

## How did we get here?

Erev RH 2025

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At all my High Holy Day services over the years, I have started my sermon with a joke that is relevant to the theme I am discussing. This time, however, I would like to do something that I have never done with you before. I want to introduce my sermon with an excerpt from a song by the Talking Heads entitled, "Once in a lifetime."

"And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack. And you may find yourself in another part of the world. And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile. And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife. And you may ask yourself, well how did I get here? Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down. Letting the days go by, water flowing underground." (Song Spotify up to second 55 start to fade out with Once in a lifetime, water flowing underground, up to second 58)

How did we get here? I don't think any of you, at least I hope not, live in a shotgun shack. Some of you may indeed have found yourselves in another part of the world. Some of us may have a beautiful house, some may not. I, for one, certainly don't have a beautiful wife, don't really want one either. But it feels rather appropriate during the High Holy Days to take an opportunity to take a step back and reflect on our lives and how we came to be who and where we are. We are gathered here both in person and virtually. We are at different ages and stages of our lives. Perhaps we feel some pride in what we have achieved or disappointment in what we haven't. Many of us know that our lives have taken us in directions we never could've imagined years ago. And yet, here we are. How did we get here?

As Jews, we recount the journey of our ancient people as we began life in Israel as descendants of Abraham and Sarah, thousands of years ago. We are familiar with God telling Abram, in Genesis, who later becomes Abraham, to *lech lecha*, to go forth from his native land and from his father's house to the land that God will show him.<sup>1</sup> Abram, with the promise of God's blessing, sets out with his wife, his family, and all that he had acquired to make a life in the land of Canaan. What is often overlooked, though, are the preceding verses about Abram's father Terah. Prior to *Lech lecha*, a few verses earlier, we read, "Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter in law Sarai, the wife of Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the **land of Canaan**; but when they had come as far of Haran, they settled there."<sup>2</sup>

Wait a minute! Terah, Abraham's father, was already on the journey to Canaan, i.e. Israel? How can that be? *Or Hachayim*, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalist and Talmudist, says it's because Terah noticed that Abram and Sarai were having trouble conceiving and thus he thought a

change of locale could help. Nachmanides, a 12<sup>th</sup> century commentator, suggests that Terah was aware of Abram's continuing journey. He wrote, "It was by his counsel that Abram went forth from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan."<sup>3</sup> How interesting it is to reflect that Abraham completed the journey that his father began. Whether his father did it to help his son or otherwise, Abram did indeed follow through. It seems quite significant that he basically continued and then completed his father's journey.

As Jews, we have traveled the globe over thousands of years following in the footsteps of our ancestors. Dispersed from Israel, we made homes in Babylonia, now modern day Iraq. We traversed the Roman Empire creating new lives along the Mediterranean coast in places such as Italy, Greece, Spain, and parts of North Africa. We have spread further out into just about all countries in Western Europe and then when times became difficult, we were welcomed into what is now modern day Poland, Lithuania, and Russia. Our people have crossed oceans to live in South America, Mexico, U.S., and Canada. We have even had a presence in Asia and have flourished in Australia.

Why have we, as a people, moved so much over millennia? It is firstly because of persecution and pogroms. Jews, as well as other people, have been targeted over history. We have also strived to escape poverty, starvation, and our ancestors yearned for a better life for themselves and their children.

Of all my great grandparents, Rachel, my mother's grandmother shared the most. She was born in 1891 in Poland which at that time was part of Russia. When I was thirteen years old, I interviewed my grandmother about her parents. She told me that Rachel couldn't marry the man of her choice because he was not religious enough. The husband she ended up having led to an unhappy marriage. Too bad her father wasn't like Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof. Anyways, I heard how much she loved the klezmer musicians who would come and play in the streets and people would gather around and dance. Her family was very poor. Her mother was hired out as dressmaker and earned \$2.50 per year. She had her own geese and would kill one of them for its fat. At times, they would scour the forest for berries to eat.

