Away With All Borders

The Immigration Mess

BY MICHAEL LERNER

Immigration opens up a complicated set of ethical and spiritual questions, and it’s time to confront them directly.

Every country in the world uses oppressive and sometimes violent means to keep out those whom it does not want, and these actions are almost always based on both capitalist economic rationales (“there is not enough to go around, so don’t let others share it”) and racist feelings toward others (“they don’t deserve what we deserve because they are less valuable or less truly human than we are”). There is also this phony argument: “My great-great-grandparents built up this country; therefore, I am entitled to it because I inherited their genes.”

Our claim to own this part of the earth that we call “our country” because we currently live on it is fundamentally problematic. The notion of ownership of the earth and its products is a convenient fiction popularized in each generation by the latest set of victors in struggles for land that have been going on for at least the last 12,000 years. With this concept the winners justify their current power to exclude others from that land. This way of valorizing the ethos of “might makes right” has been going on for many thousands of years.

The notion that we “own” the land on which we live, foreign though this notion was to many indigenous cultures, seems so intuitive to people in modern, global, capitalist societies that it almost seems sacrilegious to question it. Yet that was precisely what the Torah and Jewish tradition set out to do over two thousand years ago.

A Spiritual Critique of Land Ownership

The Torah approaches the question of land ownership (Leviticus 25) by commanding that every seventh year be considered a Sabbatical year in which all work on the land is...
prohibited—no planting or harvesting. Anything that grows on that land is considered ownerless and hence available for the poor and the homeless to take. Those who have inherited land are expected during the Sabbatical year to live off of food that has been planted and harvested previously. Moreover, all debts are automatically canceled on the seventh year. The Torah goes on to ordain that at the end of the seventh cycle of seven years (or in other words, every fifty years), the last Sabbatical year will be followed by yet another year of no work—the Jubilee year, during which all land will be redistributed back to the original (essentially equal) distribution of the land among and within the twelve tribes.

Anticipating the resistance to this revolutionary notion that God can tell people what to do with what they’ve come to think of as “their land and their property,” God tells the people, “The whole earth is Mine.” The Torah recognizes that this is a revolutionary notion, so it invokes God’s voice to make clear that humans don’t have a right to property.

God, on the Torah account, goes on to teach us that human beings are “wayfarers” on the earth with the obligation to tend it, protect it, and share its produce with everyone—and without any right to possess it. So, no, just because you live on some land doesn’t mean you have a right to it, even if some previous conqueror or inhabitant created some system that eventuated in you owning a piece of paper that claims you own it or have a right to it, or that the community in which you live validates that right.

Unfortunately, private ownership, the right to control the land and its inhabitants, is so deeply enshrined in the imperial ideologies that originated long before capitalism that even those who suffer most in this system of domination nevertheless have internalized its values. These imperial ideologies have now reached new heights of penetration into our consciousness through media and public “education” such that the vast majority of people believe in private property in ideas, land, and products. Holding this belief, they are not as outraged as they might reasonably be when the powerful “1 percent” manipulate the capitalist marketplace and corporate-controlled banks, insurance companies, media, and elected officials to create economic and property arrangements that end up materially hurting and disadvantaging the majority.

Part of the compensation that people receive in the face of these unfair arrangements is the belief that they still “own” the country in which they live—that it is still “theirs.” And one way to reinforce this fantasy of ownership of the country is to rally the relatively powerless inside the country against the even more powerless migrants and refugees outside the country. Hence the popularization of the notion that “our” country will be “taken over” by “undeserving others” unless we rigorously enforce this country’s borders. The demand for rigorous enforcement of the borders works to prop up popular acquiescence to the unfair distribution of wealth internally. So just at the moment when the global capitalist order is ravaging the economies of countries around the world and driving people to risk their lives to come to advanced industrial societies in hopes of supporting themselves and their families, the supporters of the unfair domestic inequalities do all they can to whip up fear of foreigners.

