

Massachusetts Board of Rabbis -- Statement on Immigration

December 4, 2008

You shall not mistreat or oppress a stranger who has come over to you, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:20)

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis supports legislation, social policy initiatives, and education designed to create a just, humane, and effective immigration system in the United States and in Massachusetts.

The story of the Jewish people is one of migration, and therefore of immigration. From the beginnings of exile, impelled by persecution and drawn by hope, Jews have crossed myriad borders, both legally and illegally, in search of a better life. Had America's borders been open during the Holocaust, many more Jews might have been saved. The Statue of Liberty speaks with the Jewish voice of Emma Lazarus; "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." We know in our bones what it is like to be a stranger in a strange land. The Torah warns concerning treatment of the stranger thirty-six times, beginning immediately after the exodus from Egypt; And you shall not impose restrictions upon a stranger, for you know the soul of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9).

Jewish tradition recognizes the inherent dignity of every human being, each one created in the image of God. All people, therefore, are deserving of respect and humane treatment. We are commanded repeatedly in the Torah to remember the most vulnerable, the "orphan, the widow, the stranger." The Torah does not qualify the status of a stranger, saying only: You shall not grieve a stranger who has come over to you (Exodus 22:20). In commentary on this verse, God challenges us by example: Says the Holy One, 'Do not think that there is none to champion the cause of the stranger, for I champion the cause of the stranger (Rabbeinu Bachya al Hatorah).

Beyond politics, the immigration debate is about real human beings. Toward a just, humane, and effective immigration system, from law and policy to implementation and enforcement, the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis urges:

- Adequate funding to expedite naturalization for eligible immigrants;
- In-state college tuition for all students who have attended a Massachusetts high school for three years and graduated from a Massachusetts high school, regardless of immigration status;
- Humane immigration enforcement and adjudication, including respect for family unity, and consideration of individual circumstance with the possibility of attaining legal status;
- Protection of undocumented workers from mistreatment by employers;
- A commitment in the Jewish community to learn more about immigration issues and to help raise the level of discourse concerning immigrants, so that public policies reflect our highest values as Jews and Americans.