

## Beshallah 5778 Sermon

Moshe Bernstein and Yussi Goldberg are plotting strategies to get into a fancy schmancy, and exclusionary, Golf Club. Goldberg goes to the club interview and comes back with information on how it works: “First he asks my name; I say Yussi Goldberg. Then he asks my profession; I say I’m in the schmatte business. Finally he asks my religion; I say I’m a Jew.” Bernstein explains that Goldberg got all three answers wrong. So Goldberg goes back a second time and interviews with a different club member. This time he is convinced he has the proper answers. “What is your name?” “My name is Joseph Gold.” “And what is your profession?” “I work in the clothing industry.” “And what is your religion?” “I’m a goy!” It was so hard, for so long, for Jews to fit in, in America. We were unwelcome strangers. That is less so now, but Jews in many places still feel apart because of their history as eternal foreigners, as wanderers.

In fact there are few elements of Jewish identity more basic than that of wanderers, a people seeking deliverance from oppression and shelter from danger, a nation without a permanent homeland. That part of us originated in this week’s Torah reading. The Israelites flee bondage in Egypt and are miraculously saved from Pharaoh’s pursuing army at the Sea of Reeds. From that moment, they are refugees, immigrants headed for a land they have never seen. It is the experience of the Exodus that God refers to so frequently when reminding the people that they were strangers in a strange land. They arrived in Egypt as strangers, and they will arrive in Canaan as strangers.

In a later era, after a thousand years settled in the Holy Land, and for the next 1900 hundred years, Jews once again became a wandering people, settling in every corner of the earth, sometimes for longer periods, sometimes only briefly. Do I need to mention the fate of the

thousands of Jews who fled the Nazis during the Shoah, only to be refused sanctuary? It was only with the founding of the modern state of Israel that a Jewish home was once again established. Even today, Jews outside of Israel sometimes feel, or are treated, as unwelcome guests rather than as equal citizens in the countries where they live.

So it is with a particular experience of history that Jews view the stigma with which immigrants and refugees are viewed around the world. In Europe, democratic countries are more and more turning their backs on those immigrants, exiles and refugees most in need of shelter and support. And this country, official policy often seems to represent a hardening of American hearts. Ignoring the plight of those seeking safety from war, terror or persecution runs counter to Jewish values, as well as our long history of being discriminated against because of our identity as Jews.

What is a course of action which Jews might follow now? I want to suggest three things. First, we have to remember our own history and the teachings of our sacred texts. Actions must flow from knowledge and from a firm sense of identity. Jews were destined by God to leave one place for another, first for Egypt, then for their permanent settlement in Canaan, They were destined by history to then leave Judea for nearly two thousand years. We know what it is to be a stranger in a strange land, and the Torah specifically commands us to treat the stranger with kindness and compassion because of our experience as strangers. Second, when speaking to others, whether in public or private, whether they are Jews or not, friends or strangers, public servants or private citizens, Jews should uphold their own dignity and that of others by remaining civil and respectful. This might seem self-evident, but when everything from town hall meetings to dinner with friends turn into shouting matches, we diminish ourselves and others. Seeing

others as being created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, needs to guide our interactions even with those with whom we most vigorously disagree. Finally, those who feel moved to advocate on behalf of immigrants and refugees who have are fleeing persecution or war at home, should do so, knowing there is a firm Jewish basis for providing help to them.

If we are to take religion seriously, we cannot ignore its most basic tenets. We look to our faith in order to know how to understand the world, and how to behave in it. Our sages teach us that the whole Torah exists only to establish peace. We inhabit our religious identity most fully when we live out the values that have been handed down to us for thousands of years, including the command to seek peace and pursue it. A life of faith means making the words of Torah live, not only in the sanctuary on a Shabbat morning, but in every interaction and, especially, on behalf of those most in need. Those enslaved by violence in their own lands are entitled to seek peace elsewhere, and as Jews we are obligated to help them find it.

Shabbat shalom