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Ruth Answers Ezra
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When I was a teen, I lived in a master-planned community in Southern California. It was a lovely place, full of grand boulevards with lushly planted traffic islands and acres of cul-de-sacs, with every fifth house looking alike. I never learned how to develop a sense of dead reckoning when I lived there, as every street looked the same. But I did spend a lot of time traveling along those broad, smooth sidewalks.

Those grand boulevards required endless tending by a small army of workers in wood-sided trucks. Each of these trucks would be filled with four or five men, all speaking Spanish, all dressed in the same basic outfit: long pants, a long-sleeved western-style shirt, and a straw cowboy hat.

I had encountered these trucks enough times in my wide-ranging walks to know exactly what the workers would do any time a teenaged girl like me wearing shorts and a tank top walked by the truck: stop their work, stand quietly looking at their feet, tip their hat in greeting when I walked by, and then continue with what they were doing. Every time.

Thus, I was surprised when I was out walking with a friend one afternoon: “Illegals” she hissed when she saw one of the trucks. “Actually, no,” I countered, “We know the guy who hires them, as he lives up the street from us. They’re not.

These are documented workers.” Our neighbor had a contract with the city of Mission Viejo to keep these public spaces beautiful.

She was less than impressed: “We should cross the street,” she said. I was surprised: “Why?” She jerked her head toward the truck of workers. I replied: “They’re not going to do anything.” She was unconvinced; she started looking both ways to cross the street. “Fine,” I said, but I did not follow her. She could take the long way around if she wanted, but I was continuing my path. Besides, I thought, she might learn something if she saw that I could walk past the truck without incident.

It didn’t convince her. When she returned to my side of the street, she called them an ethnic slur and then told me, “They should go back to Mexico.” As for me, I was having none of it. I was participating in my high school’s Model United Nations program and I was planning to major in international relations. I knew things. “They might be refugees fleeing the political violence in El Salvador or Nicaragua,” I told her. “These are folks seeking a better life.”

I’m pretty sure that I told her that the California economy would fall apart without them. When she suggested deporting all of them, I asked, “who would pick the strawberries and the oranges then?” I was saying out loud a widely understood truth in our region: it’s common for an agriculture economy to depend heavily upon migrant labor.

We all knew that there were areas around town where day-laborers would gather, and it would be possible to pay in cash, no questions asked. We had seen them in the mornings, gathered in the parking lots or on street corners. They might be picked up for any kind of job— gardening, construction, odd jobs. It was part of the grey economy, the quiet part of California’s business landscape that no one talked about but was widely known.

My friend pushed these thoughts away with the comment, “Yeah, but I didn’t do any of that, so that’s not my fault.” She was uncomfortable with this perceived-foreign presence in our midst and wasn’t open to persuasion on this topic. My friend and I never spoke of it again, and within months we had drifted apart. Even as a teenager, I didn’t like it when people used ethnic slurs in my presence. I’m even less tolerant of that now.

The situation in California, and in all our agricultural states, is complicated. Cheap migrant labor keeps our food prices down; consumers benefit from their hard work under difficult conditions. These pickers are often working in fear, without the support of sick leave or benefits of any kind. It’s backbreaking labor. I do not claim to have easy answers for how to resolve the dilemmas that stem from that, but I do know that it is inhumane to snatch people off the streets and hold them without due process in miserable conditions. It is wrong to be this cruel.

Judaism teaches us that we are born with competing impulses: the impulse to do wrong, which is called the *yetzer ha-ra*, and the impulse to do good, which is called the *yetzer ha-tov*. These two impulses pull us in opposite directions. The image of an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other is really a Jewish image: we are continually urged on by these dueling forces. When we paint others as being composed entirely of *yetzer ha-ra*, the impulse to do wrong, we are ignoring that element in ourselves; we are suggesting, by comparison, that we are entirely made of *yetzer ha-tov*, the good impulse. It's a form of projection, and when it arises, it's a sign that we're not doing okay, emotionally speaking.

