

Shabbat Shalom. Thank you all for coming today. For the past few months, I have been studying the Torah portion beha'alotecha in the book of Numbers or BaMidbar. In this week's Torah portion, we find the Israelites, well on their journey in the desert.

As you may know, after the plagues in Egypt, the Pharaoh allowed the Israelite slaves to leave. They had to move quickly in fear that the Pharaoh might change his mind. They left with only their most prized possessions and essential goods.

Moses was their leader, he led them out of slavery which they had endured to the promise land.

Several years into what was ultimately a 40 year journey, the israelites became weary from their travels. They started doubting why they left egypt. It was as if they forgot why they left egypt in the first place. They developed a craving for meat derived from the feeling of losing something they thought they had in egypt. They lost sight of what their hopes were. Perhaps their cravings were a way to cope with their sadness. They no longer had faith in G-D and Moses that they would lead them to a better life. And so they complained to moses and G-D that they wanted to go back to Egypt. Ultimately there greed got them killed due to a severe plague G-D put on them.

In learning about their struggles and their journey to a better life, I became interested in the struggles and journeys of my ancestors. Why did they come to the United States? What did they leave behind? What were their journeys like? Did they ever have regrets? Did they ever miss things from home? And how did they make lives for themselves here?

I have come to learn from speaking with my family, their stories, the religious persecution they endured, and the oppression they faced as European Jews.

My great grandma Sadie was 12 when she left Russia to come here. Her parents lied that she was 9 so that they could afford the less expensive children's fare for the ship. But when she arrived, they had to lie again and say that she was in fact 12 so that she could go straight to work in a factory. Her father had come to the U.S. for one year at a time to work and bring money back to Russia so that he could ultimately bring each one of his 7 children here. One at a time.

My great grandpa Herman had rickets when he lived in Russia. It is believed that this was because the food was scarce and he suffered from malnourishment. He came here in steerage (the lowest and cheapest area of the ship often where the cattle were). There were no windows. It was awful. When he got here, he joined the U.S. army and fought in World War One. He was promised U.S. Citizenship if he survived. In the army he was given meals and he learned English. He was always very proud of his service.

My great grandpa Max was in the Russian army. He knew that as a Jew he would be made to fight on the front line. It was bitter cold and the Jewish soldiers were given flimsy clothing and fed scraps. So he took the first opportunity to run away. He also came here in steerage. He was so horrified by the journey that he refused to ever go on another boat again. When he arrived, he worked as a painter in Malden, MA. He loved his boss so much that he changed his last name to him.

My great great grandma Rose whom I share the same middle name with. After narrowly missing being beaten with a bayonet, she left Russia when she was 14. It was no longer safe for her there. She was also not allowed to go to school in Russia because Jewish children were not allowed to. Food was also scarce. She came here and got a job at a candy factory named Schraffts in Charlestown, MA so that she could make enough money to buy clothing and food so she did not look like a Russian peasant. She learned English and worked hard to become a citizen.

In 1920, My Great Grandma Fay left Shereshov, a border town between Poland and Russia with her mother and 3 older brothers at age 11. Life for her there was terrifying and she had no choice but to run in the middle of the night. She assimilated to a nice life here in the U.S., but she suffered from great anxiety.

My great grandpa Gus was born here but his grandparents came from England and Prussia (which is near the border of Austria and Germany). They made a living as motion picture operators.

My great grandma Eve, left Russia and her family had to sleep in cemeteries on their journey.

The common theme for all of them was that they didn't know what life would be like here but they were able to come here and work hard, have food, get educated and practice Judaism. They were safe to live freely and raise their families. They never wanted to go back and they were proud to be Americans. They knew that having children and educating them would be the key to keeping their faith alive. They learned the language and worked hard and made lives for themselves here.

They are not here to tell us how they felt on their journeys. As much as it seems like they were running and in many cases had no choice but to leave, did they have cravings for familiarity from their home lives? Did they feel unsure and lost?

I live in a community with a significant undocumented Brazilian population. I hear stories both on the news and at home. I hear about sanctuary cities and about mothers and fathers who have to hide out in churches so that they will not be sent back to Brazil and separated from their American born children. Some (or many) have come here illegally. And even though they have worked hard and paid their taxes, followed our laws and raised their children well, they face this real threat.

I think about their journey's here. I think about what their lives were like in Brazil and what led them to take such a risk to seek a better life here. I imagine how hard it was for them to leave their home towns, the people they knew, their churches, their family members. What it must have been like to leave everything behind in the hopes of a better life for their children.

I think about how they must have felt on their journeys. I wonder what they hoped a life would be like here. The American dream. And I wonder how they worked to make that dream their reality. What it must feel like to live in fear of being sent back to a place you desperately wanted to leave. And I feel for them. I know that like my ancestors, and like the Israelites, the drive to make a better life is very real and in some cases not optional.

Studying Behaalotecha has helped me understand the challenges of a journey to pursue a better life and the hardships along the way. I was able to talk with my family members and learn about the past of my ancestors.

In studying my Torah portion, I have begun to understand the extent of the religious persecution my ancestors and the Israelites endured.

This has led me to think about how the immigrant population in the United States and on this Island may be experiencing things that the Israelites has in the desert. Perhaps they also experience feelings of not knowing what the future would hold and whether their choices would influence the lives of their children in a positive or a negative way.

Does anyone have a story of family journeys that led them to the United States and what they had to endure to get here? How does that shape your opinion of immigration issues we are discussing today?