

We're With You in Immigration Reform

One year ago today, the immigration raid on the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant in Postville Iowa brought together the Jewish and Hispanic communities in a dramatic and unprecedented way.

Agriprocessors was at the time the largest kosher slaughterhouse in the United States, providing Jews nationwide who adhere to kosher laws with the bulk of their meat. The plant was owned and operated by a Jewish family who identify with the Orthodox Jewish Chabad movement.

The plant's workforce, on the other hand, were immigrants, primarily from Latin American countries, many of them undocumented. The enforcement methods were particularly harsh and in the wake of the raid, 389 people were separated from their families, detained, and in some cases railroaded into pleading guilty to crimes they didn't know they committed and expelled from the country. Numerous labor violations are alleged to have been committed by the owners and managers, which led to the reorganization of the plant.

The Postville raid was a wakeup call for the Jewish community. This level of alarm started with the fact that the raid took place at a kosher slaughterhouse. But, it went far beyond that, striking a deep chord that is rooted in the very core of our Jewish beliefs and our own immigration experiences in this country.

The Hebrew Bible, or *Torah*, commands us no less than 36 times to "welcome the stranger." Biblical scholars believe that these "strangers" were poor inhabitants, generally rural, from cultures far and wide. They were not much different than the poor documented or undocumented immigrant workers in America today.

The language about how to treat them is unambiguous. The Bible says that we must love the stranger because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt. We felt the lash of the Egyptians, and we know what occurs when strangers are ill-treated.

And we were once strangers here, too. Today, as low-skilled Latino workers clamber to get into the U.S., we are witnessing a striking parallel to our own Jewish American history. We too fled economic hardships and left our homelands in hopes of securing a better future for our children. We too were made to feel unwelcome by restrictive laws instituted in the 1920s by those who saw our different language and traditions as a threat to their own. We too were turned away when we desperately sought safety during World War II — with disastrous consequences.

For all these reasons, American Jews feel a powerful connection with the struggles of all immigrants. Since its founding in 1881, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), the international migration organization of the American Jewish community and the oldest immigration agency in this country, has led efforts for immigration reform.

After years of government reliance on raids and enforcement as the sole means to control immigration, we were heartened by the new Administration's recent announcement that its enforcement activities would focus more on employers who violate immigration laws and exploit undocumented workers and less on the workers themselves. Yet, an enforcement-only approach will not fix our broken immigration system.

Though we do not condone breaking the law, the reality is that legal channels for immigrants to reunite with close family members or to pursue employment opportunities are scarce and in many cases non-existent. A rational immigration system would closely match the needs of employers and workers and allow families to stay together. A fair immigration system would not keep millions of people in the shadows, living in fear.

The American Jewish community has had a longstanding, historic alliance with the African American community in this country. Our rabbis marched with their leaders in Selma. Mindful of the injustices perpetrated against them throughout our country's history, we have been vigilant and proactive partners in their drive to achieve fair treatment in this country.

Today, the Jewish community is working intensively on immigration issues. We have launched our own grassroots immigration campaign that educates, advocates, and mobilizes our forces for immigration reform, and teaches our community how to provide direct services for newcomers.

In all we do, we collaborate closely with the Latino community, and are active in the Reform Immigration for America campaign, led by the National Immigration Forum and the National Council of La Raza. The opportunities for other coalitions are plentiful. Together we can assure the passage of sensible and humane immigration laws, so that today's anniversary of the raid in Postville will pass into history. Together we can honor our history as a nation of immigrants and ensure that America fulfills its promise of strength through diversity.

Gideon Aronoff is President & CEO of HIAS, the international migration agency of the American Jewish community, and chair of the National Immigration Forum, the leading immigrant advocacy organization in the United States.