

April 27th, 2018/12th of Iyyar, 5778

Dear chevreh,

Last Sunday I went with eighteen KHN members and their families on a 6th grade and Confirmation trip to the Lower East Side of Manhattan. We ate our way through the neighborhood of course, but we also toured the Tenement Museum and the Museum at Eldridge Street housed in the phenomenally restored Eldridge Street Synagogue. In 1887, Jewish immigrants from Eastern European countries (Russia, Poland, and Lithuania, among others) built “a tangible monument to the religious freedom and economic opportunity afforded by their new land. Today, it is a powerful symbol of the historical and cultural contributions brought to America by generations of immigrants” (from the Museum literature). The synagogue now has national historic landmark status, one of only two synagogues in New York City. Many Eastern European Jews were fleeing pogroms and other barriers to religious freedom and came to America, along with millions of other immigrants in the late 1800s. This synagogue was a proud symbol of the religious freedom given to them in America. It was particularly moving to view this extraordinary house of worship after visiting the Tenement Museum, and seeing the crowded conditions in which millions of new immigrants lived.

As I have heard over and over, many parents of that time and even a generation or two later did not teach Yiddish to their children in hopes that they would assimilate and learn English. They reserved the Yiddish to speaking ‘about’ the children. There was a tension between wanting to become ‘Americanized’, which the settlement house movement allowed them to do, and keeping their traditions, both religious and cultural.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read in Leviticus, “You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you . . . You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live.” There are clearly strains of the Hebrew Bible which are against all forms of assimilation. But in real life, things are messier. We learn the languages of the places we live. Some of the words of those more powerful than us historically even made it into our sacred (Hebrew and Aramic) scripture, like Greek and Persian loan words. We are always in a dynamic relationship with the country we are living in. Even in Israel, where Jews are the majority, there are common Arabic phrases which come not only from Jews from Arab-speaking lands, but from the Palestinians living among them. We influence each other. We learn to discern what makes sense to incorporate into our lives, and what to leave out.

The Reconstructionist phrase “living in two civilizations” helps us to appreciate the uniqueness of being Jewish and also being American. Learning and borrowing from the wider culture, and also relishing what is ancient or has evolved more recently which feeds us from Judaism and Jewish culture are two paths which work well together.

May we continue to honor our past by visiting and learning from places like the landmarks on the Lower East Side which welcomed millions of Jews, and to live into our current lives as Jews and Americans at a time when it would be so easy to fully assimilate. Let our rich history help us respond compassionately to current immigrants, a value we learn from deep within our tradition. We and the world need some of the gifts of Judaism more than ever...starting with Shabbat.

I look forward to seeing you at 7:30 pm. We will hear our Education Director Stacey Frank present her Jewish Journey in a “Hineini” (Here I am) talk.

Shabbat shalom and Happy Shadfest,

Rabbi Diana