

Seder celebrates contributions of American immigrants

By **Aneri Pattani** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 11, 2016

At 12 years old, Yarden Fanta-Vagenshtein walked 800 miles from Ethiopia to Sudan, carrying her baby sister on her back in search of a better life. After a year in a refugee camp, she made it to Israel.

She didn't know how to read or write, but Fanta-Vagenshtein worked hard to educate herself, and eventually made it to the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

Fanta-Vagenshtein shared her story on Sunday at the Anti-Defamation League's annual Passover Seder, which draws on contemporary accounts of the immigrant experience to celebrate the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt.

"Each immigrant has struggled. They can motivate other people and appreciate what others might not," Fanta-Vagenshtein said during the event held at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

This year's Seder — held in advance of the holiday that begins April 22 — takes place amid heated discussions on immigration, fueled by the refugee crisis in Europe and a series of terrorist attacks.

"At a time when immigrants are being targeted through restrictive laws and rhetoric on the campaign trail, it is more important than ever that we recognize their contributions and do everything we can to prevent people from acting out on those fears and that rhetoric," said Robert Trestan, ADL regional director.

In a keynote address, US Representative Seth Moulton called upon the nation to continue its tradition of welcoming those seeking freedom and opportunity.

He said he was disappointed that leaders in many states, including Governor Charlie Baker, expressed reservations about accepting Syrian refugees after last November's extremist attacks in Paris.

"Terrorists are trying to recruit people within the nation, and a way to recruit people is to make them feel ostracized in this country," Moulton said in an interview with the Globe. "We shouldn't let our bigotry become a weapon against us."

Moulton, along with nearly 100 other attendees, signed a letter prepared by the ADL to send to Congress, urging lawmakers to create pro-immigration policies.

"Rather than allowing anti-immigrant rhetoric to undermine the Framers' vision of a nation that affords life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all, we call on you to recognize that we, too, came to America as strangers, and those journeys bind us together," the letter said.

Melissa Garlick, a lawyer for the ADL, said the letter is meant not only to promote policy changes, but to combat negative ideas about immigrants.

"Words matter," she said. "In some situations, they can motivate people to commit violence."

Garlick pointed to an incident in South Boston last August, in which two brothers were accused of attacking a homeless man.

Police said the brothers targeted the man because he was Hispanic and that they were inspired in part by GOP presidential candidate Donald Trump.

Boston City Councilor Tito Jackson said he chose to attend the Seder to combat anti-immigrant views.

“The vitriol the candidates are spewing, to me, is one of the most dangerous things in our political history,” Jackson said. “We need to be loud and proud and let our immigrant brothers and sisters know we are a great country because of them, not in spite of them.”

A world map at the Seder showcased the various journeys that brought attendees to America.

As people entered, they placed stickers on their country of origin. By the end of the evening, colored dots covered dozens of nations, including Germany, Haiti, Brazil, Iraq, Pakistan, and China.

For Kashif Ahmed, the colorful map served as a symbol of America today.

Ahmed, who emigrated from Pakistan in 1996, said he loves the annual Seder because it brings people from many diverse backgrounds together in one room.

“Look at this,” he said, gesturing around the room. “This is what America looks like.”

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