

Shabbat shalom.

I think the first time I ever heard the word migration was in elementary school. We learned about how birds migrate south for the winter. They somehow knew when the weather would no longer be safe for them, when their food sources would disappear, so they'd head to warmer climates. And when it was safe to return, they would. These natural cycles of movement spanned the entire globe, we'd learn, reflecting the wisdom of nature to leave and return, travel and find safety. Migration is baked into living beings, as natural as breathing and eating.

For human beings, though, somehow we have forgotten this natural wisdom. Migration has become a moral question - restricted and dangerous. It's a defining quality of nature to move when necessary, but we have become expert in demonizing it, preventing it, and punishing it.

I started thinking about this while reading our parsha this week, parshat Vayigash. We are a migrant people, the stranger in a stranger land, never really home - this enduring identity of the Jewish people is set into motion as far back as Abraham heeding the call to Lech Lecha. But this week, in this parsha, is the moment that something changes. Parshat Vayigash appears to be when this part of our identity as migrants crashes into the human inclination to recast migration as a problem.

In our narrative, our ancestor Jacob has just discovered that his son Joseph is alive and has risen to power in Mitzrayim, Ancient Egypt. And now, in the midst of famine, he and his family will go there to meet him.

The first hint that migration itself is treacherous is that God appears to Jacob in a dream and tells him:

אל-תִּירָא מִרְדָּה מִצְרָיִם

Fear not to go down to Egypt . . . I Myself will go down with you, and I Myself will also bring you back.

In general, God would have no reason to tell Jacob not to be afraid, unless there is reason to be afraid. These words remind us that we know what's coming - this migration will lead to 200 years of slavery and 40 years of wandering before our people will see home again. So with this harbinger of things to come hanging in the air, Jacob and his family set off.

Joseph is overwhelmed with joy to be reunited with his dad, having been torn from his father when he was a kid. He instructs his family: tell the Pharaoh that you are shepherds so that he will settle you in the land of Goshen. Why? *כי-תועבַת מִצְרַיִם כָּל-רֹעֵה צֹאן*. Because shepherds are a to'evah - an abomination - to the Egyptians.

This becomes a defining new addition to our identity as migrant: though the Pharaoh seemed to welcome us himself, we are mostly not wanted where we go.

The commentators do a lot to unpack why these emigrating shepherds are a to'evah, an abomination, to the Egyptians.

The Da'at Z'kenim suggested that it was because: "The Egyptians hated sheep meat . . . "

So how do we understand this in the context of despising the stranger? The stranger's customs tasted funny and smelled funny, were unfamiliar and off-putting. But wouldn't this be for any shepherds? Even Egyptian ones? The Da'at Z'kenim continues: (The Egyptians) harbored a deep aversion for anyone stemming from the Euphrates-Tigris region. They considered the Sumerians as a lower class of human beings.

So here we go - those who had these strange customs, that our people shared, and who came from another region, near where our people were from, they and their customs, we and our customs, were seen as detestable, kind of gross, and a lower class of human beings. The Da'at Z'kenim suggests that the Egyptians viewed our people, who arrived at their border - as a "sub-human species." And as we know, such a designation opens doors for all kinds of terrible treatment.

Additionally, the Siftei Chachamim explain that the Egyptians actually worshipped sheep as one of their primary deities. So they taught that one reason that they were particularly suspicious of these outsiders, is: "The Egyptians know that shepherds know all about sheep, since they are always with them. Shepherds therefore know that sheep have nothing [divine about them], so the Egyptians hate all shepherds." Meaning: these outsiders will see them for who they are and reveal a lie about them, make them feel foolish, or make them have to change. So it is better to silence them or remove them than welcome them here.

While migration among animals carries none of this emotional complexity, human migration has created the perceived need for those whose home is being entered to be clear about who is citizen and who is just visiting, inhabiting the margins, which can lead to a certain intentional vulnerability.

