

Faith-Based Approaches to Immigration Policy

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Good afternoon. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this panel. It's a privilege for a first-generation American, the son of a refugee.

I'm Stephen Steinlight, Senior Policy Analyst at the Center for Immigration Studies. I'm here in a different capacity, however: to share my understanding of my faith's teachings regarding the current immigration debate. I'm a proud American and a faithful Jew.

My religious values are rooted in Judaism's prophetic tradition that teaches redemption is achieved through pursuing justice. As I understand it, justice is defined – in part – as the absolute, peremptory connection between actions and consequences. Without individual accountability, justice means nothing.

The holiday of Shavuot – Pentecost – begins at sundown today. It commemorates God's giving of the law, the Torah, to the Israelites and, through them, to humanity. Rabbinical commentators traditionally linked Pentecost to Passover, the Exodus from Egyptian bondage – reflecting rabbinic understanding of freedom's dangers. Unrestrained liberty leads to anarchy. At Mount Sinai, God bestowed the gift of law to educate, limit and ennoble freedom. Kathleen Bates echoed this union of principles in "America the Beautiful:" "Confirm thy soul in self control by liberty in law."

The millions that have entered America unlawfully and broken countless laws to remain traduce these principles. So does S.1348 by offering the profligate Z-Visa to those that exhibit contempt for the rule of law. We ignore history and justice at our peril. The 1986 amnesty multiplied illegal immigration five-fold.

Since anyone can quote Scripture, it's not surprising how frequently faith representatives supporting the Bush-Senate immigration bills employ it – or, rather – abuse it – obsessing on passages from the Hebrew Bible, especially *Leviticus 19*. This includes the Jewish Establishment, which surveys show does not speak for America's Jews. Ordinary Jews, like most Americans, are not xenophobes, but draw a bright line between legal and illegal immigration. They oppose exponentially increased immigration, guest worker programs, and amnestying illegal aliens. Like most Americans –given the option – they choose attrition of the illegal population vigorous law enforcement.

Supporters of the Senate-Bush bills fixate on *Leviticus 19*: “When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall do them no wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

This is their routine rhetorical climax. It's presumably unassailable. *Leviticus 19*, they declare, supports S.2611 cum S.1348. End of story.

Or is it?

It doesn't require much hermeneutical acumen to see the meaning of a key term – *sojourn* – has been misconstrued for political purposes.

The word in the Hebrew Bible for stranger is “Ger v'toshav.” The *precise* English equivalent is **sojourner**. It first appears in *Genesis* 4:23 describing Abraham when he dwells briefly with the Hittites in what is now Hebron. It last appears in *Chronicles* 29:15 where King David employs it to

contrast the transitory nature of human existence with the eternity of God, creator and steward of the earth on which we briefly dwell as wanderers.

Richard Elliot Friedman, a leading authority on biblical Hebrew, translates it as “**alien**” and “**visitor**.” Every English dictionary defines *sojourn* as a *temporary stay*. Thus, this passage offers no scriptural sanction to argue some 12 million illegal aliens should be permitted to remain **permanently in the United States**.

Terms for *immigrant* or *immigration* are absent in the Bible. Narratives of inclusion are rare. We know the rule by the exception –the *Book of Ruth*.

The Bible also addresses the inclusion of strangers in civil and legal terms. In *Exodus* 12:49, *Leviticus* 24:22 and in *Numbers* 15:14, it proclaims there shall be one law for citizens and strangers alike. This is often cynically misread as a bill of rights for sojourners. **The contrary is true.** Strangers must conform to Israelite law.

Strangers did have rights, but they earned them by an ancient form of naturalization: circumcision and abandoning idolatry. Strangers were required to obey all Israelite laws **strictly** and not undermine the legal fabric of Israelite society.

Leviticus 19 commands us to love the stranger. S.1348 is about greed, not love, and *Leviticus* 19 surely does not command us to exploit strangers as cheap labor or for partisan advantage. S.1348’s reactionary, inhumane provision for 400,000-600,000 “Guest workers” violates the Holiness Code of *Leviticus* that demands dignity for laborers, including the most humble. We are told to be “holy because I the Lord am holy.” Our holiness is tested by how justly we treat laborers.

Cherry-picking the Bible to exploit poor immigrants at the expense of working-class and impoverished Americans – African Americans especially – to enrich wealthy employers is nothing less than sacrilege.

Thank you.

