

**Ron Sadok's Life Journey**  
***Parashat Vayikra***  
**March 16, 2019**  
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**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

Hello everyone,

Shalom Haverim,

Salam Doostan Aziz,

Emruz man mikham vasey shoma dar-mored zendegi man dar Iran arf bezanam.

Oops, I forgot that most of you don't speak Farsi.... Let me try that again.

Shabbat Shalom and hello again,

In the Parashat Vayikra the main message is the sacrifices that the Israelites made either individually or as a community.

As a Jew growing up in Iran, which was ruled by Muslims as majority residents, I'd like to share with you my life story, experiences, and the sacrifices that I and my family made.

I was born in 1960 in a city called Shiraz in Iran and I spent the first 19 years of my life in that country, moved to Israel in 1979, and studied and lived there for the next 7 and ½ years before I moved to the US in 1986.

***First, about my childhood in Iran:***

Back then, they were still arranging marriages for the Jewish girls in order to protect them from the Moslem boys. My mother was only 13 when she was engaged to my father, who was 25 years old, and married at 15. After two miscarriages, I was born when she was 18. They had 5 kids by the time my mother was 25. It was not a happy marriage and they were divorced when I was 13 years old. Back in the 1970s, it was very rare for parents to get divorced but my dad was



very rude to my mother and she could not tolerate him anymore. I'm the oldest in the family and at that time my youngest sibling was 6 years old. We were lucky enough to have had a wonderful uncle by the name Hushang who took care of us for the next 6 years. He is a great man with a big heart and I don't really know what would have happened to us if this wonderful man did not take care of us.

I went to a Jewish elementary and middle school till age 14. I grew up with many Jewish friends and we spent a lot of time together.

When I was in the eighth grade a major educational change occurred and many of the books and materials were replaced. Our teachers were not ready to teach us the new materials and we were forced to move to a different school. We went to a public school where the teachers and the students were primarily Muslims.

**Now I'm going to share with you a very personal story, probably my strongest and most difficult memory of growing up in Iran.**

For the first two years in high school I was getting high grades in all classes. We studied the usual classes, literature, chemistry, physics, mathematics, and history. In Iran the highest grade is 20 and my lowest grade was 17 in chemistry.

In my junior year, I had a literature teacher who was really nice or appeared to be nice. Since I was the tall..... I mean the shortest person in the classroom, I sat in the front row exactly across from him. Occasionally I would say a funny statement and he would crack up. It seemed that he liked me.

When it was time for the first midterm, the teacher asked 6 of us to get up and stand up in the front and explain the meaning of a word or statement from a book. When it was my turn, a student in the classroom yelled out, "Do you know he is a Jew?" and I clearly saw the teacher's look of disbelief. He asked me if I was Jewish and I said yes, I am.

He asked me to explain a word which I did and he said: nah. You did not explain the whole thing. He gave me a 9 out of 20, which is a failed grade. Everyone in the class got higher grades even though they did worse than I did. The next time I came to the class I could not face him anymore and I went and sat in the last row in the corner of the classroom. Initially he did not notice me, but later he spotted me and yelled out, *what are you doing there? Come and sit in the front row* which I

did. The next time I came back to the class I went and sat in the last row again. This time he spotted me right away and said. *Get out and you are out for one session.*

After throwing me out twice, he decided to ignore me. Two more midterm tests and he gave me a 9 each time. Everyone else passed the tests. When we had the finals, if he had given me a 9, then he would have had to come back at the end of the summer and test me again. He decided to give me a 10 which is barely a passing grade. **This was a very humiliating experience that I remember well to this day. This teacher who had been so nice completely turned on me just because I was Jewish.**

During the following summer I worked for my uncle, Hushang, and was responsible for supervising and making sure that people who were building houses came to work on time and helped them with their work. I earned enough money to leave the public school and attend a private school for my last year of high school.

After finishing high school I was searching for colleges and travelled to Tehran which is a 16 hour bus drive from my home town. While I was in Tehran, I applied for a passport which usually takes a few months to get approved and I'm so glad that I did that.

I applied and got accepted to a college in Isfahan which is about an 8 hour bus drive from my home town. That was in 1978 and we were at the height of huge turmoil and demonstrations in Iran. Students would storm in the classroom, interrupt, and force us to move out of the class. We did not study much.

In Iran, the winter break starts in January. After being in college for about 4 months, I was finally getting a chance to go back to my home town, Shiraz, to be with my friends. Back in 1978 we did not have the technology that we have now and I had no communication with my friends. On the way to my home town I was very excited and was looking forward to being with my friends for a few weeks.

When I arrived, I found out that more than 90% of my friends had left the country. Many had left for the U.S and a few went to Israel. I was very disappointed and I had to make a very tough decision. Do I want to stay or do I want leave my family and leave the country. I decided to leave the country.

I called the embassy in Tehran and asked if my passport was ready. They said yes. The next day I took a bus to Tehran, got my passport, and applied for a visa to Israel. The revolution happened in February and I left the country in April 1979.

