

Erev Va-eira 5778

Refugees have to look back as well as forward



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Chen, bnei Yisrael lo shimu ayli – ...look, the Israelites don't listen to me... (Ex 6:12)

Refugees can be a stubborn lot, why wouldn't they? So many hardened by travail and just as fragile by happenstance we, who have lived in settlement all our lives can barely imagine. So why seek refugees out?

That is what New Zealand is doing. Following a track record of opening its arms to those Australia shoves away, New Zealand has offered to take 150 of the 400 refugees and asylum seekers who have barricaded themselves in an abandoned detention centre on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. The men are living in squalor without power, sanitation facilities or medical treatment, but say they fear for their safety in PNG if they were to leave.

Why is New Zealand offering sanctuary? The Government of New Zealand does seem compassionate and they can see the value that immigrants bring to societies that host them and that become home.

I was reminded of this last Sunday visiting the magnificent exhibition at the Jewish Museum in London, 'Designs On Britain.' The show explores the major contribution of Jewish émigré designers to 20th century British design, and demonstrates how much of the most iconic British design of the period was produced by immigrants to this country. 18 designers who shaped so much that was recognisable in our culture.

My brother-in-law went around pointing out the fabrics adorning underground trains: Jewish. The designs of Penguin books series: Jewish. National Savings bank adverts: Jewish. The chopper bike and iconic Bush radio: Jewish. Some of the most familiar of brands and logos, British war propaganda: Jewish, Jewish, Jewish!

Marc Chagall once wrote, "As for myself, I know quite well what this small people can accomplish. Unfortunately, I am modest and cannot tell what it can accomplish. Something to conjure with, what this small people has done!"

There is of course a flip side to being a refugee, immigrant, and émigré. Whilst some have the choice and are pulled by the allure of perceived opportunity; very often one has been pushed. Both cases are real for Jews.

What is noticeable is that the refugee and immigrant and émigré, I think in particular if one has been pushed, often has a yearning for a place from which one was wrought-out unwillingly: There was still life to live there, things left behind, people lost: Something for us to find.

I sat yesterday afternoon with a dying woman who survived unspeakable things in Stalin's gulags of Archangel and escaped the Nazis before finding 'safety' in the Potteries of Stoke-On-Trent. Her daughters expressed their desire to visit the, now Polish towns of their parents and to go back as far as they could to rediscover those who had been lost to them.

At every turn, whilst I doubt any miraculous personal, family account, 'Everything is Illuminated.' This is the title of Jonathan Safran Foer's first novel of a young American Jew fascinated by missing links in his family history travelling to what is now Ukraine in search of answers. Philippe Sands writes, 'East West Street,' and an idea is kindled to twin with the current day Liberal Jewish Community in the 'City of Lions.'

'City of Lions,' published in 2016 presents an essay by Jozef Wittlin written from the safety of his new home in 1946 New York; and one by Philippe Sands tracing his own family heritage through a place that, "...Depending on the point in history and the shifts in eastern Europe's precarious border regions, the ['City of Lions,'] Lviv is one of those cities whose name readily metamorphoses into Lwów or Lemberg. Eastern outpost of the Habsburg empire in the region of Galicia, western corner of Russia, proud city of briefly independent Ukraine, then Poland, then Russia, then Germany and back again, the only constant in Lwów up until the terrors of the second world war was its sizeable Jewish population of some 100,000.

Sands focuses on 2 of these, Lemkin and Lauterpacht – who studied at the law faculty in Lwów and coined and defined the terms, 'genocide' and 'crimes against humanity.' Sands own family story is interwoven with these real characters using much primary source material.

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We are a stubborn lot. Remnants, 'the stump of Jesse' wish to revive Judaism out of the stump and the descendants of the Jewish refugee, immigrant, and émigré wish to find something. On June 14 -17, five of our households are already signed up to come with me on personal journeys and for us as a community to engage with a newly vibrant Jewish community. Today, the Teyve Congregation of Lviv is proud and confident, defiant of history, concerned in their present but stubborn in their desire to be the Jews of Lviv.

Refugees have to look back as well as forward – it is who we are for generations, searching for identity in the present from the past to allow us to move forward with confidence. Somewhere, like Sands, you will find a family member who lived in or passed through Lviv. Come and join me in history.

Oh ...and WizzAir is now offering direct flights to Lviv. To that let us say...

Amen