Rachel's father repaired windows and wasn't good about collecting payment. One night, there was no food in the house and all the kids went to bed hungry. Rachel's mother urged her husband to go and collect his fees. When he finally returned with a few small coins, it was night time. Her mother went out and procured an old loaf of bread. She then woke up Rachel and her siblings to eat the dry bread and they washed it down with hot water and splash of milk. They called this, "Jewish tea."

Facing starvation and violence from pogroms, the family started out for the U.S. When Rachel was seventeen, she came on a boat with her father. They slept in steerage, ate raw fish from the sea, and everyone on board got sea sick. At Ellis Island, her father was detained

because he had asthma and Rachel cried thinking they would have to return to Poland. Fortunately, he was released and then they worked to bring over the rest of the family.

I am sure you have similar stories in your families. Where are your relatives from? Did they come from Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, or Australia? It took courage forged out of desperation for Rachel and my other family members to come to America but there is an element of luck as well.

Brian Klaas, in his book, Fluke, details how the events in our lives are predicated on earlier events. He begins by explaining that Mr. and Mrs. Stimson took a vacation in 1926 to Kyoto, Japan. They loved their trip. Fast forward to almost two decades later on May 10, 1945, where, “Mr. Stimson had become America’s secretary of war, the top civilian overseeing wartime operations.”<sup>4</sup> Decisions were being made as to what cities in Japan were to be bombed. Kyoto was a target because it was home to wartime factories. However, Mr. Stimson advocated strenuously with President Truman twice for Kyoto to be spared because of his fond memories of the, “Miyako Hotel, the majestic Japanese maples, or the golden ginkgo trees.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, as you know, Hiroshima, and a last minute change to Nagasaki because of cloud cover, bore the wrath of the atomic bomb.

Basically, what Klaas is trying to convey that had not Mr. Stimson had a vacation in Kyoto decades earlier, it surely would’ve been bombed. If clouds that day hadn’t obscured Kokura, Nagasaki would’ve been spared. There is a randomness to why things unfold in the ways that they do that can be invisible to our eyes and those of history.

My family on my father’s side was easily impacted by flukes of history and policy. In the late eighteen hundreds, my great grandfather Nathan wanted to escape from Lithuania to come here. Luckily, he was able to get in with the immigration quotas that existed. However, if they were more stringent, I likely would not exist today. If my ancestors didn’t hear of the promise of America, they could’ve ended up in Canada, South America, or even Palestine, as my great, great aunt Miriam settled. How differently would life be? How different could your life have been if your ancestors made other decisions based on the random luck or lack thereof of their lives?

What flukes have occurred in your life that have set you on the path you are on today? Was there someone who influenced you, an experience that transformed you, or something else that set in motion the journey of your life?

For me, I never imagined I would be living in California. I came out because I wanted my own pulpit and I was impressed with Temple Beth David. Growing up, I never thought I would be divorced. In my twenties, I would not have conceived of living the life that I live today. How about you? How did you choose the work, partner, or life that you have?

For many of us, we have been guided in ways that we may be unconscious of. My son, Shane, recommended that I read Malcolm Gladwell's book, Outliers. Gladwell describes outliers as people whose achievements fall outside normal experience. In this book, he explores what it means to be an outlier in terms of success.

Gladwell points out that it is not just being naturally talented or hard working that leads to a person being an outlier. But rather, he states that, "People don't rise from nothing. We do owe something to the parentage and patronage. The people who stand before kings may look like they did it all by themselves. But in fact they are invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others cannot."<sup>5</sup>

What does it take to be a success? According to Gladwell, it takes many different elements including when and where we are born, our ability to put in 10,000 hours of practice to gain expertise, having practical intelligence, i.e., able to communicate and relate to people, have a cultural legacy where you can advocate for yourself and others, a willingness to work very hard, and have access to educational opportunities.

