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Honoring the Angel in the Immigrant

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Oddly enough, two chapters of the Book of Genesis tell us everything we need to know about how Jews should regard the plight of immigrants. Genesis Chapters 18 and 19 bring us the story of the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah. Through the ages, commentators have asked, "What was so terrible about the behavior of the people of Sodom and Gemorrah that warranted their destruction?"

When the residents of Sodom saw foreigners in their territory, they immediately responded with hatred and abuse. Rather than offering hospitality, they threatened sexual violence. The prophet Ezekiel elaborates that the people of Sodom were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned, refusing to help the poor and the needy. The Talmud speaks of the people of Sodom passing laws forbidding the entry of outsiders, whom residents feared came only to deplete their resources.

Does this sound familiar or what?

In our day, we have a regime that treats immigrants (and anyone who might "look like" an immigrant) as aliens, threatening, less than human. Immigrants are abducted on the street and deprived of their legal rights. Their families are torn apart, and their human dignity is brutally assaulted.

Every religious tradition I know teaches a special duty to care for the vulnerable in society. Our Torah famously teaches no less than 36 times, "Do not oppress the stranger." This teaching is central to the Jewish mission and the Jewish experience in history: "Do not wrong a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." "The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

The government's treatment of immigrants violates the most basic Jewish—and human—instincts about care for the outsider, the poor, and the vulnerable. We Jews know in every fiber of our being—because all of us were immigrants—that this is the very opposite of a righteous society. We forcibly reject the policies of dehumanization and othering. We refuse to let our immigrant siblings suffer as we suffered when we were in their place. We know their pain, for we and our ancestors have been subjected to it. We cannot fail to protest with all our might.

This same Torah portion offers a very different image of relationship with the foreigner. Abraham, recovering from surgery, looks up and sees three strangers on the horizon. Abraham and

Sarah hurry to offer them abundant hospitality and honor that is due to strangers who come to our homes.

The strangers turned out to be angels, with a message which answered the prayers of Abraham and Sarah for progeny. Maybe the immigrants of America, too, will turn out to be angels, offering boundless blessings to our society and to each of us.

Dear God, strengthen our resolve to be the children of Abraham, leading our lives with generosity and care, offering the best of what we have for those most in need. Help us remember our own experiences of being othered, excluded, and marginalized. Reconnect us with the deepest instincts of our hearts to reach out rather than recoil from those who appear different. May our embrace of our immigrant siblings bring blessing to everyone within our borders. May those who respond to foreignness with fear be healed and transformed. And may this holy work bring blessing to us all.