

In the month of April, Jews around the state and far beyond will speak these words from the Haggadah as part of their Passover celebrations: “My father was a wandering Aramean.” The Jewish story is essentially an immigrant story. Therefore, we are particularly called to love and support our immigrant neighbors. Inflammatory rhetoric, too oft employed in our political discourse, has poisoned the well where good-hearted, intentional and smart people meet to thoughtfully craft and employ humane immigration policy for the people of Rhode Island and beyond.

The 364 Misdemeanor Bill(House Bill 5502) is a crucial opportunity for this august body to remain one of the prime examples of compassionate, sensible, and progressive leadership. This bill would change the maximum prison sentence for a misdemeanor from 1 year to 364 days.

As a rabbi on the East Side of Providence serving Temple Beth-El, a storied institution with 170 years of demonstrated moral leadership, I have been privileged to behold first-hand the unique spirit of this state and all its inhabitants. Today, Temple Beth-El is the open-hearted and welcoming spiritual home of more than 800 families, many of whom are among your constituents. We support Jewish life, education and diverse religious striving in collaboration with our community partners and with shared commitment to religious tolerance and belonging.

The people who call Rhode Island home have, time and again, demonstrated a concerted effort to make this place as tolerant and forward-thinking as any ever was. As my colleagues of all faith backgrounds will attest, we are communities united in our shared mandate to care for the people who entrust us with stewarding their moral aspirations towards collective liberation.

As a member in good standing of the RI Board of Rabbis, and the appointed representative thereof to the Board of Trustees at the Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island, I have seen how the institutional Jewish organizations of this state strive to align our actions with our values.

The Jewish community of Rhode Island is intertwined in the inescapable garment of destiny that binds us all together. Our sacred texts call us to show up in solidarity with the immigrant. 36 times—a number that twice asks us to consider life, which is represented by the number 18 for many Jews—the Torah singles out the special vulnerability of immigrants. Notably, this week we read in our communal lectionary from the beginning of the book of Leviticus. Therein, the Holy One calls us into a sacred relationship with both the Divine and each other.

The 364 Misdemeanor Bill has an appreciable impact on the safety of immigrants and their families. Even so, without sacrificing any of the otherwise necessary prosecutorial discretion of the State’s justice system and its law enforcement. In fact, by removing the threat of Federal overreach, our State can take accountability for the just prosecution of misdemeanor crimes.

Under federal immigration law, certain minor convictions that are punishable by a year or more in prison may lead to detention, denial of necessary forms of immigration relief, and deportation for immigrants. It is a harsh and unnecessary consequence for people who need not become subject to a federal administration that seeks to dehumanize them.

The people of Rhode Island should not seek to permanently exile those who still have the potential to make a positive impact on our communities; all the more so we should be compassionate and fair to the immigrants who make our community richer and more vibrant every day.

Last month, at a regular meeting of the Rhode Island Commission on Prejudice and Bias, the Commission received a report from the Immigrant Coalition of Rhode Island - an association of 33 organizations committed to ensuring just and equal treatment of our immigrant neighbors. Their representatives alerted us to the urgency of this bill and its potential positive impact for the lived realities of people in our state.

I serve as Vice Chair of the Commission on Prejudice and Bias; we are a statutory body of the state of Rhode Island charged with studying and reporting on all forms of prejudice and hatred in Rhode Island and to revise and codify, if possible, all laws relating to all forms of prejudice, bias and hatred. Our commission is made up of representatives from the Attorney General's office, law enforcement, community partners, and a bipartisan delegation of Rhode Island's legislative bodies. In your possession, you have the Commission's endorsement of this bill as penned by our honorable Chair, Joe Reddish. We believe that it is a necessary step in curbing discrimination in the state of Rhode Island.

As we enter the Spring Holiday season, my community turns own attention to the Passover season when we remember the story of our people's Exodus from Egypt. I pray that we will not fall victim to the sort of hard-heartedness that was Pharaoh's downfall. Today I solemnly submit my testimony in support of the 364 Misdemeanor Bill in hopes that you will hear the similar resonances in this request I make of you: take this necessary step to further protect the people of our state. Please, protect vulnerable members of our immigrant community, including asylum seekers and victims of domestic violence, who otherwise could be barred from immigration relief due to a misdemeanor conviction. We urge the Committee to approve this legislation and protect the state's immigrant community from the harsh consequences of federal law for instances of minor misconduct.