

Rosh HaShanah 5780/2019
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Zichronot

It was winter 1994 and my fourth freezing cold day in Moscow. I was there to adopt an eleven-month-old baby girl, but the paperwork and bureaucracy were taking forever, and I found that I had a free afternoon on my hands.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do. My grandparents had come to America from Russia. In college, I had demonstrated for the freedom of Soviet Jews. Now I was actually here, and I had read that there was one synagogue left in the city.

I found out the address and hailed a taxi. The driver didn't speak English, but it turns out that the word "synagogue-a" is the same in every language.

When we pulled up, I stared in shock. Before me was a magnificent pale yellow and white edifice with beautiful white columns, a portico

and a small dome. This jewel of a building is not at all what was I expecting. I couldn't wait to go inside where I found several middle-aged men standing in the foyer in the otherwise empty building. They looked at me in surprise and I said, *"Shalom. Do you speak English? I am a Jew from America."*

I can't tell you how excited they got. This was just one year after the Russian Federation had relaxed their visa policy and I realize now I may have been the first or one of the first American Jews to visit the synagogue.

The men surround me and shake my hand, eagerly asking *"Yiddish? Yiddish? Redst du Yiddish?"* They want so much to communicate with me, but sadly I shake my head. No, I don't speak Yiddish. But then I get an idea. *"Ivrit? Midaber Ivrit? Do you speak Hebrew?"*

The men shake their heads regretfully, and then suddenly one of them lights up and puts up his finger to say, "just a moment" and hurries off. A few moments later, he returns with an elegant very old man, who had to be at least 90, who greets me with "Shalom Aleichem." To which I give the traditional reply, "Aleichem Shalom." At which point he begins to speak to me in fluent Hebrew, explaining that he had

learned it in *cheder* – Hebrew school – before the Russian Revolution and before Jewish schools were banned. He had studied Hebrew over 75 years ago and still remembered it.

The old man then gallantly takes my arm and escorts me into the majestic sanctuary, with hand-carved wooden pews, an ark covered in gold leaf, crystal chandeliers, a colorful mosaic ceiling and a gorgeous balcony on both sides. Overcome at such beauty, my eyes fill with tears as I suddenly realize what a grand, great, vibrant Jewish community once must have existed here.

The old man watches me intently as I take it all in and then he leads me to a closet in the back and opens the door. Inside were stacks of torn and tattered Torah scrolls piled high on top of each other. These Torahs, he explains, were saved by Jews who wrapped them around their bodies and fled east to Russia to escape the Holocaust. The synagogue has held onto them for 50 years, hoping someday to have the money to repair and use them once again. Without a word, I open my wallet and give him every American dollar I had. Without a word, the old man takes my hand and kisses it.

This happened over 25 years ago, and I remember it like it was yesterday.

The second set of shofar blessings, which we are about to hear, is called *Zichronot*. *Zichronot* means memories, the traditional explanation being that during this time of judgment, God remembers our actions during the past year,

But *Zichronot* can also refer to our own memories, particularly our Jewish memories, which profoundly affect us and connect us to each other. They can be about living in each other's hearts and minds and being part of each other's history. They can heighten our sense of oneness as a people because, when you think about it, most Jewish memories are not just about the individual, not about you or me alone, but about what we've experienced together and what we've created together, memories that we all share and which bind us through that sharing.

Zichronot are the beautiful, moving, and sometimes transformative Jewish memories of our families and ourselves that we hand down to our children and grandchildren and the new memories that we create with them.

For me, Zichronot is my daughter's adoption story forever intertwined with the memory of that kind elderly Russian Jew in the Great Synagogue of Moscow, connecting three generations of hope, past, present and future and embodying our ancient teaching: kol yisrael aravim zeh la zeh – every Jew is responsible for the other.

Zichronot is also the day I took my two-year-old daughter to the mikveh to become a Jew in front of family and friends and 3 rabbis, giving her the Hebrew names of my mother and grandmother so they would live through her.

And Zichronot is the day eleven years later, when my daughter stood in front of an entire congregation, chanting from the Torah on her Bat Mitzvah, reminding me of those tattered Torah scrolls piled high in that backroom closet and impressing upon me how truly important this moment was.

We all have Jewish memories and as we listen to the shofar blasts of Zichronot, I'd like to ask you to concentrate on one specific Jewish memory that you cherish, that has uplifted you, moved you, healed you or possibly even changed you for the better.

Think of where you were, who was with you and how you felt, and then take that feeling and let it lift you and inspire you to create more important, powerful, meaningful Jewish memories in the coming year. And then promise yourself, that whenever you have the chance, you will share them.