

# **Jews on the Periphery**

## *Devarim* - 21 July 2018

By Leanne Shelton

Have you ever felt that you don't belong? Perhaps you went to a public school and were one of a few, or the only Jewish kids there. Or perhaps you always felt different among your friends somehow.

Have you ever felt this lack of belonging when among other Jews? Or is that one situation where you've always felt like you belonged?

For me, growing up on the periphery - outside the Jewish mainstream areas of Sydney - for my whole life, I often struggled to feel that sense of belonging among other Jewish kids my age.

There were many times when I was asked which school I went to - and as soon as they discovered that it wasn't a Jewish day school, or at least a school near them - there would be this awkward silence as they turned around and struck up a conversation with someone else.

If I wasn't within their inner circle, it was like I spoke another language.

For the first 22 years of my life, I lived in Peakhurst, in Sydney's south-west, near Hurstville. It was a minimum of 30 minutes to the Jews on the East and almost an hour to the Jews on the North. Then I moved to Baulkham Hills in Sydney's north-west with my then fiancé, and I remember being so excited to be ONLY 20-25 minutes away from St Ives!

And for the past 5 years, I have lived in Kellyville and once again live a minimum of 30 minutes away from the Jewish mainstream (on a good day with Sydney's traffic).

But having said all that -

Does it mean that I'm not a practising Jew? No.

Does it mean that I 'married out'? No.

Does it mean that I'm not connected to the Jewish community? No.

But has it made me more determined to stay connected to my Jewish identity? Yes.

Despite the distance, over the past 33 years of my life (turning 33 this Tuesday in fact), I have ALWAYS felt a strong sense of Jewish identity within myself. And I am very thankful to my parents, Narelle and Garry Belinfante, for making such a big effort in my youth to ensure this.

You see, on a typical Sunday my siblings and I would be fully immersed in the 'Jewish experience'. Sunday school in the morning, followed by *schlepping* out to the East for Maccabi Swimming in the afternoon and then Maccabi ten-pin bowling at night.

I was also involved with B'nei B'rith Youth as a teenager, which is where I met my husband, Justin, and in later years I attended and volunteered at Maccabi Junior Carnivals. As an adult, I managed quarterly journals for Southern Sydney and Parramatta Synagogues and was the editor of the Maccabi NSW weekly e-newsletter for three years.

And over the past 3.5 years, I have been the Marketing and Communications Coordinator here at NSTE.

So, I guess you could say that distance has only made my Jewish heart grow fonder.

This week's *parasha*, *Devarim*, provided a few words of encouragement and inspiration when thinking about my family's situation.

It focuses on the speeches of Moses in the last month of his life, as he addresses the next generation, those who, unlike himself, will be destined to cross Jordan and enter the promised land.

Perhaps Sydney's Hills District is the promised land - for current and future generations of Sydney Jews who can't afford to live in the East and North Shore? Who knows?

But it was these particular words from *Devarim* that resonated with me -

"You have come to the hill country of the Amorites which the LORD our G-d is giving to us. See, the LORD your G-d has placed the land at your disposal. Go up, take possession, as the LORD, the G-d of your fathers, promised you. **Fear not and be not dismayed.**"

My message, then, is not to be dismayed if you live or a family member lives in the Hills or somewhere else outside the 'main' Jewish areas. Whether it was your or their number one

choice or not. G-d has given the land to us - and it's up to us to turn our situation of somewhat 'isolation' into a positive.

Three years ago, I co-founded the Hills Jewish Families Facebook group. Since then, this group has grown to 80 members and has gathered on multiple occasions for Jewish festivals, picnics and even a very successful Mitzvah Day event last year. We have young families with kids ranging from a few months old to post *B'nei Mitzvah*.

And the numbers keep multiplying.

I'm so very thankful for the support received by NSTE, Parramatta Synagogue, PJ Library, and the Shalom Institute so far.

This group gives me the confidence that my two young Jewish daughters will get opportunities to build relationships with other Jewish kids in their local area, without *schlepping* too far away.

It gives me confidence that they will feel a strong Jewish sense of belonging, despite any distance.

In *Devarim*, it also states -

"Indeed, the LORD your God has blessed you in all your undertakings. He has watched over your wanderings through this great wilderness..."

(Well, some people may consider the Hills to be the 'wilderness', or, to use a more Aussie term, 'woop woop')

"The LORD your God has been with you these past forty years: you have **lacked nothing.**"

And I agree. Although I haven't quite lived for 40 years yet, I definitely feel I have lacked nothing, especially when it comes to my Jewish identity.

This evening marks the start of *Tisha B'Av*. The saddest day on the Jewish calendar when we remember the destruction of the Holy Temple.

However, while the Temple is no longer standing, as a Jewish nation, we **are** still standing.

A physical location or building is not what makes us Jewish. It's how we feel deep within our hearts.

So I want to leave you with this.

You can live in the centre of Bondi, surrounded by Jews, and still be disconnected.

And you can live in the "wilderness", the centre of Kellyville - or Woop Woop - and still be connected.

Ultimately, you have a choice.

I am, and have chosen to be, Jewish.

Inside and out.

And distance will never stop me from being who I truly am.