Our Jewish tradition acknowledges, rather, that our reality is infinitely more complicated. As our tradition recognizes, all of us have mixed impulses; all of us are capable of harm, and all of us are capable of good. What I have learned, in fact, in the intervening years since that conversation with my friend, is that hating the other is a form of hating oneself.

If I were having that conversation with my friend right now, and I was coming at it with the pastoral training of a rabbi, I would probably stop and ask her: "are you okay?" Instead of debating the merits of immigration with her, I would want to know what's going on in her life: what's giving her such pain that she needs to scapegoat others in this manner? When I reflect on it, though, I probably knew the answer. Her parents had divorced recently, and her father remarried right away, one of his co-workers, and my friend really wasn't

comfortable with her new stepmother's presence in her life.

And it should also be acknowledged here that an anti-Hispanic racism had seeped into the conversations in our community, much the way that agricultural pesticides might seep into the water supply, poisoning everything. My friend and I both wrongly assumed that the workers in the truck must necessarily be immigrants because they spoke Spanish and worked outside. That assumption reflected a widespread bias in our hometown: we did not want to have to acknowledge that there are Americans, US citizens born and raised, who speak Spanish as their primary language.

According to the most recent census statistics, about 33% of the residents of LA are foreign born—that's counting the population from all nations, not just Spanish-speaking ones—but 38% (or 5% more than that) speak Spanish as their primary language. There are at least 100,000 *native-born US citizens* in LA who speak Spanish as their primary language at home, probably more. That's not so surprising, given that about half of the residents of LA are in fact Hispanic. The truth is, California's first language was Spanish, and the state was officially bilingual until 1986, when a law was passed making English the only official language.

I think that it's also important to note here that the *ranchero*, or ranch hand, has the same mythic status in Mexican culture as a cowboy does in the United States. It's a job that takes genuine skill. The boulevards in my hometown of Mission

Viejo looked beautiful because they had teams of trained ranch hands managing them. In other words: the idea that a truck full of ranch hands speaking Spanish amongst themselves must necessarily be a carload of unskilled illegal aliens is a racist narrative.

When we have difficulty acknowledging the humanity of others and refuse to see them as people with full inner lives, we create an obstacle in our relationship to the divine. Racism is ungodly. As Abraham Joshua Heschel stated, rather directly, in a speech on “Religion and Race”: “You cannot worship God and at the same time look at [fellow human beings] as if [they] were horse[s].”¹ The people we encounter are more than mere instruments in our economy; they are also fully realized human beings with their own rights and needs. Heschel argues that we are enjoined by our tradition to see the world through God’s eyes, to think of others as reflections of our own humanity.

Yet I would be remiss if I didn’t point out that we see evidence of hatred of the stranger in our Jewish texts. Our tradition also reflects the full spectrum of our humanity. Just like us, our texts feature a mixture of the *yetzer ha-tov*, the impulse to do good, and the *yetzer ha-ra*, the impulse to do wrong. One of our responsibilities, as fully formed moral adults, is to sort between the two, and to reject those messages that lead us astray, much the same way we reject

¹ He gave this speech in 1963; you can find a copy of the text of his speech at https://drisha.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Handout_Bondi_FA20_Heschel_Part2-religion-and-race.pdf

those parts of our familial inheritance that are less than ideal. Consider, for example, this text from the book of Ezra, chapter 10:

Then Ezra the priest rose up and said to them, “You have committed sacrilege and settled with foreign women, to add to Israel’s guilt. And now make a confession/give praise to YHWH, the God of your fathers, and do [God’s] will; and separate from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women.” And the whole congregation responded and said in a loud voice: “Indeed, in accordance with your words we must do.”²

HIAS, formerly known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, quotes this passage as an example of hatred of the stranger. The content of this text is akin to what my friend had said about the *rancheros* whom we encountered on our walk: she felt that these perceived outsiders are a cause of our misery. Like Ezra, she did not think that we should have to tolerate them.

