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## This Passover, let us remember our modern-day Exodus

by Rabbi Paula Marcus

I was very close with my maternal grandparents. I often think about them and the stories they shared with me about their lives.

One story, often repeated by my grandmother, Marian, was about the last time she saw her own grandparents. They were leaving Hungary for the Goldene Medine — the Golden Land. She and her mother, along with a few other siblings, would be crossing the ocean to reunite with my grandmother's father. He had left years earlier, trying to make some money to bring the rest of the family to America.

So, as a child, my grandmother cried when it was time to say goodbye, old enough to understand that they would never see her grandparents again, and who knew what would happen to those left behind.

Here is another story that has been on my mind. As my grandfather, Dave, lay dying in their Miami Beach condominium, it was difficult for me to understand what he was saying. Slipping in and out of lucidity, he called out the word "Hiyas." I thought that maybe it was a Russian word, retrieved from his youth. But when I asked my mother she explained that he was trying to say "HIAS," referring to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which assisted his family when they immigrated to the United States from Vilna.

So, why am I sharing these stories with you now? There is a simple answer that involves a complex problem.

I just returned from a rabbinic delegation to the U.S./Mexico border. This delegation of 10 rabbis was sponsored by the Jewish Funds for Justice and hosted by Border Links.

Our mission was to meet a variety of people dealing with immigration and hear their stories. We were going to learn about immigration from people who had tried to cross into the U.S. but failed, people living in Nogales (a city on the Mexican side of the border) and grassroots organizers who are dedicated to transforming their communities and improving their lives.

At our first stop, we visited with the people at No More Deaths. Their operation consisted of a makeshift tent and trailer right over the border in Mexico. No More Deaths is the group that has been setting up stations of food and water for Mexicans lost in the Western Arizona desert. They are dedicated to reducing the growing number of people who have died trying to cross into the U.S. Since the early 1990s more than 3,000 people have died in the desert.

One woman we met inside the tent told us about how she had left her 2-year-old son behind with her mother in Vera Cruz. She was trying to get to the U.S. so she could find better-paying work and send the money home to Vera Cruz. She looked at us with tears in her eyes and I saw the face of desperation. I couldn't imagine what it took for her to leave her child for a chance of a better life. Her heart was torn in half.

We also met a woman from Nogales who, along with five other women from her church, brings hundreds of sandwiches to this tent every day. When Mexicans trying to cross get picked up and brought back over the border, these women feed them. The money to pay for the sandwiches comes out of their own pockets.

I returned from the border feeling sick at heart. The faces of the people I spoke with reminded me of my own family. Some of the people were my son's age and younger.

As Jews, we must ask ourselves how we treat undocumented migrants in our own country. How many times do we find reference in Torah to treat the stranger with dignity and respect, for we were strangers ourselves and we know that struggle? This one teaching is repeated 36 times and most of us don't stop to unpack its deep meaning. When we take this teaching seriously, we realize that it must lead to action.

The first step is to educate ourselves about the details of the problem. I invite you to join me in this task. Please look into the immigration work being done by organizations like the Jewish Funds for Justice, HIAS and Border Links.

As we move into our season of liberation, we remember the oppression our ancestors faced and we hold in our hearts their sojourn in the wilderness. As I sit down at my seder table, I know that I will be telling more of the stories I heard at the border. As I remember the redemption I will rededicate myself to working for the redemption of all people, including the woman I encountered in the No More Deaths tent. Her story is our story.

We cannot get stuck in the political battles around immigration because at the heart of the matter, we're not dealing with politics. We're dealing with people dying in the desert. My great-grandparents left Europe because they believed in a promise of a better life for future generations. I am that future and I am compelled to make the most of that gift.

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