

Freedom Shabbat D'Var Torah-Haim Mizrahi

Shabbat Shalom. My name is Haim Mizrahi and I have a story to tell. It's the kind of story that may sound familiar to many of you. You see, I left Egypt, in 1957, when I was only five years old, with my family, to escape persecution. This is the story of my Exodus.

Settling in Alexandria, Egypt, my mother's side of the family came from Greece in the late 19th century and prior to that from different parts of the Mediterranean, and prior to that they were expelled from Spain. My grandmother and her three sisters all worked in child labor factories to sustain the family and their widowed mother. She lived in an isolated community with other Spanish Jews. She knew many languages, Spanish of course, Ladino, Greek, and Italian, but never mastered conversational Arabic. Her husband, my grandfather, whose family came from Corfu, was fluent in Arabic, and spoke many other languages as well. My father's side of the family were traveling rabbis. They possibly came from Persia, through Palestine, then through the Yemen to Egypt. My grandfather and his brothers had to hastily leave the Yemen in their teens, in the late 19th century, and in the process changed the family name from Gohta to Mizrahi, to more inconspicuously blend into Cairo's Jewish population. My father's mother had immigrated to Egypt, from Morocco, with her parents as a child. My father grew up in Cairo. As a young man, on a trip to Alexandria, my father noticed my mother and asked her parents for her hand in marriage. Thus, her marriage was arranged and she was promised to my father. He was 23 years old and she was 13. They were married three years later. My mother went to French schools, but my father taught her Hebrew and educated Arabic, not the "street" Arabic she knew.

Life had been very difficult for the Jews in Egypt for a long time. It became even worse after the creation of the State of Israel, in 1948, three years before I was born. Many Jews left Egypt at that time, including many aunts and uncles and their families, who settled in France, England and Israel. Even though life may have been perilous, my parents, Joseph and Julia Mizrahi, decided to stay in Egypt.

Life continued, as one would think, within our sizable Jewish community in an area of Cairo called Sakakini. My father, who was very religiously observant, attended the nearby synagogue. Throughout each and every day, he unabashedly practiced Judaism, sometimes in an uncondusive environment. In his career, he worked his way up the ladder and became one of the directors of the tramway system in Cairo. My father's younger brother, Uncle Jacque, who also remained in Egypt with his wife and children, was a pharmacist. Our family grew. I am the youngest of six children. My memories of my life in Egypt are few, but indelible. They contain events that reflect a loving family, and elements and rituals found in so many Jewish homes. I cannot remember a summer when my family did not jump on a train, leave the sweltering city of Cairo and spend the summer with my mother's parents in Alexandria, and go to the beach every day. I enjoyed my childhood, surrounded by my siblings and caring parents. I was protected from many of the growing tensions in Egypt.

The overthrow of King Farouk in 1952, however, and the rise of Gamal Abdul Nasser increased those tensions, leading up to the nationalization of the Suez Canal, and eventually war, in 1956. At age five, I was registered at the neighborhood Jewish French school, Ecole de la Communaute Israelite du Caire, where my siblings attended, even though it had been set on fire several times, especially since the Jewish state was established. Although I felt secure with my

family, there were also some frightening times as well. My father was frequently called away at night, during an air raid, to minimize disruption to the transportation system. The sound of the blaring air raid sirens, the subsequent explosions, the repeated anti-aircraft gunfire are all indelible memories. The fearful reactions of a five year-old boy are ones that I remember well, but never shared with my own children.

The Jewish families in Cairo lived with uncertainty every day. The Jews had their Egyptian citizenship revoked. Jewish families, who considered Egypt as their home, had become strangers in a strange land. Thousands of Jews living in Egypt were being expelled or fled at this time. Daily life for my family, as all other Jewish families, became unstable, perilous and futureless. My Uncle Jacque and his family soon prepared to leave Egypt by ship headed for France, then on to Israel. I am told, as I don't actually recall, that my uncle's family boarded the ship, as my father quickly bribed officials to get my sixteen year old cousin, who may have been involved with the Haganah, out of jail to also board the departing ship. A few months later, my parents made plans to leave Egypt as well, taking my grandparents with us.

In a strange turn of events, the country of Ethiopia offered our family asylum. My oldest sister, Marguerite, was romantically involved with the nephew of Emperor Haile Selassie, and we were looked upon with favor, for a period of time. My father also weighed the perils and hardships of living in Israel, relayed to us by family there. So, in March of 1957, the family decided to accept the asylum offer of the Ethiopian government. In preparation for our imminent departure from Egypt, my parents sold all our household furniture and goods, pennies to the dollar. In retrospect, I realize that it didn't matter, since the amount of wealth and currency taken out of the country was very restricted. During this

exodus of the Jews from Egypt, our exit documents referenced our nationality as “Stateless”, and papers were signed that we were never to return to Egypt.

As I remember, we left for the airport at night on a bus with covered windows so you couldn't see in or out. We were allowed to have one suitcase per family member. At five years old, I carried my own bag with essential clothing; no toys, of course. I remember the multitude of armed soldiers at the airport checking our documents and making sure we did not smuggle any riches out of the country. My mother, grandmother, and sisters were allowed to wear some gold bracelets, but were not to pack anything else of monetary value.

Upon arrival in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, my father got a job as a foreman in a machine shop. All the children were enrolled in the international French school, where we were able to continue our studies. Fortunately for us, in addition to French, Arabic, and Hebrew, we also spoke Italian with our grandparents, which was also our primary method of communicating with a lot of Ethiopians. I have wonderful memories of my childhood in Ethiopia. Life as Jews in Ethiopia for my parents, however, was an isolating experience. My father butchered our own chickens, doing the best to follow the laws of kashrut. To keep Shabbat and have some religious study, we attended the Seventh Day Adventist Church with a missionary who befriended our family.

