

Shabbat Hagadol/ Parshat Tzav
April 7-8
By Lloyd Epstein



Yachatz

One *Seder*, after we performed *yachatz* – breaking the *matzah* we later use for the *mitzvot* of *achilat matzah* and *afikoman* – we turned to the youngest child to recite the *mah nishtana*. He decided, instead, to ask a different question: why, if we are cousins, do his father and I speak with such different accents? Ilysha and I answered with the following story, which we now repeat every year.

Our great-grandfather was a *Cantonist*, a Jewish boy who was snatched off the Russian streets and conscripted into the Czarist army for twenty-five years of forced service and *russification*. When he was taken, no one in the Jewish community ever expected to see him again. No one expected that he would marry and raise a family. But he did marry and raise a family and, with an obsessive sense of urgency, resolved to send his children to America when each became of age.

In 1907, my great-grandfather sent his oldest son, then thirteen, to New York. In 1908, he sent my grandmother, Esther, who had just turned twelve. In 1911, he sent my grandmother's twelve-year old sister. In 1913 my great-grandfather himself arrived, leaving behind his wife, his youngest daughter, and his two youngest sons, one of whom would become my cousin's grandfather. My great-grandfather's plan was simple. If he and his three teenage children all worked hard enough, they would save enough money to send for the rest of the family by 1914.

1914, as it turned out, was not a great year for travel. World War I broke out. Overseas travel was expensive and dangerous, international communication was virtually nil, and my great-grandfather's plan came to a sudden halt.

In the late summer of 1917, my great-grandfather came up with an idea, which was probably more of a tribute to his dream than his sanity. My grandmother who was then 21, married, and with small children, would return to Odessa, in the middle of the Russian Revolution, armed with train and boat tickets, and would bring her mother, youngest sister, and two younger brothers to New York. My grandmother, who apparently shared many of her father's traits, agreed and found herself again in Odessa.

Within a week, the bags were packed and the family was ready to leave. And then one of the brothers took ill. It was decided that the two boys would remain behind until the one who had fallen sick had recovered, and that the boys would join the others in London in a few weeks. My grandmother, her sister, and mother boarded the train.

Iluysa's grandfather, Reuven, and the other brother remained behind.

As the boys were ready to leave, less than a month later, the Bolsheviks consolidated their power and the Iron Curtain fell. My grandmother did not see Reuven for more than fifty years, when he was allowed a short trip to the United States. Eventually his children and grandchildren, including Iluysha, managed to immigrate to the United States where Iluysha, who knew no English when he arrived, graduated from Princeton and later became the CFO of Genesis, the Russian-Jewish philanthropic organization.

My grandmother never saw her other brother again. He was murdered baking matzah in an underground factory in Odessa in the 1930's.

So now we tell this story to our children at *yahatz*. Understand that *Matzah* represents deliverance and vulnerability. A split second's delay can ruin *matzah* and make it unfit for *Pesach*. A slip of the hand may cause it to splinter. When we perform *yachatz*, we recognize the fragility of the world and our hope for the future. When a piece is set aside, for the child to return as the *afikomen* so that we can complete the *Seder*, we express our hope that families and communities that are split will one day be united.

Chag Kasher V'Sameach.