

REMARKS DELIVERED AT ELLIS ISLAND ON THE SUBJECT OF IMMIGRATION AND REFORM DURING VISIT OF EUROPEAN IMAMS AND RABBIS TO THE UNITED STATES BY MUSLIM AND JEWISH EXPERTS ON IMMIGRATION ISSUES, SARAH SAYEED AND GIDEON ARONOFF

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In the name of God the Most Gracious the Most Merciful.
Greetings of Peace,

When we come here to Ellis Island, it is natural that we remember our own immigration story. Mine is that I left India in 1976 as a child to come to the United States. My father came as a graduate student to Teachers College, Columbia University in 1969, established permanent residency here and then sponsored us. We settled in the Bronx, and my experience was that I had left the familiar and come to a new place where the culture did not resonate with what I knew at home. Also, I experienced the tension of my religious identity in combination with two national identities, Indian and American. Growing up, I navigated the world of race-class divides, shuttling daily between the Bronx and the Upper East Side where I went to a private all-girls high school. The Bronx neighborhood in which we lived in had experienced high rates of arson, so we lived in close proximity to many burnt-out buildings; yet my school was across the street from Gracie Mansion, the residence of the Mayor of New York.

My experiences as an immigrant were also impacted by the larger post 9-11 experiences of Muslim communities in New York City. The Muslim community here is quite diverse, including Africans, African Americans, Arabs, Albanians, Bosnians, South Asians, Turks and Caucasians. Despite our great diversity, the community shared a common experience of backlash and extra scrutiny in the post 9/11 era. Special registration requirements were put into place under which foreign nationals from 24 predominantly Muslim countries and North Korea who were already residing in the U.S. (i.e. students, temporary worker visas, etc.) were asked to give fingerprints, photographs and be questioned. "Willful" failure to register remains a ground for deportation, carries criminal penalties, and may be used to deny future immigration benefits.

In their effort to locate terrorists, immigration officials fingerprinted, photographed and interviewed 85,000 Muslim and Arab

non-citizens from November 2002 to May 2003. The special registration program was sharply criticized by civil liberties groups and advocates for immigrants who pointed out that it did little to find terrorists and alienated the very communities that could help uncover terrorists. Many people were afraid and as a result of the program, there remains a high degree of mistrust of law enforcement agencies. For many immigrants who come from countries where there is already a strained relationship between police and communities, these procedures created even more fear and a sense of humiliation and vulnerability.

Separately from special registration, there have been other policies that have negatively impacted Muslims- including pre-emptive detentions, about 14,000 deportations, secret evidence, monitoring of mosques and community organizations. While all of these practices are driven by well-meaning concerns to prevent terrorist attacks, they force us to ask essential questions about the intersection of immigration, human rights, civil rights, and how we can enact policies that reflect compassion rather than fear and that preserve family life and human dignity.

Thankfully, there have been many interfaith responses to such post 9-11 policies that have advocated on behalf of justice and human rights. My own personal experience growing up as an immigrant as well as my community's difficult experience post 9-11 propelled me to join these efforts to make practical changes in how we as a nation treat immigrants.

One example of such a response is the New York State Interfaith Network for Immigration Reform, which has been working on the local level to help enact national policy reform in order to create a path to legal immigrant status for 12 million undocumented immigrants and to help unite families. The Network was founded by an interfaith steering committee, comprised of Diane Steinman of The American Jewish Committee, Annie Rawlings of the Presbytery of NY, myself representing the Interfaith Center, and Frances Liu of the New York Immigration Coalition, which acts as our organizational partner and advisor.



The Interfaith Center, where I serve as Program Associate, is an important partner for this initiative because we reach diverse grass roots communities in NYC, including both Abrahamic faith communities and those outside those traditions. It is of critical importance that religious leaders undertake this kind of policy-based advocacy, because religious leaders are in a unique position to inject a moral voice into the policy debate in a way that is credible and persuasive.

On behalf of the Interfaith Center I recently organized The Rabbi Marshall Meyer Retreat for Social Justice which brought together 80 NY religious leaders on the theme of “Immigration: From Estrangement to Engagement.” The goal of the retreat was to educate religious leaders about immigration issues from a broad policy perspective; including social services available to immigrants through the City and non-profit sectors, including education about notario fraud, finding legal assistance for those who needed help filing papers, accessing health care, and law enforcement attempts to build trust with immigrant communities. Mayor Bloomberg’s Executive Order 34 is among the strongest local confidentiality policy in the nation protecting immigrants from unnecessary collection and reporting of immigration status information when seeking City services or interacting with police.

Moving from estrangement to engagement is the critical shift that needs to happen so that religious leaders and members of religious communities can become more involved in the immigration issue on the local and the policy-making levels. As we work in a focused way to create dialogue and policy shifts on very specific issue that we face in common, we will also, God willing, be able to articulate and realize the positive potential that religion has to help create a more pluralistic and democratic society that is respectful of the dignity and intrinsic value of all human beings.

GIDEON ARONOFF
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When we discuss ideas of dignity, tolerance and understanding, the question is ‘How do we take these very good emotions and turn them into work on the ground that solves problems for our communities and helps bring us together.’

On immigration reform, we need to understand and identify the Jewish interests in the immigration debate, the Muslim interests and our common interests, so that we have a framework in which we can put our dialogue into action.

