

## **EUPJ Conference Amsterdam 2012**

### **Erev Shabbat**

It is a curious thing to raise children in a country not of your own birth. Their accent is not your accent. Their language is not your language. Their cultural reference points are not your cultural reference points. The dislocation is sometimes obvious, but more often a dawning realisation that their young lives are little, if at all, like my own. And yet, my choice to raise children in a country not of my birth is very much that – a choice. After more than twenty years in the UK, I've finally lived more of my life outside the United States than in, yet in addition to my newly found British citizenship, I remain a US citizen as do my children. I cannot help the lingering feeling that collecting passports is still a sensible idea. If I had recourse to easily gather one or two more, I expect I'd be sorely tempted. That is, in the end if I am honest with myself, a legacy of being Jewish.

Because unlike I, who have chosen to live and work in Europe, an ocean and continent away from where I was raised, my grandparents had no such choice. Both my grandmothers were economic refugees from Eastern Europe. They arrived in the United States as children to be raised a world away from the birth land, and culture, of their parents. And while both of my grandmothers' families left Eastern Europe for economic reasons, those economic reasons were intimately related to the political realities of being a Jew in the later half of the nineteenth century in the Pale of Settlement and along the Baltic Sea. Had their families not left when they did, the chances of them having survived the ravages of the Second World War would have been very slim. The great-grandparents had little choice but to leave the lands of their birth and raise children in a foreign country.

My maternal grandfather's story is far less usual – forced to flee from the land into which he was born or face court-martial. But this was not the Russian or Prussian or any other European army that he beat a hasty retreat from. My grandfather was born in Ottoman Palestine and following the Second World War joined the quasi-military British Border Patrol guarding the northern

border with the Lebanon. There he was, in direct contravention of orders, involved in a skirmish between a nearby kibbutz and a Palestinian village. His commanding officer helped sneak him down to Haifa and a ship leaving for America before my grandfather could be court-martialed for his actions. Oklahoma proved to be a long way indeed from the mosquito-infested Zionist settlements of his youth. My mother cannot even speak the Hebrew language which was my grandfather's first tongue.

But this has been the way of Jewish communities for most of our post-biblical history. Few Jewish communities remained truly settled for numerous generations in one place without disruption, displacement or dislocation. There were pockets of historical moments – the most notable of which is probably the Golden Age of Spain – when Jews felt settled and safe, like residents of the lands into which they were born, not an itinerant, diasporic people longing for 'home'.

Only from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the present day have we, as Jews, had anything akin to real choice – the relative security of the modern, democratic nation-state or a Jewish, democratic one. We can truly choose – life in America or Australia or Brazil or Argentina or South Africa or, even, Hong Kong or Mumbai or we can choose life in the modern State of Israel.

But perhaps most curiously, even after the several centuries of expulsions, all manner of discriminations, forced conversions, and even mass murder, not an insignificant number of us choose to live in Europe. None of us need to any more. We could all up sticks tomorrow and make aliyah. Barring language issues (fairly easily resolved) and job prospects (far better than in, say, Greece or Spain at the moment), there is nothing to stop us. And yet we build our homes and raise our children in these lands that have so often rejected us, in the hopes that the modern language of human rights and the rule of law, of citizenship and multiculturalism will make the ground more fertile and more stable than it has been for at least a millennium. Were I an historian, it would seem a most irrational choice.

It is true that some of us are third or fourth or even longer generations here in Europe. My husband is even a third generation Reform Jew in the UK. And then there is Europe and *Europe* – everyone surely knows that the British hardly consider themselves European at all, while the eastern edges of the continent vie more and more for a place at its centre. And as a Jew, too, there is probably no small difference between consciously making one's home in a land that invented the blood libel a thousand years ago and one that less than three decades ago was still actively and strenuously persecuting its Jewish community.

Still, here we all are – celebrating Shabbat in the beautiful new, permanent structure that is this synagogue in Amsterdam. I am an American born Jew who chooses consciously to live and raise children in London. The rabbinical school which I am so very proud to serve as Principal, Leo Baeck College, currently has students from Germany, France, Holland, Italy, Hungary and the FSU. Less than a year ago we ordained the first ever Danish born progressive rabbi. And from September, alongside all our wonderful British students, we look forward to welcoming a Spanish born student from an anusim background to the College. For a country and community rediscovering its Jewish heritage, we will be able to provide a rabbi who understands their journey. Leo Baeck College graduates and their colleagues from our sister seminaries, Geiger College and the Levisson Institute, are building communities across the continent, from Luxembourg to Budapest across France and Germany and Holland and beyond. We, alongside every Jew who lives in these cities, are rebuilding Jewish life in Europe. And we look after Israelis in Berlin and Americans in Surrey. Europe – London, Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Warsaw, Prague, Moscow, Budapest, Vienna, Barcelona and many more – is now a place to live a dynamic and exciting Jewish life.

But for how long? There is a question I cannot answer.

Perhaps my children or grandchildren will be forced to dislocate themselves from the country of their birth and raise children in another land or perhaps they will, with all their passports in hand, merely choose to do so.

We, Jews, are, after all, a peripatetic people. Even our sidra this week is about nothing at all if it is not about that. The Israelites were wanderers, and for a wandering people nothing more than a semi-permanent, portable place of worship would do. The detailed instructions regarding the building of the Mishkan are the love song of an itinerant people to an ever-present God, a way of creating a home even on the go.

And that is what we all do, I think, though some of us are more conscious of it than others, perhaps. Nowhere for anyone on this earth is necessary permanent. We Jews are acutely aware of that. And yet we are also aware of the Ever-Present God and the need to build our communities wherever we find ourselves in hope. The European Union – no longer a mere region, but a real union – for Progressive Judaism is an acknowledgement of just such a hope. We build for an uncertain future in the certain knowledge that the present community is worth building for.

כן יהי רצון, may that be the will of the Ever-Present God now and forevermore.