

Hello, folks from Harry Karp

Continuing to miss everybody more and more.

Plenty of time for Passover preparations.

Too much time.

I was supposed to be studying with you about the modern history of Persian Jewry. We want to look at what they had escaped from and the many accomplishments which they have done here.

Our Baltimore community has many of these fine people. They have truly been an asset to us. They are an integral part of the community's infrastructure. From the first generation to the current one, they just give and give in every area, both commercially and for Jewish tradition. Truth be told, it's hard to imagine how we ever made it before they arrived.

Most of them have incredible stories of escape, living under persecution, adjusting to our culture, and not knowing what the next day or regime would bring.

I personally recall when one of the first groups of Iranian students arrived here at Ner Israel. The Dean, Rabbi Herman Neuberger, was instrumental in transporting many groups to Baltimore.. That is why if you drive past Park Heights and Falstaff, the Persian shul on the corner bears his name. That pretty shul stands out with its Persian architecture too!

That rabbi is a entire course unto himself. Neuberger,, a German refugee from the Holocaust, knew very well what it was to live in peril and uncertainty. His heart pined to rescue these people... and rescue he did!! Initially, Rabbi Neuberger was not so much thinking about persecution. The evil Ayatollah would not gain full power and overthrow of the Shah, until 1979. Things would be changing fast and furious soon enough. However, in 1975, Persia had banned all parochial schools (that actually was from the Shah,for his own agenda). That meant no more legal Jewish education. What could happen to this ancient Jewish culture? The rabbi planned out with other Jewish leaders, to bring over groups of Iranian youth to be properly educated. The task with its risks and endless formidable details was an awesome one. The goal? Later, they would return as the new rabbis, teachers and community leaders of their ancient Sefardic communities. Be it Tehran, Shiraz or elsewhere, these young men would be needed. History largely had other plans.

My personal recollections

It was the late '70's and word spread that some new students from Iran would be arriving at our yeshiva. Most of us were clueless as to what was going on with Iran. Just snips and snaps of what anti-Jewish developments were occurring across the Atlantic. Whatever it was, we young yeshiva boys knew nothing at all of the situation of the Jews in Iran, We barely were aware that there were Jews there altogether. As far as we were concerned, Mordechai and Esther was the end of Jews in Iran (shame on us) Then one night, suddenly there they were! The new students/ refugees stood with their belongings spread out in the vestibule of our dormitory.. They had only been allowed to take a minimum of possessions. These were basically all they had in the world. They did not know if they would ever see their families ever again. They did not know what was going to happen to the Jews which they had left behind..

And there they stood. Quiet and orderly. Not really able to communicate. Waiting for room assignments.

They looked so different from any Jews we had seen before (except maybe in picture books).

Everything about these boys was different!

They were darker than us. Different hair than us.

Very different clothes.

They were so scared and had endured so much in their travels of escape.

One more surprise.

They were not of your standard Ashkenazic stock. Not from Russia, Poland or anywhere in Europe. THEY DIDN'T KNOW FROM YIDDISH. Let alone this land of Baseball and apple pie.

The better ones of us, greeted them warmly. The Persian yeshiva boys knew enough Hebrew for them to get a message of welcome.. A firm handshake with Shalom Aleichem always works. The better ones were careful not to stare and rushed to offer them things.

That was the better of us. I was not one of them. I think I shook a few hands, but was lacking the true Jewish spirit of so many mitzvos attached to this situation.

I and others were not mean. Just selfish and apathetic. What did we know of suffering?

The better ones were quick to gladly make space for them at their meal tables. Even if students had routinely reserved table places for Shabbos, they would squeeze the newcomers in. The Iranian boys would be made to feel that they were wanted. Made to feel that American Jews were glad that they made it out alive and unhurt.

But not all of us extended the warm open arms and hearts we should have.

I would take a while (not that long, but still no excuses) to emulate the better ones of our yeshiva. I would learn to admire and appreciate these brave young souls.

Thinking back, I feel such shame.

They were as my very own immigrant father was back in 1938.

They were as my mother's grandparents in the 1910's and 1920's.

My wife's side as well, had the same immigrant experience.

How well were they received in their days?

And our families had an advantage. My relatives were able to escape the Old World to reunite with brethren who were at least from the same places and spoke their language. Of course, there were many differences, but quite a bit in common.

Landsleit gkummin! People from the old country are here!
was a prevalent, though not universal attitude.

These poor Persian boys had none of that at all.

The institutions set up to aid my relatives, were not there in the same way for these new students.

It would be Rabbi Neuberger, his supposed new "friendly yeshiva boys and rabbis," who needed to rise to the task (which they did) But other than the knowledge of all of us being Jewish, there was not so much in common.

So how did they succeed?

We will need to explore that answer. Two key factors, are their incredible work ethic and long chain of Jewish family tradition. A chain which is older than the roots of most our ancestral countries of the Exile.

They can be pretty lovable too.

As we will see, they have given back, far more than they were given.
And they still are

Keep in touch with me as we learn together about this lovely part of our brethren.