

On reaffirming 'the promise that is America'

By Rabbi Alfred Benjamin

Frances Bogeinsky came to America in 1904 from Poland. She was 8- years-old. Like so many other immigrants, the boat left her off at Ellis Island.

Frances was my paternal grandmother but we never met. She died six months before I was born and following Jewish tradition, my parents named me after her.

When visiting Ellis Island, I make a point to walk along the Memorial Wall to where her name is engraved.

Without exception, I end up taking a few extra minutes to run my fingers slowly, tenderly, and carefully over each letter. Letters cut in stone feel good to me; they're strong and permanent.

Another feeling wells up when I see her name – pride in the courage it took to make the journey but also pride in America whose promise beckoned.

The words on the Statue of Liberty say it best: "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-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

This was not the first time a Jewish person came to a new land. Throughout history and most often by no choice of their own, Jewish people have found themselves strangers in strange lands.

The predicament became a challenge of how to maintain a cherished identity, religion, and heritage while living among a host society that was culturally different.

Sometimes things worked out and the Jewish community flourished. Far too often, that wasn't the case. No, not at all.

America, it was hoped, would be different. After all, it was populated by so many other "others"; a society teaming with multiple cultures, a kaleidoscope of people who were also not native to its shores. Here

we could build a life, feel safe, and live free as Jews. Needless to say, the Jewish American journey has had its stops and starts.

After World War II, when the soldiers came home, acceptance of Milton's growing Jewish community took a positive turn.

As told to me by Eddie Shatz, a long time Temple member who fought under Gen. George Patton in the Battle of the Bulge, there came a time when the Jews of Milton decided they wanted to build a temple and start a religious school for the children.

The town's Jewish War Veterans went to their friends in the local VFW and asked if they would go with them to the town fathers to request that land be set aside for purchase. The VFW soldiers, being longtime Miltonians, led the way, advocating for their colleagues in arms.

The town agreed, but with a caveat. The building couldn't be called a temple or synagogue. That's how the Milton Hebrew Center was born.

Not perfect, but a good start.

Keeping up with the news has made me think about what it means to live free and safe as a Jew in America, but the Festival of Passover which retells the story of the Israelite's exodus from slavery to freedom that began this past Saturday night, demands that I also consider the degree to which others feel free and safe.

You see, freedom and safety are dependent on communal buy-in. I need you and you need me. There's really no alternative.

It's time for all of us to reaffirm the promise that is America and the hope of an 8-year-old girl whose family fled Poland.

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