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Congregation Shir Shalom
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“Got Bensch Amerike, Our Home Sweet Home”

In the summer of 1986, six months before my Bar Mitzvah, I - Alexander Martin Lazarus - was convinced I had won the Golden Ticket. The Statue of Liberty was celebrating its 100th anniversary and a nationwide call had gone out that all blood relatives of Emma Lazarus were invited to attend the huge ceremony planned for that July 4th weekend to commemorate the occasion. It would be one of the biggest events of the year, full of pomp and circumstance. Celebrities, big shots, and even the President and First Lady would be in attendance. Frank Sinatra, Johnny Cash, Niel Diamond, Barry Manilow, John Denver. The Temptations, and Whitney Houston were all scheduled to perform.

My sixth grade class had taken a trip to New York City the year before to see a Broadway Show, visit Gus's Pickles on the Lower East Side, tour Ellis Island, and, of course, go to the Statue of Liberty. Scaffolding had covered the entire base of the historic beacon at the time as she underwent a complete refurbishment. In honor of her century of service, she was getting a new torch, leaks were being repaired, and rusted iron removed. They wanted her to gleam like she did when she first was presented to us by the French in the 1880s. We got to view the massive giant from up close, walk the narrow winding stairs to the top, and see the bronze plaque on its pedestal imprinted with the words of “The New Collusus”:

“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-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

This was the first time I had encountered the famous Jewish poetess, and realized that maybe, just maybe, my family and I might be somehow connected to American royalty. My last name was Lazarus.

We must be *mishpachah*, right? Of course, when I ran it by my parents, they matter-of-factly informed me that not only was I not related to Emma Lazarus, but that Lazarus was not our original family name, it was Lazarofsky. Like millions of others, our name was shortened and Americanized on our entry through Ellis Island. Boom, just like that not only were my hopes and dreams dashed, but my entire family lineage was now in question.

So, as I watched the proceedings on our tiny RCA that July 4th, I did so with a heavy heart, pouting in the way only a pre-teen who just got a harsh reality check could pout. Worse still, it turned out several of our family friends were actual blood relatives of Emma Lazarus. They had children who were my sisters' ages and were no doubt sitting gleefully, amongst the many other esteemed guests that looked like grains of sand on our television screen.

What I didn't realize then, and sometimes still forget now, is that in this Golden Medina of the United States of America, I had already received my Golden Ticket.

For the past four thousand years, the Jewish people have been searching for a Promised Land. A place where we could be loved and accepted for who we are. A place free of bigotry and persecution. A place of safety and security. And, no matter how far or how wide we have looked, from the Mediterranean Sea to the furthest reaches of Africa and Australia, finding that place has always proven elusive. Sure, for a time - whether in the land of Israel or outside of it - we have felt fully at home, but inevitably the vagaries of time will encroach and that rug of home and community will be pulled out from under our collective feet. It happened in Canaan after Solomon's reign, in Roman times after Herod, Babylonia and Spain, in England and Germany, all throughout South America, and, now, perhaps, even here in the US of A. The Promised Land... A Promised Land was always out of reach.

In the Torah, there is a great deal of ambiguity about the actual place we call the Promised Land. In Parashat Lech Lecha in Chapter 12 of Genesis, God instructs Abram to leave his country, his family, and his parent's house, to go to the place that God will show him. *Lech lecha*

me'artzechah, u'mimoledetchah, u'mibeit avechah el arets asher arecha.

לך-לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל-הארץ אשר אראה:

That place is not named. Nor, is the method that God would use to show Abram the place. Abram is only told to go to the place God will show him.

So, how did our forefather know where to go? One imagines a large spot light shining forth from the heavens to illuminate our patriarch's path, or a Bat Kol, angelic voice, calling out to Abram from the sky, to "Go that way!" or "You're headed in the right direction." But no spotlight is ever mentioned, and no Bat Kol is ever spoken about. According to the record in the Torah, he was simply instructed to walk forward, to Lech Lecha, into the unknown.

