

Traveling with Tradition

Bob Dylan wrote, in “Neighborhood Bullies,” “He’s traveled the earth and exiled man....” Fortunately, Jewish people have sometimes traveled just for fun and not under the gun of some repressive or murderous regime. People often ask, what makes the Jewish community different? Is it tradition, religion, fidelity to community, or something inexplicable and intangible? A recent experience in Aruba, of all places, is enlightening.

Prior to escaping the North Central Pennsylvania cold via vacation to Aruba, we made the usual check of whether there is a Chabad in Aruba. We have great loyalty to the Chabad. This is an institution envisioned by the great Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known as “The Rebbe.” Schneerson was a visionary, whose power seems to have grown since his passing. A not so simple Chassid educated at the Sorbonne in physics, The Rebbe was a member of the Lubavitcher sect. Always outreach oriented, accepting of others, Schneerson turned the Lubavitcher movement into a worldwide phenomenon. Chabad houses around the country and the world are inviting, provide a warm kosher meal, study, prayer, and just a good place to hang out. The Rabbis who are sent out on Shlichim seem to be especially well chosen for their jobs; they are always married, have young children, and are committed to the acceptance of others regardless of background, education, or lifestyle choice. We have tried to help campus Chabad Houses at the three colleges attended by our kids, as well as the Chabad House at any location we have visited.

We found that in Aruba, there indeed was a new Chabad. We figured that we would have a place to go for Friday night Shabbat dinner, and perhaps a service Saturday morning. What we found, instead, was that thousands, yes, thousands of members of the New York Brooklyn Sephardic community were going to be invading the Marriott during the time frame that we were there. One man said to me, “You won’t believe it; it is really crazy. You will see a thousand men at services Friday night.” Well, it was true. So what was the first thing that my son and I were asked when we walked into a service? Where are you from, what is your name? No, we were asked, “Are you Sephardi?” “No,” we responded, “Ashkenazi.”

Most Jewish and Gentile Americans have never met nor have very little exposure to the Sephardic community. Interestingly, American Jewry was founded by Sephardic Jews, many of whom were fleeing from the Spanish Inquisition and found refuge in the Caribbean, South America, and eventually North America. Names like Cardozo, Torres and Mendoza were as common to American Jews during the Revolutionary War era as Goldberg and Schwartz would be today. The great United States Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Cardozo, one of the early Jewish appointees to the U.S. Supreme Court, although not the first, was of a renowned Spanish-Jewish ancestry. It was those Sephardic Jews, along with some of their Ashkenazi brothers, who fought in the American Revolution and smuggled gun powder through the Caribbean to the revolutionaries. A British general believed that Washington never would have prevailed had it not been for the Jews of the Caribbean

creating a passageway for gunpowder to the Colonists. We know that were it not for Haim Solomon, the Revolution would have failed financially and several of the Founding Fathers would never have been able to attend the Constitutional Convention. The Hyman Henry long gun enabled the new Americans to tick off British officers at long range. Washington, Hamilton, and many of the other Founders expressed their gratitude to the Jewish community in writing and in the tolerance they showed to minority groups.

The Sephardic Jews who showed up in Aruba were part of a nonprofit effort to provide a vacation and to raise money for the Sephardic Jewish community in Brooklyn. That community is made up of Jews from Egypt, Lebanon, and particularly Syria. They make sure that all of their children can attend Jewish religious schooling regardless of finances and they brought with them a kosher restaurant from New York to assure that in Aruba kosher food could be consumed at all times. It was spiritual and delightful for me to be able to go to service in the morning, don Tefillin, go out and play a round of golf, swim in the ocean, and go to evening services. For me, the combination of spirituality, observance and fun in the sun could not have been more pleasurable. Shabbat was unique. Hundreds of people, spirited Eastern-style services, and a comradery atmosphere.

What was so special about this community was its fidelity to its members, respect for religion, the absolute belief that Judaism is portable, and the easy welcoming of others. Sephardic Jews do not dress any differently. My wife and I looked at the way the Sephardic women were dressed on the beach, and Kim said to me, "So much for modesty."

These modern American Jewish families, singles, old and young, are the ancestors of Jews who lived in the Middle East as long ago as Biblical times. The first Jewish diaspora was in Egypt, and there had been a continuous Jewish community in Egypt until the early 1950s. Jews have lived in Syria and Lebanon for well over 2,500 years. All of those Jewish communities predate Christianity, Islam, modern Arab extremism, and the rise of the Western European powers. The Eternal Jew has lived in Babylonia and Persia, modern Iraq and Iran, since pre-Antiquity. All of those communities were decimated, destroyed, and driven out of their ancient homes after World War II and in the 1950s through the 1960s. Praise the Lord that there was an Israel or these Jewish refugees would have been destroyed in a Holocaust equal to that suffered by the Jews of Europe at the hands of the Germans and their allies.

An interesting footnote in history is that when the allies in World War II conquered North Africa, the Americans wanted to leave North Africa under the administration of the Germans who had colonized and controlled the region. Churchill, much to his credit, insisted that the West administer North Africa after Rommel was driven out by the Americans and the British. That action on the part of Winston Churchill saved the Jewish community in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and other places from physical annihilation.

No one has or ever will repatriate those hundreds of thousands of Jews who had to flee the Arab world. They have asked for nothing and they will receive nothing. They educated their children, formed strong communal bonds, worked hard to succeed, and now

are capable of vacationing in Aruba, whose economy is grateful for the temporary influx of American Jews of Middle Eastern dissent.

There is a lesson to be learned here. Those who suffer and struggle at the hands of others with a strong will and a pure heart will recover, prevail, and contribute. Israel, after all, means one who has striven with G-d and man and prevailed.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,
Waters & Dohrmann
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders, who practices law in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.