

Are you looking for them?

A highlight of my childhood half term holiday was the day I would spend with my great-aunt Aunty Ruth, of blessed memory. After a trip to the shops where she let me pull her shopping trolley and before the ride on the top deck of the bus, she would take down the big box of photos and tell me stories of her parents and her grandparents.

Rosh Hashanah is also known as Yom Hazikaron, the day of memory. Aunty Ruth taught me how to remember.

She would speak of a mysterious place called 'Der Heym', 'the home' in Yiddish, the old country, where her grandparents had come from back in the 1880s. I would ask her for the name of the shtetl that they were from, and she would say, Pikiln in Lithuania.

I was a community rabbi for 7 years. The community had a broyges, a fight, about how we should relate to the State of Israel. I did not have a Jewish

story that could hold the different perspectives together. That was one of the reasons why I set out on a long pilgrimage across the terrain of my broken Jewish story in the hope that I might be able to tell a new story. This long pilgrimage included a visit to the shtetl of Pikiln.

On the outskirts of the shtetl I notice three storks: swooping across the road and landing in their grand nests on the top of wooden posts. I drive in and park. The village is peaceful, beautiful and feels like the end of the world.

I wander around the village of old wooden houses. Three children on roller blades greet me in Lithuanian.

I respond, English.

One of them says, I speak English. Is this your first time here? she asks.

Yes, I say, it's beautiful. My ancestors come from here.

Have you come here to find them? she asks.

Yes, I say.

I walk along the straight quiet road towards the Jewish cemetery.

I pass the last wooden house on the road. I turn left on a grassy track towards a cluster of trees. The cemetery is sheltered beneath a canopy of spring leafed birch trees which grow directly out of the graves. The ground is covered in a carpet of white spring flowers. A stalk swoops across the field just beyond the trees.

I sit. As I look at these woodland graves a verse from Torah comes to mind. Ki adam hu etz ha sadeh, is a tree of the field a person?

I sit. A wave of self consciousness passes through me. What am I doing here?

I think of the flood of emails that arrived in my inbox that morning from my wise rabbinic colleagues who are doing the hard work of holding their communities together amidst the ongoing broyges of how we should relate to the State of Israel. I feel far away from them. A wave of shame comes over me and seems to say:

Our people are in crisis and you are in a cemetery. Shouldn't you be with actually *living* Jews offering comfort and support?

I tell myself that this trip is a contribution but I do not believe it. I feel embarrassed, useless.

I sigh. The critical voice gives way to a tightness, a determination that something must happen here.

I search for something to do. I take out my Tanakh to read this week's Torah portion. That feels wrong. I think of putting on my Talit and tefillin. That feels inappropriate. I get up and approach a grave with my paper and pencil and attempt to make a stone rubbing to decipher the illegible weathered engraving. I fail. I open my siddur to the pages that offer a liturgy for visiting a cemetery. The words do not fit this visit.

A wave of embarrassment, and then confusion, comes over me.

In its wake honesty surfaces. I was willing for something to happen. Could I drop my will and just listen? In other words, could I pray?

I breathe and allow my heady will to drop down into my heart.

After a long moment of silence I stand up. I hear myself say:

I am here. I am Daniel a descendent of the Scher and the Leibowitz families of this place. I heard of you from my great aunt Ruth Scher. I am the first in my line to come back here.

I have come to honour you. The soil of this place, fertilised by many an argument between you about how to safeguard the Jewish future, meant that Torah was strong enough that she could be taken across the sea, planted in new lands and grow like these birch trees.

But then Holocaust destroyed the branches of our family who stayed here and broke our faith: Torah was not enough on its own. We needed something else to help us to stand up, to help us to feel safe in the world. The State of Israel gave us that. And then the 7 October came. The state created as the safe haven for Jews failed. The ongoing war, the hostages, the rise of Jewish extremism, death,

destruction has left us feeling vulnerable,
frightened, angry.

I am a rabbi but I no longer know what stories to
tell our people. I have come here because I am
stuck. I have come here to ask for your help.

I listen. I look at the hundred weathered
grave-stone faces looking back at me. Faces that
suddenly invite me to read Psalm 23. I open my
siddur.

Mizmor L'David. In green fields God lets me lie,
leading me by quiet streams, restoring my soul.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death I fear no harm for You are beside me; Your rod
and staff they comfort me...

I stand up. I walk to the far side of the cemetery.
I stand beside a large tree that rises from the
centre of a grave. I face the place where I had sat.
I become one more face alongside the the many faces

that look from the past into the present to offer a different future. I recite the words of Psalm 23 once more as though my voice were giving voice to those here who in their lives had said this Psalm in this place.

...You soothe my head with oil; my cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy seek me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of God forever.

I touch the rough bark of the tree and the soft moss on the top of the grave. I pick a white flower from the ground and press it into my siddur beside Psalm 23.

I walk the circumference of the cemetery.

I stand at the cemetery exit and as I look back over the graves I know to recite the blessing:

Blessed are you Eternal our God Sovereign of the Universe who revives the dead.

And now, when I tell this story, I think of Auntie Ruth and the box of photos, on this day of memory. It's time to go home, its getting dark, time to get the double decker bus. We take each photo and put them back in the box to look at another time.

May this story, and may these ten days of reflection bless you with the permission to say 'I am stuck';

May these ten days of introspection grant you the humility to ask for help;

And may the prayers we say during these ten days of yearning offer you a phrase, a line or even just one word that touches your heart, may that word bless you on your way.