Within a short period of time, however, my sister's romance failed, political turmoil was increasing in Ethiopia, and my parents realized that our situation was untenable, economically and religiously. My family hoped to be able to immigrate to the United States of America. That hope was realized with the tremendous financial help and planning of The Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS) and a distant relative, living in San Diego, California, who was willing to sponsor our family.

In March of 1959, after two years in Ethiopia, we began our migration; my grandparents, Sultana and David Levy, my parents, Joseph and Julia, my sisters, Marguerite, Fortunee, and Riquette, and my brothers, Moise, and Isaac, and me. We hopped from one destination to another on a propeller plane, the best technology available to us at the time. First stop was Athens, Greece. A day later we flew on to Rome. A couple of days after that, we arrived at our next stop, Paris, where we stayed for three days. While in France, my mother tried to connect with relatives who had immigrated there. They were, much to my mother's sadness, too busy to see us. Perhaps they were afraid we would ask them for money or other form of support, and jeopardize their own fragile attempts at financial and societal stability in a new country. Apparently, this is a common occurrence faced by many immigrants.

Our journey was difficult both financially and emotionally. My mother, the pragmatist, was very concerned about uprooting her parents, as well as her children. At one point, my father was chastised by my mother for being too generous to some impoverished children who were helping us with our luggage. Being a spiritual man, my father's response to her was, we must have faith. G-d will take care of us and He is with us on our journey. We then flew on to Montreal, then New York. Finally, after weeks of travel and uncertainty about what lay ahead, we landed in San Diego. As we got off the plane, reporters from the local newspaper, The San Diego Union, were there taking pictures and writing an article about my family entitled "Jewish Refugees From Egypt." We were somewhat of an oddity.

We landed a few weeks before Passover on Friday, March 27th, 1959. The very next Monday, my mother escorted us to school, registered one sister in high school, one brother in middle school and my next older brother and me in

elementary school. My oldest sisters enrolled in the local community college. My mother spoke limited English. The rest of the family did not speak any English at all. So, as you can imagine, assimilation was a challenge. “English as a Second Language” classes did not exist at the time. My brother, Isaac, who later at age 25 received a PhD in Biochemistry, was placed in a class with special needs students. I was told to use my middle name, “David”, in school, because “Haim” was too difficult to pronounce. I did not speak at all in class for most of the year. My teacher noted on my report card that I was well behaved but very quiet, perhaps not totally aware I did not speak nor understand English. We were told to try to speak English, exclusively, so that we could learn the language faster and assimilate into society at a faster rate. We were operating under the melting pot model of American society. My parents and older sisters took any available jobs, my father as a mechanic and my mother as a daycare provider. Many of the gold bracelets taken out of Egypt were sold, out of financial necessity. We survived, all ten of us, in a small three bedroom, one bathroom house.

My family eventually overcame the challenges faced by the vast majority of immigrants who come to the United States. My parents sacrificed for their children’s safety and success. I am a retired high school teacher. Within the ranks of my siblings, we have a biochemist, a vector control analyst, a successful business woman and real estate developer, a home maker and paraprofessional in the education system, and, lastly, an historian, lecturer, and regional director of the SIDS foundation. I guess this was my parents’ “promised land.”

Now I have told you my story. I am both entwined and a product of this immigrant experience. In many ways it is so similar to the innumerable stories of the Jewish people who have been forced to leave their homes. Each year, at my favorite holiday of Pesach, we always retell this story, and the mitzvah of leaving

Egypt, to my children and grandchildren. My wife, Jody, and I have included in our Haggadah the story of the Mizrahi family, as well as my wife's family, and all other Jews, who immigrated because of persecution and to be able to practice their religion. From the time my first child, Joseph, was born, Jody and I decided to make Pesach meaningful to him. We wanted the Exodus to be a relevant event, not simply something that happened thousands of years ago. Soon after my daughter Julia was born, we continued our commitment to have both children engaged in the Seder by drawing pictures included in the Haggadah. We included the San Diego Union news article in the Haggadah as well. My sisters and brothers, their spouses, their children and grandchildren, as well as my wife's parents, her brother and sister and their spouses and children, joined our Seders, every year. As our extended families became bigger and bigger, we would frequently host about sixty five people at the Seder. As you can imagine, Seders were loud and sometimes seemingly chaotic, but Jody and I felt it was imperative to share our modified Haggadah and blend together our Sephardic and Ashkenazi foods and cultural traditions. Often, I had no idea who some of our guests were, as family members would invite others, who did not have a Seder to attend. They were, of course, more than welcome.

Because of my wife's and my efforts, my children developed a personal connection to Pesach. Every year, my son and daughter-in-law would fly with their children from Seattle to attend our Seder in San Diego. Our daughter insisted on coming home to attend the Seder while she was on the Nativ program in Israel. Now, living in Seattle, Passover Seders are smaller. We continue our tradition of passing on the Exodus stories to our grandchildren, grandnieces, grandnephews and guests.

Through the retelling of our story, and the story of all people who continue to struggle for freedom, we are preparing the next generation to take on the mantle of performing the Seder. Of course, it is gratifying to parents that their children have such a connection to Pesach. My children feel, as I do, that we really do walk in the same footsteps of our ancestors. But they also realize that there is a personal and modern historic relevance to the Exodus. Just as my family had to leave Egypt and my wife's family had to leave Eastern Europe, the Exodus is real. It did not happen so long ago.