

## **Demonizing Immigrants**

### ***Shabbat Vayeitzei 5785***

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Who remembers “Nannygate?” Do the names Zoe Baird and Kimba Wood ring any bells? Baird and Wood were President Bill Clinton’s first and second nominees to become Attorney General of the United States. The trouble was that both had employed undocumented immigrants to work in their homes, and neither had paid payroll taxes. As it happens, employing these workers was not illegal at the time, but not paying their taxes was a crime. Both nominations were withdrawn.

In January 1993, while this controversy was swirling, I was asked to give the *D’var Torah* at SWARR, the Southwest Association of Reform Rabbis, a rite-of-passage in those days for the youngest new rabbi in the region. I asked my colleagues to turn their focus away from partisan matters for a moment, and even the question of the employees’ immigrant status. My sense was that many of the people these rabbis served, and maybe even some rabbis, did not pay payroll taxes for domestic employees. Failure to do so is tax evasion—that is, stealing, and not

only from the government. One day, these employees would reach retirement age and could be shortchanged on their benefits by having been paid under the table. Longstanding and common practice or not, it was wrong, we should not do it, and we rabbis should implore our congregants to change their ways.

My claim was considered revolutionary, even by rabbinic colleagues very much my senior, though a leading southern rabbi came up to me and told me he was going to figure out how to change his family's practice in this regard. For me, the matter was straightforward, thanks to my unfailingly honest father, who always insisted that we pay anybody who worked for us in an above-board manner—that is, fully taxed.

Anybody who works for me has a tax identification number—and, if I'm hiring them individually, rather than their company, they must submit a W-4 before they start work.

Today, the cleaning service came to my house, as they do every other Friday. All the workers are Latina. I do not know their immigration status. Only one, the proprietor, speaks English, and I assume that she has legal status, since her

company has a tax identification number. Today, I told her that I was worried about what might happen to the women on her team as early as next month, and I asked how I could help. She let me know that she was touched, even as she reflected optimism. Without my asking, she disclosed that her own legalization is in process. Her husband and children are U.S. citizens.

Our Torah portion this week is about an immigrant—in this case, Jacob, forced to flee his home and Promised Land, because his brother Esau wants to kill him—for good reason, but that’s another story. Jacob is warmly received in Haran, his mother’s and grandparents’ hometown. His uncle, “Laban ran out to greet him; he embraced him and kissed him and took him into his house.”<sup>i</sup> Laban doesn’t always treat Jacob so well, but here at the start, he appears to be magnanimous.

Our sages aren’t so sure. The medieval commentator Rashi cites earlier sources when he surmises that Laban only greets Jacob warmly because the uncle believes his nephew to be loaded with money, precious jewels, and pearls.<sup>ii</sup>

While there is plenty of good reason to doubt Laban’s good intentions—his behavior both before and after this incident is not always so friendly—I wonder if

the rabbis simply can't believe that a gentile would welcome an Israelite so generously. Throughout history, Jewish immigrants were met with suspicion at best, hardly a warm welcome and a well-paying job. Even in America, "greenhorns," as new immigrants were called, suffered from unsafe and unsanitary housing and labor conditions. As more acculturated Jews began to gain status in American society, they nevertheless often faced social and workplace discrimination, alongside quotas limiting their ability to attend America's finest institutions of higher learning.

Thankfully, though, America was not like medieval Christian Europe, where Rashi and his community were always considered foreigners. Most American Jews who are descended from Jewish immigrants to this country, and the overwhelming majority of those arrived before the United States first began limiting immigration from Europe in 1921. Restriction of immigration from China started forty years earlier, but regarding immigration of Jews, from all the lands of our people's origin, throughout the period of large-scale Jewish immigration to the United States, no immigration was "illegal." We are all too familiar with the disastrous

impact of U.S. immigration restrictions on European Jews seeking refuge from Hitler's persecution and eventually the Holocaust.

Reasonable people can and do disagree about the extent to which America ought to welcome immigrants. Even if we all agree that legal immigration is preferable, most Americans are unaware of the severe limits that our nation's laws place on legal paths to immigration. Some American Jews identify with caravans through Mexico and Central America as analogous to the ships that brought their ancestors to these shores. Others view those caravans as a dangerous crime. Be that as it may, we might all grant some grace to immigrants and asylum seekers whose only crime is illegal immigration. Thirty-six times, our Torah bids us to love the stranger, for we were strangers in Egypt—and, we might add, in Christian Europe, in Arab and other Muslim lands, and even in America. Though we hold onto a myth that our ancestors came to America escaping persecution, the vast majority came for the same reason that people join those caravans across Mexico, to seek a better future.

During the recently ended presidential campaign, particularly during the vice-presidential debate, we were treated to despicable lies about immigrants, the most galling being an allegation that was never substantiated and always false, that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio were eating local residents' house pets. Lying is endemic to American politics and common among politicians of all parties. Still, this lie, stirred hatred and created chaos in a peaceful town that was already experiencing some growing pains with increasing numbers of immigrants, most of them documented. One can argue that our southern border ought to be more secure, that only legal immigration should be permitted, and that certain dangerous and problematic undocumented immigrants ought to be deported without lying about the scope and nature of the problem, and certainly without using language that dehumanizes immigrants, potentially subjecting them to treatment far more dangerous than deportation.

Perhaps, like me, you have been enjoying *The Diplomat* on Netflix. Kate Wyler, the fictional U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom—soon, apparently, to be replaced in real life by Little Rock's own Warren Stephens—is continually faced with an off-the-rails British Prime Minister who seems to want to unite his

nation around a common enemy, irrespective of whether that enemy is real. The story is all too familiar to Jews, recalling what happened to our people when we were the chosen common enemy.

Steps to secure our border, and probably to deport some undocumented immigrants, are apparently coming. We will, and we should, debate the policy and the way it is implemented—applauding if we feel that it is just and protesting if we find the practice to be inhumane. I hope that all of us, whatever our partisan positions and opinions about immigration and immigrants, will resist the temptation to choose and pick on a common enemy, including the lovely, hard-working women who cleaned my house this morning.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 29:13.

<sup>ii</sup> Rashi to Genesis 29:13, citing *B'reishit Rabbah* 70:13.