Rabbi Seth Goldstein, writing on behalf of HIAS, argues against taking the book of Ezra as our guide. As he writes:

We should be troubled by this text on two levels. One, it points to the ancient roots of the persistent tendency

² This is the translation offered by HIAS. When we (representatives of Temple Micah) met with HIAS earlier this year, we learned that they had a text sheet with this interpretation of Ezra, which was then forwarded to me via email.

for nations to need to blame certain groups for their issues. And two, as is often the case, those groups are immigrants. Ezra not only seeks a semblance of “national purity” by casting out immigrants, [but] he is [also] blaming those immigrants for all the troubles of the community, both past and possible future.

That’s his interpretation of Ezra. However, our biblical texts are multivocal. Not only do they contain stories that make us uncomfortable, but also, they include subversive sequels, texts which were written specifically to undermine other biblical texts. Thus, I would argue that the subversive sequel to the book of Ezra is the book of Ruth. Both the book of Ezra and the book of Ruth have their origins in the Persian period, between 550 and 330 BCE.³

At the opening of the book of Ruth, we learn that Ruth and Orpah are foreign-born wives, the daughters-in-law of Naomi. When Ruth’s husband *and* Orpah’s husband, *and* Naomi’s husband all pass away, Naomi decides that it’s time to return to the land of Israel:

Accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, [Naomi] left the place where she had been living; and they set out on the road back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Turn back, each of you to

³ See Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *Ezra: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible, 2023), p. 6. Also see Jeremy Shipper, “Introduction,” *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible, 2016) where he explains that some scholars consider Ruth to be an answer to Ezra-Nehemiah and thereby assign its origins to the Persian period.

her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me! May the LORD grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband!" And she kissed them farewell.

They broke into weeping and said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi replied, "Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons in my body who might be husbands for you? Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to be married. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons, should you wait for them to grow up? Should you on their account debar yourselves from marriage? Oh no, my daughters! My lot is far more bitter than yours, for the hand of the LORD has struck out against me."

They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her. So, she said, "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law."

But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."⁴

⁴ The remaining translations are all from sefaria.org.

Ruth proves herself to be steadfast; when they arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth takes care of Naomi, gleaning in the fields on her behalf. Ruth is the perfect immigrant: she learns the language, becomes part of the household, and works hard to improve her life. You couldn't ask for a better role model.

Happily, this story, unlike the book of Ezra, offers our foreign-born heroine a much better outcome:

So Boaz [a relative of Naomi's] married Ruth; she became his wife, and he cohabited with her. The LORD let her conceive, and she bore a son. And the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today! May his name be perpetuated in Israel! He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons." Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom. She became its foster mother, and the women neighbors gave him a name, saying, "A son is born to Naomi!"

Ruth is considered truly righteous here for what she has done on behalf of Naomi. Ruth could have stayed in her home country and found a second husband there, but by choosing to immigrate and then marry someone in Naomi's extended family, and by letting Naomi raise the child as a foster mother, Ruth made it possible for Naomi to inherit land from Boaz's estate. That's why the women neighbors say that a son is born to Naomi – and why they are so happy for her. They know that she now has a retirement plan in the

form of her grandson. Ruth has done something selfless, in the eyes of the biblical narrator, by taking on the difficulties of immigration, marrying within the family, and providing an heir, thus helping Naomi with her plight.

That's a beautiful outcome, which by itself would have made for a lovely ending to this sweet pastoral story, and fine example of undermining the Ezra narrative. But I think that the point of the book of Ruth is what's found in the next line:

They named [the baby] Obed; he was the father of Jesse, father of David.

That, right there, is the whole point of our bucolic pastoral story of Ruth the righteous immigrant.

Why should that lineage matter? It tells us that King David's great-grandmother was not just a foreigner, but a destitute foreigner from one of the least desirable of the foreign tribes, the Moabites. As it says in Deuteronomy 23:4, "No... Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of Adonai; no descendants of such, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of Adonai." Ruth is an unemployed Moabite immigrant living on the left-behind gleanings of the field: the lowest of the low. Yet it is the warm embrace of this lowly foreign wife that brought us King David. By itself, it would be a sufficient answer to Ezra.

