

Friday Evening Message – 21 August 2020

Shabbat Shalom everyone and warm wishes from Gie, the girls and I.

We have all missed our visits to the wonderful city of Norwich and our special community at NLJC. The long schlepp neutralised by the warm welcome and wonderful services as we tried to squeeze in beside Chaim of Woodton in the back seat and exchange pleasantries in a mix of Tagalog, Hebrew and English with a distinct Irish twang (and that was only Dr Philip). I am mindful of our Orthodox brethren at these times, who cannot utilise Zoom as a substitute as we do. Even before this virus one of the studies we carried out in the Ambulance Service was Loneliness and Isolation as being the next big issue after Mental Health and which could only be exacerbated by the lockdown.

The Corona Virus Infectious Disease 2019 has changed all our lives and for ourselves it has been no different. The girls have taken up volleyball, Gie has discovered her hidden talent of painting. Althea and I have been gardening and she planted some sunflower seeds which have grown to over 8 ft high and an array of fresh vegetables. I have started to learn the bagpipes, very slowly and very badly and have become a webinar / podcast / Zoom junkie, connecting with new organisations and communities as well as keeping up with my CST training.



Unfortunately we have all lost precious family members during this time, our thoughts go out to Annie and family on the loss of Stuart and to Helen on the passing of Chris, may their memories be a Blessing and to everyone else who has suffered.

Sadly we lost my Savta, in May, just three days before her 90th birthday, although she had beat the covid virus there was too much damage to her lungs. In Northern Ireland they have a semi-Jewish burial routine in that it is 48hrs. Happily I managed to get there in time on an overnight boat from Liverpool and join the funeral of our Matriarch.

Due to the situation the funeral was a surreal experience with close family in the garden under the rare Irish sun and a field full of mourners in cars with the service broadcast via their radios. By complete coincidence the minister spoke of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs and of Me'arat HaMachpelah in Hevron of which I was able to provide him with a more accurate account.

My Savta looked after me a lot as a child as both my parents worked and she was a big influence on my life. She was the most competitive Monopoly player I met, the owner of the biggest sweet box in the country and the most generous person but if we misbehaved her stern Ulster look was backed up by a flash of a horsewhip if we stepped out of line.

While living in Israel, Hevron was amongst my favourite places to visit. Hevron comes from the Hebrew Chever which translates as friend or connection. The Me'arat HaMachpelah or Tomb of the Patriarchs is believed to be the final resting places, of Avraham, Sarah, Yitzak, Yakov Rivka and Leah and was a place of reflection for me as well as a place which always made me think of my Savta. The Tomb of the Patriarchs is one of the oldest active buildings in the world built by King Herod some 2000 years ago. In 1267 CE Jews were expelled by the Mamelukes from the building and only permitted to pray at the seventh step leading to the Tomb. The construction is almost identical to that of the Western Wall in Jerusalem in that there is no cement and on the entrance to the Tomb is a Mezuzah inscribed with the Hebrew "Shaar Gan Eden" -the gateway to Garden of Eden which according to the Midrash is the connection point of this world and the world the Garden of Eden. The markers in the Machpelah are believed to be above the tombs of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs and Moshe Dayan the former Chief of Staff and Minister of Defence when Hevron was returned to Israeli control in 1967 was a keen archaeologist and used a small youth to squeeze into the tunnel below which led to a void believed to be the location of the resting places.



The Tombs of the father and grandmother of King David (Jesse and Ruth) are located in the Tel Hevron area of the city which King David ruled from, for the first seven years of his reign before relocating to Jerusalem. Another poignant location for me given that Ruth was a righteous convert to the Jewish people. Actually Ruth was a descendant of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter with the Moav translating from the Hebrew M'Av – from my father. One of the most fundamental lessons in Judaism is that it doesn't matter who your parents or grandparents are it's the here and now that matters, what are you doing with your life.



If you ever are in Israel I highly recommend a visit to Hevron to visit your ancestors, it's a very special city with a museum and memorial now located in Beit Hadassah the former hospital and scene of the 24th August 1929 massacre of 67 Jewish residents by Arabs which led to the British expelling Jews from Hevron. I was lucky to be in Hevron for Shabbat Chayai Sarah in 2014 and slept in a tent along with around 50000 visitors.

Stay safe and well and enjoy your Shabbat,

Stephen
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