

Immigrants: We Get the Job Done

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Growing up I loved spending the night at my maternal grandparents' home: sorting stamps with my grandfather, making homemade fudge with my grandmother, being pampered and bathed and then wrapped up in a fuzzy towel coddled in my grandmother's arms. We would peer into the mirror and she would lovingly say, "my little babushka, my little Polish babushka."

I am mostly of Polish descent, and, although all four of my grandparents have immigration stories, my grandmother was actually born days before her family boarded the boat for the long journey to America. They were lucky, because there was an aunt and uncle in America that had sponsored them to come, although the aunt and uncle were very surprised (not happily surprised) when the family arrived with two daughters in tow. My great-grandmother and her two daughters were quarantined for the entire journey, since my aunt Esther who was 3ish at the time, had the measles.

My grandmother could not have been a more thankful American citizen. Although her parents often spoke Yiddish so their children wouldn't understand, her father worked incredibly hard to learn English. My aunt, the eldest, was fluent in Yiddish, my grandmother knew some but the younger siblings knew virtually none (except for the curse words).

My great-grandfather was a peddler, scrap dealer who barely made ends meet for his family. I can't really imagine my grandmother's life growing up during the Depression, although it makes perfect sense that until her dying day she hoarded food, sugar packets, condensed milk, money and Pringles. We made fun of her for doing these things, but deep down we knew we were laughing instead of crying about my grandmother's the rough childhood.

As a very comfortable—too comfortable— third generation American, I rarely think of my immigrant roots. I have never longed for Eastern Europe; rather, I am so happy and proud to be a Jewish American. I feel at home. And yet each year we celebrate Passover, and each year I read the Haggadah in first person, "My father was a wandering Aramean... welcome the stranger because you were once a stranger in a strange land." Yes, our Biblical ancestors were strangers but so were my grandparents and great-grandparents.

I have never really had to deal with being a stranger. Living in Israel, it was tough enough being comfortable in a grocery store or arguing at the post office to pay an electricity or tax bill... but I had a support system helping me, and I was only there for a short time. And most people there spoke my language as well as I did. And and and... I wasn't really a stranger in a strange land... rather I was privileged being able to study abroad for a fabulous adventure.

The truth is that I am completely privileged and too comfortable; the only redeeming reality about that is my ability to use my privilege to help others. I can't sit ideally by; I can't numbly click to the next channel, turn the page or flick up on my iPhone screen.

In February, I arrived early to SFO (for my privileged trip to Israel), checked my bag and went down stairs to join the protests outside of the international terminal baggage claim. It was a Monday and most of the big crowd of protesters had gone back to work; the crowd was small but mighty. I found myself picking up on the cheers, holding a sign—and being overwhelmed by emotion.

I was chit chatting with a Muslim lawyer who was offering free legal help to anyone detained. All of a sudden, I was crying, telling him that we were just the same. The Jewish-American story is one of immigration.... My grandmother arrived on a boat, struggled... we were both crying, taking selfies, hugging and vowing to fight for the values we believe America stands for.

All of these experiences came flooding back to me this week as I sat watching *Hamilton*. This new revolutionary musical really does live up to all of the hype. It was wonderful! And Lin Manuel Miranda is a genius. He took a story that could have been a boring chapter in a dusty history textbook and made it into a relevant politically poignant revelation... he probably didn't even know how relevant it would be when he wrote it!

Hamilton, if typecast, would be filled with white men and a few white women, but, instead, a multi-racial cast, with women playing men, uses ensemble roles and music to poignantly speak about racial justice issues. Watching *Hamilton* in SF among likeminded people, even though I know we don't always agree, was exhilarating. In a packed theater of excited people feeling privileged to have found our golden tickets, we were engaged in relevant political history. When the cast sang the line, "Immigrants: we get the Job done," the crowd irrupted!! The cast had to pause so we didn't miss the next lines.... It was at that moment when I felt the tug, the relevance, the lessons we are supposed to learn from the history as to not move backwards...

I am not the first to be moved by this line. T-shirts announce, "Immigrants, we get the job done." And when Vice-president Pence went to see *Hamilton* in NY soon after the election, the cast made headlines when they used the opportunity to express their political opinions ...

Tell him "We, sir, we are the diverse America, who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights.

But we truly hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us. All of us.

Again, we truly thank you for [inaudible] this wonderful American story told by a diverse group of men, women, of different colors, creeds and orientations.

Our work is not finished. We need sanctuaries!!! But really, there should be no sanctuary synagogues, no sanctuary cities... because we should be a sanctuary country. Jewish poet Emma Lazarus's words, so famously inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, express the most American of values:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Let our privilege be an asset, not a stumbling block... let us lose our comfort, or use our comfort to provide comfort for all who are seeking shelter. Let our immigrant stories, whether 1st, 2nd, 3rd generation or Biblically connected, serve as a reminder of our Jewish values! Judaism is relevant today, in politics, in the theater, the airport, in your home...or at temple. We must make the connections, tease out the lessons and pass our history, beliefs and moral values on to the next generation.

Tomorrow when I lift my daughter out of the tub and wrap her in a towel, we will look into the mirror and repeat, "My little babushka, my little Polish babushka..."