This week, we have seen at least two examples of how this is all playing out in our country today. The first unfolded at the Turning Point USA conference earlier this week, which platformed a series of conservative thinkers and leaders. One of those leaders was Vice President JD Vance. He said this: We have been, and by the Grace of God, we will always be, a Christian nation. And: Here in America, you don't have to apologize for being white anymore. This was followed a few days later by a social media post by the Department of Homeland Security, which read: Merry Christmas, America. We are blessed to share a nation and a Savior.

In a country that legislates the separation of Church and State, what is happening here?

What's happening is a not particularly subtle defining of boundaries. Who is insider and who outsider? Whose country is this, and who is just a visitor (regardless of how long they've been here), and is therefore, a potential threat to the homeland?

In this case - in an unself-conscious admission of White Christian Nationalism - it is white Christians who are home and everyone else - to varying and shifting degrees, of course - is of some other, lesser, status. Now, please hear me on this - this is not a statement being made by the majority of Christian people, many of whom have spent this week celebrating their holidays of light and generosity with their families, some of whom call this congregation their family, many of whom have spoken loudly for and acted for the welfare of immigrants this week and many weeks. Rather, this is an announcement that, in the eyes of our government, any non-Christian, and specifically any non-White Christian, in America is an outsider, a visitor.

Why does this matter? What does this give them the power to do? Well, that brings us to our second example from this week. This week, the shelved 60 Minutes story about the 252 Venezuelan immigrants who were flown to CECOT prison in El Salvador back in March 2025 was leaked to the public.

What we see there confirms the fears we spoke of here at CBE when the planes first took off under the cover of night. Those interviewed told of their torture, their abuse, their terror. How they were treated like animals, how they were told they would die there. The footage cuts to Kristi Noem describing these men as terrorists. But when Sharyn Alfonsi, the interviewer, asks one expert who they were, he responds: they were migrants. While White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt calls them murderers and worse, he goes on to reveal that by ICE's own data, 8 of the 252 men had records of committing a violent or potentially violent crime. Eight.

But the administration wanted us to believe, needed us to believe - as the Egyptians saw the migrant shepherds, they are sub-human. See, they were marked by tattoos, marked by their skin color, marked by their strange foods, and their customs - labeled as dangerous.

For if migrants, outsiders, strangers, are defined as dangerous and less than, then you can throw them away and still sleep at night. You can gun them down on a beach in Australia. You can tear them away from their families or lie about them and be believed. It is functional to otherize segments of society, but it is an act of fear and not love, fear and not strength, fear and not patriotism. However packaged it may be to look otherwise.

This America we live in - the one who placed the words of Emma Lazarus on its shores: give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free - that is a country that can relearn how to see one another as belonging - not because we share a savior of a particular hue, but because we share a set of values and aspirations and the re-discoverable wisdom that all living things migrate as a course of nature, and that "migrant" doesn't mean danger and "minority" doesn't mean less than, and "home" is not a word to weaponize and dehumanize, but rather is built in concert with those around us.

After January 1st, the administration may choose to ramp up the already aggressive actions of ICE in this city in response to the swearing in of our new mayor. And the dangers of being “not from here” will be even more amplified. Whether, as we’ve seen, a person is “from here” or not. So what can we do? I think this is also found in parshat Vayigash.

When Joseph is explaining to his brothers that they will live in Goshen, he tells them it is *v’hayita karov eilai*, so that you will be near to me. So that his nearness can offer protection. There is a great loving wisdom in this. If everyone outside of the drawn lines of who belongs is meant to be seen as suspicious, then let us stay close to each other. If newer immigrants are separated out so they will be more vulnerable, let us stay close to each other. If we have found ourselves outside the definition of whose country this is, too, then let us roundly reject that idea for us and for others by responding: *v’hayita karov eilai*. We will not see each other as the enemy, but instead, we will stay close to one another. If we and our foods and our customs and our skin and our language and that of our neighbors would have some see us as disposable, let us double down and get to know each other more deeply, show up for each other more regularly, deepen relationships, and stay close to each other until home is defined not by fearful and desperate words, but by actions of love and solidarity and friendship. Amen.

Shabbat shalom.