***This was the first big move for me.***

When I first got to Israel, I was able to stay with another uncle who lived in Holon. On my second day in Israel I went to Tel-Aviv to explore the city. As I was walking in the city, whom do I see? One of my best friends from school in Shiraz! That was a very exciting moment and I think it helped me feel a little more comfortable in those first few days in Israel. He and I are still in touch with each other.

A few weeks later, I went to a kibbutz in Zikhron Ya'akov for five months for an Ulpan to improve my Hebrew. This was a lot of fun and I have good memories of that time. There were actually quite a few other young people from Iran there with me. After this, I applied to Technion University in Haifa and got accepted.

My sister had gotten married in 1978 when she was 17 years old and moved to Israel around the same time as I did. My mother and three other siblings came to Israel just five months later in September. At that time my sister Madlen was 13, and brothers Morris and Merdad were 14 and 16 years old. This was a very hard and trying time for my mother. She had made this move basically alone with three children to support and not knowing the language. She had to work in a factory for minimum wage and her daily routine was to get up at 5 AM, cook for the kids, leave the house around 7 AM, walk for about a mile and a half to work, work until 4:00, walk back, and do the house work like cooking, cleaning, laundry, etc.

Her job was a stressful job, she had a manager who was very mean to her, and eventually it impacted her. The fact that she could not speak Hebrew added to the stress. Also, even though Israel is a country of many immigrants, each new group that came in, whether from Morocco, Iran, or Russia or elsewhere goes through a difficult time where they don't quite feel accepted and feel like they are treated like second class citizens. My mother started to feel like everyone was out to get her and this affected her mood and thoughts basically for the rest of her life in Israel.

I also experienced this but was lucky to have other Persian friends in the University with me. I remember working two summers at a winery in Zikhron Ya'akov so I could pay for my college expenses. During those times I felt the mistreatment. In those years, in the early 1980s, it was not easy to be a Persian Jew in Israel.

I graduated in 1985 with a degree in computer science. Starting in 1984, the inflation was soaring in Israel, the government expenditure rose significantly, and Israel suffered one of the largest bank stock crises in its history. The inflation rate soared by 450% and in July 1985 the Knesset implemented an economic stabilization plan which controlled wages and froze hiring. This was not great timing for me. I moved to Rishon Le-Zion where my family lived.

It was next to impossible to find a job at that time and I was unemployed for many months. Thanks to my brother-in-law, Avi, eventually I found a job in a telephone company called Bezeq.

After working in Bezeq for a few months, I was not getting along well with my boss. We shared the same office but it was very hard to have a constructive conversation or exchange any new ideas. He had been working there for 15 years, was involved with the same programs and pretty much was locked into his routine and ways. We had little in common to talk about.

In September 1985, I met my future wife, Tammy, in Jerusalem through my brother-in-law, Avi. She talked about Boston and I talked about my dream of studying at MIT and we started talking about coming to live in the US “for a few years.” With the help of Tammy’s family and something called an “engagement visa”, I was able to travel with Tammy to her hometown of Boston. The same year I left, my mother was convinced by family to resign from work because the stress was literally making her lose her mind. It was a year of many losses for her. In the few years following this, my two brothers and sister also got married and moved out. She was living alone, though close to family, for the first time in her life.

I came to Boston with only 900 dollars in my pocket including 500 dollars in gifts from family members. Saying goodbye to my family was difficult, but at the time, we thought we would be back in a couple of years. **For about 10 years we still thought we will go back to Israel and obviously it never happened!!!**

*Coming to the U.S. was the 2<sup>nd</sup> major move and immigration experience for me.*

My intention was to get my master's degree in computer science, but I couldn't afford it, so I tried to find a job. Unfortunately my spoken English was not strong enough. I could not understand what the interviewers were talking about, and I failed a number of job interviews.

I had a cousin in Baltimore who managed a restaurant. I called him and asked him if I could work for him for a while and he said of course, come on down. He arranged transportation for me from Boston to New York on a Thursday night. I was to stay in New York overnight and then travel to Baltimore on Friday morning.

Trying to find somewhere to stay the night in NY, I called a friend who had attended the same college in Haifa in Israel and had moved to New York. He had opened a few jewelry stores on 14<sup>th</sup> street. I called and asked if I could stay overnight and he said yes. When I got to his house, he said they needed help selling jewelry over the weekend, it was the beginning of the holiday season, and then I could travel to Baltimore. Something about the excitement of NY and being with old friends made me say yes. Turned out I had a knack for getting people to buy things...On Saturday night he asked me to stay and offered me a job and I accepted it.

It was a rough routine, leaving Queens early in the morning, working on my feet until 7 PM, grabbing dinner at a restaurant and getting home by 10 PM. This was repeated 6 days a week.

The whole day was spent trying to sell the jewelry for the highest price possible, bargaining with people who I could tell did not have that much money to begin with. It was not a great feeling. At least my English was starting to get better.

About 9 months after I started working for the jewelry store, I was talking with the owner of a different jewelry store and he asked about my education and my life in Israel. I told him about my college degree and shared with him my university experiences. He looked at me and said *what are you doing here?* You have a computer science degree and you are working in a jewelry store? It's hard to really

appreciate your worth when you are young and inexperienced and can't speak the language. But he gave me some of my ambition back.

