

**SUKKOT CHOL HA'MO'ED SHABBAT 2022 5783**

Torah readings: Deuteronomy 8:1-18; Deuteronomy 16:13-17

My great-granny died when I was six. My parents used to visit her regularly and I have a memory of the large house she still lived in, playing in the front room while the adults were talking and of this little old lady, the oldest person I knew, sitting in a large chair, dressed in black. She was 90 when I was born, but apparently she had not changed that much for 20 years – when I look back at old black and white photos, there she is, a little old lady at the age of 70, dressed in black with white hair even then.

As a young woman at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she had arrived in London with her husband, on a ship from what was then the Austro-Hungarian empire, but what is now Ukraine. A small town called Czernowitz, where the family had been inn-keepers. She would have been in her mid-20s and in an age before telephones, she never saw, and probably never spoke to her parents again, who stayed behind in the Old Country. Unlike many of her peers though, she learned English because they set up Kramers Grocers Store in the East End, selling kosher food to the huge wave of new immigrants that arrived in London at around the same time. She worked in the shop all her life.

I have a photo of her and my great-grandfather, who died of cancer before my mother was born, in my hallway. They are sepia-tinted portraits of a Victorian couple, staring stiffly and a bit nervously into the lens. Perhaps they were taking photos to send back home. Their first language was Yiddish, and they made an unimaginable journey so that their children and grandchildren would have a better life. Actually the Kramers were relatively comfortably off. Harder up was my mum's father, who was one of ten and whose father sold firewood door-to-door to make ends meet. Or my Dad's grandfather, the tailor, who never made any money because he spent all his free time in either trade union or Zionist meetings. His wife never learned to read or write English – her naturalisation papers are signed with an X and she used to count the tube stops to make sure she got off at the right place to visit her son.

I didn't just arrive in this world as a middle-class university-educated professional. I am here as a result of a long and arduous journey made by my ancestors, a journey that is easy to forget, because unlike me, my children never met the immigrant

generation in my family. My children were born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and even their grandparents lived comfortable lives in the suburbs of London and Brighton. It's all history to them, but it's history that we have to remember, because if we forget then we lose something of our selves, something of our soul.

That's what our Torah reading today, chosen for the Shabbat during Sukkot, is telling us. That we have to remember the journey, we have to remember how our ancestors were refugees and immigrants and we are not here just because of our own effort but because we stand on their shoulders and because we happened to be born at the right place at the right time.

At Sukkot we remind ourselves of our vulnerability. We build and live in temporary shacks – we'll be going into ours for Kiddush after the service. The Torah says that we do so to remember the huts we lived in when we were crossing the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land – a journey that lasted forty years and two generations. Now is the time for us to remember how we come from wanderers – and not just in the ancient mythic past. Our ancestors have been wandering for hundreds of years and our current comfort and stability is an exception and a blessing.

And why is it so important to remember our past? Particularly if that past is filled with poverty and discrimination? Our Haftarah, Ecclesiastes, gives a different message – for Kohelet, the writer of this piece of Wisdom Literature, it's all about being in the moment, knowing that we can't control what happens in the future, recognising impermanence.

The answer comes in our second Torah reading which outlines the laws of Sukkot as a time of rejoicing at harvest time. And it is very clear that we don't just celebrate with our own families. We celebrate with the immigrant or refugee, the orphan and the widow, with all those who are excluded from the comfortable life that many of us now live. We celebrate with them, not because we are nice people, but because we were once immigrants, refugees, impoverished, sweat shop labourers, pedlars, we once slept with ten children in two rooms, we once had to choose between staying with our families or leaving them behind forever in order to make a living or to save our lives. We were strangers in the Land of Egypt, and in the East End of London, and in many other places.

But we remember our ancestors, not to stay in a place of nostalgia, or do things the way our grandparents did, but in order to reclaim and renew Judaism for the next generation. Some years ago, I went back to Lodz, now in Poland, to visit the place my father's grandfather had come from. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century it went from being a small village to being an industrial cotton-producing town, welcoming in workers from the surrounding countryside. By the time my great-grandparents emigrated, they were already living urban lives that would have been unrecognisable to their own grandparents. And I don't know what my Great-Granny, who died in 1972, would have made of today's world of the internet, smartphones and zoom. But learning from the past to inform our future, coming up with creative ways to celebrate the Jewish festivals – I think that's probably a constant. Helping others because we once walked in their shoes – we've been doing that for thousands of years – it's in the Torah. We honour our ancestors by helping refugees just like them and by renewing our festivals for the next generation. Let's carry on doing just that. Ken Yehi Ratzon.