But what else do we know about King David? What else does he represent, in our tradition?

David is not just a king; there's something more.

The messiah comes from David.

The book of Ruth is here to tell us: *No foreign wives, no messiah.* It's a direct rebuke to Ezra. *Want the messiah to come, Ezra? You'd better start embracing the stranger in your midst.*

The point of the book of Ruth is that her immigration benefits the Israelites, bringing them closer to redemption. Welcoming the immigrant is not just the humane thing to do; it's also in the best interest of the Israelite society. Ezra's desire to purify the Israelite society from outside influence was a step backwards, not forwards.

Interestingly, this idea that immigrants are a net positive is backed up by research: as the scholar Zeke Hernandez writes, "simply put, the evidence shows that without immigration we would have a 'swamp society' that stagnates because it lacks inflows of novel ideas, talent, motivation, and investment. Immigration ensures that we live in a 'lake society' with a healthy renewal of those critical inputs."⁵

You may already know, but Temple Micah has a long-standing group called Sukkat Shalom; their name means

⁵ Zeke Hernandez, *The Truth about Immigration: Why Successful Societies Welcome Newcomers* (St. Martin's Press, 2024), pp. 4-5.

“shelter of peace”. This congregant-led group works on immigration issues in the DMV. They are, as a group, deeply knowledgeable and passionate. And they have been wholeheartedly supported by this congregation: in one of their recent fundraising efforts, for example, over half of the congregation participated in one way or another, with hands-on work, advocacy, and financial donations.

Over the past few years, Temple Micah, through Sukkat Shalom, has engaged in a fact-finding trip to the southern border, raised enough funding to support a full-time immigration paralegal at HIAS for a year, helped with resettlement of four different immigrant families in the DMV, and provided support for additional families in targeted ways such as the distribution of gift cards. Temple Micah, through Sukkat Shalom, just gave \$10,000 in emergency funds to Ayuda, a non-profit that helps the immigrant community, to assist with increased immigration filing fees, case management, mental health services, education, and advocacy. They are in the process of donating:

- \$10,000 to HIAS to support wrap around services to clients of the Silver Spring legal office,
- \$10,000 to the Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs to support immigrant justice litigation including impact litigation,
- \$15,000 to CASA to support legal work in the DMV, including impact litigation,
- \$5,000 to Mary’s Center to their compassionate care fund, and

- \$5,000 to La Clinica del Pueblo for health care for uninsured patients.

Sukkat Shalom is also currently engaged in a process of deep study once more, as the situation is changing rapidly under this administration. There will be new opportunities for volunteering and fund raising in the coming months, so be sure to read your Temple Micah emails carefully.

One urgent need right now that has already surfaced: we need volunteers to receive training to accompany immigrants to court dates and check-ins. Immigrants are much less likely to get caught in an ICE sweep if they have someone accompanying them. Accompaniment means spending four to six hours at a stretch sitting on courthouse benches while your immigrant friends work their way through the legal system. Not everyone has the kind of schedule that allows them to do this mitzvah, but if you can, please do volunteer to help. We are distributing fliers with more information at this service. As always, monetary donations to Sukkat Shalom are also welcome; there is an urgent need for funds to help immigrants deal with this unfolding crisis right now. Gift cards are particularly helpful, as they can be distributed directly to families.⁶

Our tradition calls us to rise above our *yetzer ha-rav*, our inclination to do wrong, to be good to the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. These days we would also add, the

⁶ Many thanks to the leadership of Sukkot Shalom who read an early version of this sermon, offered input, and provided detail information regarding their recent activities.

immigrant, the refugee, and the asylum-seeker. We simply cannot pretend that they are not as human as we are. We are commanded to care for their welfare.

We are called to recognize that our own redemption is directly dependent upon welcoming the stranger. That is to say: the book of Ruth is the answer to the book of Ezra. It asks us to welcome the stranger, to feed and clothe her, and not cast her out. It is time to heed that call.