I decided to take classes and improve my English. I took classes at night twice a week in Queens. I would leave work at 6:00PM in the evening, take the train, go to the class at 7:30PM, and after the class was over at 10:00 I would take the 30 minute walk to the apartment where I stayed.

Not long after, Tammy and I decided to get married and this gave me the courage to move back to Boston and try again to interview for jobs in my profession. In order to be able to legally work, Tammy and I had a small civil marriage, and started planning a larger wedding in Israel.

### ***This was another big change, the third in my immigrant experience***

I had been in the US for 16 months and had forgotten much of my computer science knowledge. I needed to quickly review and remember the material before my first job interview. I interviewed at Mass General Hospital and was asked a lot of technical questions. Some I could answer. Some, I could not. The recommendation from my future boss, Peter, was not to hire me. I pushed for another interview and this time, I asked if they would hire me for one month without any pay and if they didn't like me then they could fire me. I guess I was very persuasive and charmed them into agreeing to this. Luckily, the first month came and went and they let me stay.

My first job was as a mainframe programmer. I spent many hours at work and at home to improve my computer skills. Less than a year into this new job, Peter gave his notice and decided to work for a different company. The same boss who did not want to hire me in the first place told me that he would provide a great recommendation for me in case I decided to leave too. I started looking for a new job and found one at a company called The Boston Company in January 1989. Peter supported me 100%. And 30 years later we are still in touch and get together often.

At the same time, Tammy and I bought our first condo in Brighton and started a family. We experienced the stress of the down turn in the real estate market in the early 1990s but wanted to move from Brighton to a quieter suburb that would be

better for our kids. We decided to rent in Needham to start with, and for many years I worked 3 different jobs, missing so much time with our first two children when they were young, and eventually saved enough money to buy a house in Needham.

**I want to talk a little bit more about my mom for a moment now.** She had a very difficult life and really suffered because of her immigrant experience. She sacrificed so much for the sake of her children. As I stated earlier, my mom was forced to resign from work in 1986. She fell into a severe depression which lasted for a few years. She eventually recovered from depression but had a number of health issues and went to the hospital often. I invited her to stay with us a number of times and hosted her for months. I also went to Israel at least once a year to see her and be with my family. One Saturday night in 2005 she choked and three days later she passed away at age 64. I was able to make it to Israel to visit her while she was still in the hospital, just a day before she died. She was an amazing mom with a great heart and had a lasting and very positive impact on myself and our entire family.

During this very difficult and sad time, I was amazed to see so many people, nearly 2000 people, of whom 500 or so were family members and distant relatives, many of whom I had never met, that came to the weeklong Shiva. The reason I have such a large family is because my grandfather had three wives at the same time and a total of 15 children. Most of the children had many kids, 5 or 6 kids and some up to 11 kids. And this is only my mother's side!

In December, 1995, I started working for Lotus which eventually merged completely with IBM. I would be there for the next 20 years. There were ups and downs as with any job, many good bosses, and some not so great, but the bottom line is I knew I had achieved the American Dream after many difficult moves and transitions.

In June 2014, IBM offered for only the second time to anyone over a certain age, what they called Transition to retirement. This was offered in June 2014 and the deadline to accept it was June 27<sup>th</sup>. I just made the age cutoff and had already been considering a change. If I took it, I would work for 18 months three days a week, and retire at the end of 2015. My boss asked me what I thought about the proposal



and I said I would think about it. THIS decision was more difficult than all the other big decisions I had made earlier in my life. On the last day to make the decision, I went to Tammy and asked what she thought I should do.

She said, go out for a walk and ask yourself how I would feel when I got up the next day. Did I make the right or the wrong decision? I left the house, went for a walk, came back and clicked on the submit button.

***That was another major change in my life and it turned out to be a good one.***

I was able to work on my own terms for the rest of my time at IBM, I even shortened the transition period by working full time instead of part time, and then could take my time looking for another job, because at 55, clearly I was not ready for true retirement, in fact, I'm not sure I will ever be!

For the last few years I have worked as a Sr. Application System Analyst for a human service company. It's a great company that provides care and services to adults and children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, brain and spinal cord injuries and other catastrophic injuries and illnesses. I'm blessed to have such great and wonderful people in the company.

When I look back and think about why I made those decisions I come back to one answer.

***I wanted a better life and each and every decision I made brought me to a better place.***

I got married at age 27 and I'm blessed to have a very supportive wife and 4 wonderful and beautiful kids.

Rachel who is 27 years old, Benjamin is 24, Joseph 20, and Elana 18 years old. They have been spared the difficulty of having to leave home and country behind to find a better life, but I hope I have passed along some of the valuable lessons I have learned along the way, and I know that they, as I, feel lucky to live in this wonderful town and be part of this warm and welcoming community of Temple Aliyah.

If there are a few lessons I've learned over the years, they are:

***Don't let others control or dictate your life. Never give up and don't put any limitations on yourself. Always believe in yourself and know that you are unique and can achieve anything you put your mind to.***

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.