A Promised Land it turns out is more than just a geographical marker, it is a psychological state of being. Like falling in love, the experience is hard to explain or quantify. A feeling of home, is just that, a feeling. It goes beyond the look or feel, smell or sound of the place you are describing, it is an ephemeral emotion that engages something buried deep within our souls that feels somehow beyond time and space. Think of your own home. What makes it feel like home? How did you know you arrived in the right place when you first moved in?

Bisheret is the word Jews use to describe this experience. A Yiddish word meaning destiny, it most often compared to English words like kismet or karma, but for Jews it has another layer of being directly planned by God. According to mystical tradition, souls are assigned to one another before birth and then must seek one another out in the human realm. When the souls eventually meet it is like puzzle pieces connecting, that perfect symmetry we often call true love. Bisheret can be applied to romantic couples, but it can also be applied to other key life pursuits like jobs or places of residence.

For the Jewish people, America has very much been our Bisheret. It has been that way since our first perilous journey here in 1654, when a crew of twenty-three Jews braved the frigid waters of the Atlantic to arrive in the harbor of the Hudson River. Tired, hungry, and very much out of options, they hoped only for respite from their travels.

Among the first Jewish settlers of the Western Hemisphere, they had been living for decades in South America in Recife, Brazil. Having set up a synagogue and established a thriving Jewish community there, they had hoped to remain there for a while longer. Unfortunately for them, the Portuguese Army who had just conquered the region had other ideas, giving the Jews there an ultimatum of one month to leave or face the consequences.

So it was there in February of that year, that ten ships and almost a thousand Jews set sail back toward the Netherlands. Amazingly all the ships made it back to Europe safely, except one, that through happenstance and perhaps bad luck was waylaid to New Amsterdam. Worse still, a set of pirates had overtaken their ship. Their demise seemed imminent, until another set of pirates rescued them. As they landed on the shores of what we now call New York City, these pirates were demanding restitution in the form of all of their possessions. To add to the insult, the Governor of the Colony which they now found themselves, was one Peter Stuyvesant, who despised Jews, and wanted them gone.

It is then that a series of what could only be described as miracles occurred that would cement our place in this country until this day. First, Stuyvesant's request to the Dutch West Indian Company was denied. The Jews would be allowed to stay. Second, even an even more amazing miracle, something one historian called "one of the earliest recorded examples of... Christian charity in America" and in what we would call a *mitzvah*, the historian writes, "a group of New Netherlanders who had been defending the Jews arrived early, began buying up items at nominal prices, and then handing them over to their original owners." Bisheret.

It is as if the words on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty had come to life: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," "the wretched refuse of your teeming shore."

And, in an even more act of Bisheret (if that's possible) the writer of those words was in fact the descendant of one of those arrivals. Emma Lazarus, my hoped for name sake, the 19th Century poetess had roots on both sides of her family that stretched back to the original twenty-three.

Born into the aristocracy of New York, an eighth generation American (how many of us can say the same?), she happened to be present at that pivotal moment when not only was a grand statue being built into the New York Harbor, but that flooding into the gates of the city were millions of Ashkenazi Jews. Tired, bedraggled, fleeing the same sort of persecution her ancestors had faced two centuries before, these poor souls arrived on these shores with nothing. Amazingly, instead of leaning into her wealth and privilege that put her in contact with some of the artistic luminaries of the time like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, as so many others would have done, our hero rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

In fact, she was so immersed with the cause of helping these refugees - even going so far as to found an organization to help support them called the Society for the Improvement and Colonization of East European Jews - that when her friend and fellow poet Constance Cary Harrison asked her to contribute a poem to the large fundraiser being held that November to help finance the building of the pedestal that the Statue of Liberty would one day rest, she demurred. She felt no connection to what she perceived solely as a symbol of American diplomacy. That was until, Constance reframed the meaning of the statue, as the first image of America the flood of new refugees, and thus was born "The New Colossus."