Why We Need a Global Marshall Plan

The Network of Spiritual Progressives has a proposal for how to shift these dynamics of fear, xenophobia, and desperation-fueled migration: a Global Marshall Plan. It calls for the United States to take the lead in encouraging the Group of Twenty advanced industrial countries to each dedicate 1-2 percent of their Gross Domestic Product each year for the next twenty to end (not just alleviate, as the One campaign sought) domestic and global poverty, homelessness, hunger, inadequate education, and inadequate health care. If implemented in the way that the Network of Spiritual Progressives suggests, tens of millions of people who cross the borders of countries looking for economic security for their families will no longer have to do that, so the pressure on immigration will dramatically decrease. And since the Global Marshall
Plan also applies to eliminating domestic poverty and homelessness in the United States, the fear of immigrants taking all the jobs will dramatically decrease. To read more about this idea, visit tikkun.org/GMP and download the full version of the Global Marshall Plan.

Our government is currently building physical walls and conducting warfare on our borders against those who seek economic security. It’s a war that will never be won: with thousands of miles of borders and tens of millions of people desperate for economic survival, many will continue to find a way to get into the United States. Meanwhile, even our most liberal politicians fail to mention the central ethical contradiction here: that it is precisely the economic policies of the United States and other advanced industrial nations that have created economic crises in the impoverished nations of the east and south, thereby pushing local farmers off their land into urban slums where they still cannot find safe, decent jobs to support their families. In short, we create the problem that causes so many immigrants to desperately seek security, and then we try to use power and military technology to keep them out and deport them.

This is why a spiritual progressive agenda insists that immigration reform be accompanied by the implementation of a Global Marshall Plan so that people no longer feel compelled to move to other countries in order to achieve economic security. It’s time for the United States, the European Union, and other advanced industrial societies to agree to eliminate the economic arrangements that together create global economic suffering. These arrangements include the widespread use of GMO seeds engineered by Monsanto and other agricultural giants. They also include the use of “free trade” agreements that result in the dumping of cheaply produced agricultural and finished goods into third-world markets at cheaper prices than they could otherwise be obtained, thereby driving small farmers and small business people out of business. It is these dynamics that force people to move out of their villages and into the slums surrounding huge cities, where many face the prospect of having to sell themselves into the sex trade, risk getting caught in the crossfire of the drug wars, or get killed or tortured in a struggle between groups warring for the resources they need to subsist.

Understanding this relationship between “illegal” immigration and capitalist economics is crucial. The racism that is used to justify keeping the stranger from “our” land is a product of a deeper, mistaken intuition. The truth is that we could organize a very different way of distributing wealth and power that would in practice demonstrate to most people on the planet that there is in fact enough for everyone, and that we can live in a society that provides enough for all.

 Needless to say, anyone attempting to put this kind of a message into the public sphere is perceived as an enemy and then treated with disdain, fear, and ridicule. These sorts of ideas are almost never broadcast on the public airwaves or in any other branch of media. No wonder then that most people think these ideas are unrealistic and will tell you, based on their media-driven assumptions, that people are naturally selfish and self-seeking, that they will never agree to share what they have with others, and that therefore a Global Marshall Plan will never happen, so we need borders and police to enforce our borders. And that is how it turns out that even after President Obama allows children of undocumented immigrants to stay in the United States, another 11 million are still being harassed by the various police agencies or exploited by many employers, and why all around the world refugees are being treated like hunted animals rather than as people deserving respect and care.

So here’s an idea: implement the Global Marshall Plan and enact legislation to eliminate borders within twenty years (meaning that anyone can go to any country). The pressure from the impending end of borders will provide the impetus to generously fund the Global Marshall Plan, and that, in turn, will help create the circumstances in which the end of borders moves from being seen as a utopian fantasy to being a wonderful way to end the war on immigrants (and the war on drugs).

A first step is to articulate the kind of worldview that we put forward in Tikkun and we fight for in the Network of Spiritual Progressives (NSP). If you haven’t done so yet, please join the NSP at spiritualprogressives.org. You don’t have to believe in God or be religious to be a spiritual progressive. You only have to support our fight for a new bottom line of love, kindness, generosity, ethical and ecological sensitivity, and radical amazement at the grandeur and mystery of the universe. ■