For me, coming here to Ellis Island is very meaningful because HIAS was based here and worked to welcome new immigrants to the freedom and opportunity of America. We worked to assist them in a number of important ways. Starting in 1905, we worked here not only with Jews, but also with people of other faiths. In that year, a HIAS representative assisted a shipload of Russian Christians to avoid deportation and find new lives in America. This is something HIAS continues to do today.

To understand how Jews and Muslims can work together on immigration issues, it is important to see how, in the last several years, the Jewish community has resisted a concerted challenge to take us out of the population that cares about new immigrants. We have been told by some voices in and beyond our community that our interest in immigration is just dusty nostalgia and has nothing to do with the needs of our people today. But what our community has been saying through efforts like the ‘We Were Strangers Too—The Jewish Campaign for Immigration Reform’, organized by HIAS and a coalition of local and national Jewish organizations, is a clear refutation of the notion that the Jewish community has no interest in contemporary immigration. Why have we continued to advocate on behalf of the rights of immigrants—the great majority of whom are non-Jews? In the presence of so many learned rabbis I will not go into Torah commentary about our moral imperative to protect the stranger, but will say that our community has followed the Torah commandment to be engaged in the life of the stranger and to welcome the stranger into our community.

It should not be forgotten that we ourselves are a community of immigrants. 10 percent of the Jewish community is foreign-born, so it matters to us what our country’s refugee policies are; for example how our country’s foreign student program impacts people coming to study in yeshivas. What kind of programs do we have to allow Jews from around the world to come here?

We are also a community that has benefitted from the American value of pluralism; a value that has allowed us to be fully Jewish and fully American at the same time. This is something we are obliged to preserve for future generations. We also have a very clear understanding that we are a minority community and we must be engaged in those issues that affect our partners in other communities. So the presence of 12 million undocumented aliens living here without legal status; the suffering, exploitation and death that takes places on our borders; the families that are separated; all of these are issues that affect our partners. So they are Jewish issues as well.



As Americans, we also have national interests in the immigration debate, which represent a key entry point for our ability to speak with our friends and come up with common agendas and efforts for our country. It matters to us what kind of economy we have; that we have a vital economy with sufficient workers and entrepreneurs so we can thrive in the next century. Even during a time of economic distress we have an obligation not to turn our backs on economic realities that underscore and that demand a rational immigration policy.

We also have security interests, and those interests impel us to make sure that no one who means to threaten our country can hide among a mass of undocumented immigrants in this country, and that these dangerous individuals are not successful in staying here because law enforcement bodies are wasting resources chasing people who want to work here as gardeners, nannies, cab drivers and other professions. We have an interest in facilitating the integration of new immigrants into the American social fabric. It is crucial to understand that the greatest guarantor of social peace and a unified national agenda is to create an American civic identity for newcomers.

Where are the differences on all of these issues between the interests of the Jewish community and the Muslim community? I believe there is, in fact, a commonality of interests between us that offers us a real opportunity to work together. Indeed, we have so many special opportunities as Jews and Muslims to understand immigration issues in ways that bring us together. We both appreciate the great value of interfaith efforts that open the tent to minority faiths. Jews and Muslims clearly have a common interest in fighting hate crimes and the infusion of hate language into our debate. Groups like neo-Nazis and the KKK are strengthened by a coarse immigration debate, which empowers people who are at the forefront of promoting Islamophobic ideas. It also strengthens the historic enemies of the Jewish communities.

We also have a common stake in combating the notion that because we Jews and Muslims came here legally, the problem of undocumented immigrants do not matter to us. By making that point together, we can help prevent the immigration debate from being stereotyped as only being of importance to Hispanic Christians.

So from my perspective as a Jewish immigration advocate, I see no community as being more appropriate for the Jewish community to work in partnership with than the Muslim community. We should work together on the local level, in Washington and around the world to promote rational and beneficial immigration policies. By working together on behalf of immigrants we can make lasting contributions to the welfare of our communities and to the nation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Both Rapfogel and Shareef point with pride to our common ancestor Abraham, who invited the stranger into his home, made sure he had food to eat and watched over him when he was in need and because emblematic of a collective with an ethos of addressing the material and spiritual needs of all members of society including the weakest. Both prescribe individuals to undertake acts of righteousness on behalf of the poor, hungry and homeless. On that basis, let us explore ways that our two communities can work together in serving the needy, so as not to duplicate each other's efforts.

- 1) Members of mosques and synagogues should get together to discuss the meaning of the concept of 'Welcoming the Stranger' in their respective faiths and traditions, examining Torah, Quran and other sources. They should also share with each the history of how their own families reached America so that people on each side can discern how difficult it often was—and still continues to be—for vulnerable Jews and Muslims to find new homes and build new lives in this country. They may discuss problems facing Muslim and Jewish immigrants to the U.S. today—including civil liberties issues in the wake of 9-11--and learn together about other sizable immigrant groups in their communities and how to help them.
- 2) Consider undertaking a community service project together on behalf of immigrants in need. One such effort would be to organize a health fair at which undocumented and uninsured immigrants would feel safe to come to be examined by doctors volunteering their services. Members of mosques and synagogues who are not medical personnel can give out information on health benefits available to immigrants and on ways to avoid diseases such as diabetes and heart attacks through a program of exercise and healthy living. In addition they can provide immigrants with information of social services available to them and where they can find cost-free legal assistance.
- 2) Decide to lobby together on behalf of immigration reform by visiting the offices of their elected representatives in Washington and their own communities. Undertake a program to educate the media and general public as to why Jews and Muslims feel a moral imperative based on their respective faith traditions to join together to demand fair and humane treatment for immigrants of all backgrounds, including the undocumented.