And in yet another moment of Bisheret, among the many millions of new Americans that Emma Lazarus was providing assistance for was a five-

year-old boy named Izzy Beilin, the son of a Cantor, just happened to be arriving in New York just as she was composing her famous poem.

Scared and disoriented, this youngest of eight with no understanding of why he and his family had left in the first place sat, no doubt aghast. His only memory of the Old World of an angry mob filling the streets as flames consumed his childhood home Belarus. But, amidst the confusion and chaos, Izzy, born Israel, heard the soft voice of his mother Lena whispering in his ear, “Got Bentsh Amerike,” “Got Bentsh Amerike,” a little tidbit that decades later he would craft into one of the most familiar melodies that our country has ever known.

Because, little Izzy Beilin, would grow up to become none other than Irving Berlin. And that song his mother’s words had inspired, that he had crafted for a musical in the early 1920s and later revised as America headed to war in the late 1930s, became the words of none other than “God Bless America.” Bisheret.

And, in one final Bisheret - one that brings this story all the way back to its beginning - at around exactly the same moment as Emma Lazarus was composing her poem, and Izzy Beilin first arrived in America, my paternal great grandfather Benjamin Lazarus, formerly Lazarovsky, also arrived, also as a five-year-old. He lived until 1978 so we actually overlapped. I attended his 95th birthday party in Florida. And, in one of my only memories of any of my great grandparents I got to wish him a Happy Birthday. I was five-years-old at the time. Bisheret. Bisherit. Bisherit.

When I was growing up, the Jewish community used to ask itself - are we American Jews or Jewish Americans? Is our American identity our primary identifier or is our Jewish identity our primary identifier? Are we the adjective or the noun (the noun being more important)? It was a cute exercise that demonstrated just how important both identities were for us. Today, as America celebrates its 250th Birthday, it can feel that neither version works for us any more.

Many of us feel alienated and angry, heartbroken by our standing in our beloved country, and unsure where we are headed in the future. Some of us may even have one foot out the door, either toward Canada or Israel. Raise your hand if this applies to you.

This sermon is meant to remind you about the deep and lasting impact Jews have made on America, and that America has made on the Jews.

America may not be the Promised Land, but has certainly been a Promised Land, a Golden Medina, our Golden Ticket. For almost five hundred years we have enjoyed the bounty of this land. We have fought bravely in every war. Been leaders in every industry. Served as technological innovators and skilled litigators, craftsmen and entrepreneurs, scientists and farmers. We have made Americans laugh, cry, and sing, through our artistry. And, we have done the most of any one group of Americans to shape the story of this country.

Look closely at the dollar bill and you will find above the American eagle, thirteen stars for the original thirteen colonies arranged perfectly in a Jewish star. That, according to legend, is an ode to Haim Solomon who helped finance the revolution.

In reflecting back forty years ago to my seventh grade self, I want to tell that twelve-year-old a few things:

First, it's a good thing my family and I didn't end up attending the ceremony. The weekend featured record high temperatures and long delays that our poor family friends, along with all of those notable celebrities, were forced to endure. Watching on our tiny RCA, I was among the 1.5 billion people who watched it worldwide, a true American experience.

Second, my family's change of name from Lazarofsky to Lazarus is not a mark of shame, but a mark of pride. It gave my family and I a connection to

this country, a connection to Emma Lazarus and a connection to that beautiful statue that they no doubt passed when they first arrived. Lastly, on the occasion of America's semiquincentennial, it is an opportunity for all of us to say Got Bentsh Amerike! Got Bentsh Amerike!

At the 1986 Liberty Concert, the one that I so pined to attend, and that our family friends were lucky enough to go to, Emma Lazarus' poem was not even read. But, God Bless America was, fittingly not by any one celebrity performer, but instead by a choir made up almost entirely of New Americans, singing every word by heart.

Shanah Tovah U'Metukah, a sweet and healthy Jewish New Year!

Please rise as Cantor Frank leads us in a rendition of "Got Bentsh Amerike."