Gladwell even has a chapter on the importance of being Jewish. He describes a very successful attorney by the name of Joe Flom. Joe was a partner at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom in 1954, and helped transform it from a four-lawyer firm into one of the largest ones in the United States. The achievements of Joe Flom in law, according to Gladwell, can be traced to Jews coming to US in late 19 and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, they were able to take advantage of opportunities in urban trades such as the garment industry. Sociologist Stephen Steinberg says, "There is no doubt that those Jewish immigrants arrived at the perfect time, with the perfect skills...to exploit that opportunity, you had to have certain virtues, and those immigrants worked hard. They sacrificed. They scrimped and saved and invested wisely. But still, you have to remember that the garment industry in those years was growing by leaps and bounds."<sup>6</sup>

By the time Joe Flom was ready to practice law, the prestigious law firms weren't looking to hire a Jew. And so, he found himself in a smaller firm that came to specialize in litigation. This was a time when, so called, "white-shoe law firms" avoided such work. This situated Flom to be an expert in the 1970's when aversions to law suits declined.<sup>7</sup> He was ready to take on, along with his growing law firm, hostile takeovers and litigation. He had a skill that was needed at the right time. Legal scholar, Eli Wald, analyzes how adversity turned into opportunity for Jewish lawyers such as Joe Flom.<sup>8</sup> Gladwell adds that, "They were given opportunity, and they seized it." Why Jews succeeded in law, he writes, "Their world- their culture and generation and family history-gave them the greatest of opportunities."<sup>9</sup>

My great grandfather, Nathan Myers, arrived in the US in the year 1896. He could only afford a bind pony that he would lead through the streets of Herkimer, NY selling shmatzes, things of little value. After some time, he made enough money that he opened the Myers' clothing store that my grandfather oversaw. Prioritizing education, Nathan's children and grandchildren were all highly educated and in the fields of law, politics, and medicine. I am sure you have similar stories in your family as well.

And so, how did you get to where you are? How did you come to live where you do today? Was it intentional or accidental? Were there choices that your parents or grandparents took that led you to be where you are? On this eve of the new Jewish year, it is a great time to reflect and explore the trajectory of our own lives. Oh, there have been twists and turns to be sure but where we are is the result of choices that our ancestors have made and the luck we have to be born at certain times and places.

Often, I reflect how fortunate I am that I was born in the United States in 1969. If I was born in Sudan, Congo, Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, or Ukraine, my life would be very different. If I was born decades earlier, I likely would not have become a rabbi since the first very year of ordination was in 1972.

I want to thank my great grandmother Rachel and my other great grandparents for taking the chance to come to America. If they hadn't, I know my family would've been wiped out in the Holocaust. My great aunt Miriam showed me pictures of them years ago when I visited her in Israel. And thus, I am grateful even in this seemingly tumultuous time here in the US and world to be alive and to experience this great gift of life. May we be able to count our blessings and find meaning in the complex journey of our lives.

And so ultimately, the days do go by, the water of time continues to flow, and we live in this one moment in time.

Conclude with song

"And you may ask yourself, 'What is that beautiful house? You may ask yourself, 'Where does that highway go to?' And you may ask yourself, 'Am I right, am I wrong?' And you may say to yourself, 'My God, What have I done?'" Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down. Letting the days go by, water flowing underground. Into the blue again, into the silent water. Under rocks and stones, there is water underground. Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down. Letting the day go by, water flowing underground. Into the blue again, after the money's gone. Once in a lifetime, water flowing underground. Same as it ever was, same as it ever was..." (2:36-3:31 minute, fade out with "Same as it ever was.")

**Notes:**

1 Gen. 12:1

2 Gen. 11-31-32

3 Commentary on the Torah by Rambam. Genesis pg. 165

4 Fluke by Brian Klass pg. 3

5 Outliers by Malcolm Gladwell pg. 19

6 “ “ pg. 145

7 “ “ (pg. 127)

8 pg. 129

9 Pg. 158