.senate.gov/contact/)

Senator Thomas R. Carper  
(202)224-2441

[carper.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/  
email-senator-carper](http://carper.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/email-senator-carper)

*In Maryland contact:*

Senator Benjamin L. Cardin  
(202)224-4524

[www.cardin.senate.gov/contact](http://www.cardin.senate.gov/contact)

Senator Barbara A. Mikulski  
(202) 224-4654

[www.mikulski.senate.gov/contact/](http://www.mikulski.senate.gov/contact/)

*In New Jersey contact:*

Senator Frank E. Lautenberg  
(202) 224-3224

[www.lautenberg.senate.gov/contact/  
routing.cfm](http://www.lautenberg.senate.gov/contact/routing.cfm)

Senator Robert Menendez  
(202) 224-4744

[menendez.senate.gov/contact/](http://menendez.senate.gov/contact/)

*and your member of the House of Representatives*

Then keep up by signing up for JSPAN communications at [www.jspan.org](http://www.jspan.org). You can also join JSPAN at the same web site and take part in our work. Information and other opportunities to work for immigration reform are available through HIAS Pennsylvania at [www.hiaspa.org](http://www.hiaspa.org) and through Pennsylvanians United for Immigration Reform at [www.paimmigrant.org](http://www.paimmigrant.org).



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## Credits

<sup>i</sup> Jews United for Justice, Labor Seder, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Howard D. Scher, Esq., Past President, JEVS Human Services.

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi David Saperstein, Loving the Stranger, Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism.

<sup>iv</sup> Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch, translation by Uri L'Tzedek. Reprinted by American Jewish World Service.

<sup>v</sup> Andrea Hodos and staff of Bend the Arc/Progressive Jewish Alliance.

<sup>vi</sup> Willie Colón Reyes, Quaker Action Winter 2007. Reprinted in HIAS Pennsylvania Study of First Person Immigration Accounts.

<sup>vii</sup> Edwidge Danticat, Breath, Eyes, Memory (New York: Random House, 1994). Reprinted in HIAS Pennsylvania Study of First Person Immigration Accounts.

<sup>viii</sup> A Jewish Immigrant Story, Jews United for Justice Labor Seder Haggadah, 2012.

<sup>ix</sup> Boua Xa Moua in I Begin My Life All Over by Lillian Faderman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). Reprinted in HIAS Pennsylvania Study of First Person Immigration Accounts.

<sup>x</sup> HIAS Pennsylvania, Four Cups, Four Immigrants, Our Story, America's Story.

<sup>xi</sup> A Jewish Immigrant Story, Jews United for Justice Labor Seder Haggadah, 2012.

<sup>xii</sup> HIAS Pennsylvania, Four Cups, Four Immigrants, Our Story, America's Story.

<sup>xiii</sup> Howard D. Scher, Esq., Past President, JEVS Human Services.



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