



D'var for Boston Workers Circle  
Rosh Hashanah 5781  
Nellie Shippen | September 19, 2020

Shana Tova everyone. My name is Nellie and I became involved in the BWC community in 2014 when I started as a Shule teacher that year. As an Iraqi and Persian Jew entering this vibrant community six years ago, I encountered a lot of Yiddish (which was to be expected), a lot of photographs and images of Jewish immigrants in black and white, and beautiful vision of how a radical Ashkenazi space could be so powerful for the people it was often most accessible to: primarily other Ashkenazi folks.

To be honest, though I loved the people, I didn't really see my Jewish stories or culture reflected here. My mom is a refugee. Our Ellis Island is Seattle-Tacoma airport and my grandmother immigrated to the US shortly *after* I was born. Our Jewish coming to America story doesn't have a heritage trip to New York City or costumed re-enactment event at this or perhaps any Jewish education program. As an educator at BWC, I felt strongly that we could include the narratives of a diverse group of Jews in this space and I had incredible partners who helped support this work. One of these opportunities that felt near and dear to my heart was our programming surrounding Purim and using it as a time for students to learn about Jews of Persia both past and present. Those who know me, know that I am a storyteller by nature and I see it as an inherent part of my Middle Eastern or Mizrahi Jewish identity. So, when I have come to Shule over the years as an educator to lead classes on Purim, I always tell the same story.

I grew up outside of Seattle, a city my mother's family came to after blindfolding my Uncle Aziz in their family home in Abadan, spinning him, and making him throw a dart at a map of the United States to choose where they would live. My grandmother lived in my town near my house. In 2005, I was coming of age during the post 9/11 years, the Bush administration, and a war with Iraq, the country where my family lived before fleeing to Iran. When I was 14 that year, likely around the age Esther was during the Purim story, a letter was placed on my grandmother's doorstep. Probably written by a neighbor, it said that our kind of people were terrorists and should go back to where we came from as we were not welcome here in America after the damage we had done. I tell students honestly how I felt like Esther in that moment. I was worried and unsure about the very real and frightening things in the world that had now seemed to land quite literally on our matriarch's doorstep. This was also not something my Ashkenazi peers were going through as a part of their Jewish experience.

In that moment, I felt like I had a choice. On the one hand, I had a first and last name that wasn't Mizrahi and people (including relatives) told me I didn't look like a "real" Middle Eastern person or member of my mother's family, so I could ignore my identity and lean into more comfortable ones, something I had the privilege to be able to do. I was certainly tempted to when it seemed like there were people who felt that an immigrant family like mine didn't belong in our town. I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and I felt so small and insignificant that I was unsure if I wanted to step into the complications and responsibilities of my Mizrahi heritage. And yet like Esther, when faced with that choice of hiding or becoming more visible than ever before in that vital part of myself, I began to choose the latter. I attempt to choose the latter every day, with each passing year, sometimes in my cultural identity but other times in those other roles where it would be easier to lay low or fit in through silence and omission. Few of us in those types of choices we all have to make in our own ways are immune from them being easy ones. Many don't have the option of choosing invisibility and for those with the ability to do so, standing on the right side of justice and history is seldom a simple or unfraught decision even when it's the right one. However, that adolescent reckoning brought me to BWC and I think this moment as well.

15 years later, we live in a very different world but in the midst of what also feel like extraordinary circumstances. I, and most people, in this service regardless of age or background currently feel small, helpless, confused, and consumed with self-doubt about what impact we may have on the events unfolding around us. But for some in our Jewish community this feeling is not new for us. It is something our families have confronted in America as racism against those of us from the Arab and Muslim world have often felt it acutely, especially in the last 20 years. It is something Black Jews, Latinx Jews, Asian Jews, and Indigenous Jews have contended with for hundreds of years in this land.

Therefore, I encourage you to look around at who is here in this virtual space and consider what voices this community still has its work cut out for it to better uplift. The wisdom and endurance of members of our community right now who have persisted, mourned, marched, survived, and ached throughout their lifetimes due to existential necessity, long before COVID, or Trump, or heightened attention to systemic racism and police brutality is needed at this moment. There are people here who have struggled to feel visible and vocal here despite this organization's commitment to inclusion and equity when we need to see and hear them as much as we have always needed to. Only recently, have I seen mainstream Jewish organizations actively attempt to recruit educators and decision makers who reflect the racial diversity of our community with intentionality. Only recently have some Jews from descents that go beyond Europe started to feel as if we



aren't just tokenized when we aren't othered or erased in cultural and spiritual spaces. BWC has not always been an exception to these observations, even if unintentional as it is with many of the ways we fall short in our lives. On Rosh Hashanah while we celebrate and welcome the coming year, but we also take stock. We courageously and painfully visit shortcomings of our past and what they mean for the opportunities we have to grow in the ensuing year. This organization has much to celebrate and be proud of, and despite its struggles has so many meaningful resources and tools for change and growth. It has always asked "how do we stand on the right side of justice and history" and will do so again and again.

This work is critical for cultivating our BWC community's desires to be allies and build solidarity with others. When we do the hard and at times embarrassing work of scrutinizing our in-group practices, we are better able to actualize truly dynamic and meaningful partnerships in Boston and beyond. This is where BWC, a group exceptionally adept at preserving and revolutionizing Jewish culture, becomes the radical place it aspires to be. I love this organization, its mission, and the vital space it has been for so many, including myself. We are in the midst of a period that is trying and terrifying emotionally, spiritually, physically, and politically and this may be a year of subsistence and survival but it will also be a year of choices whose impacts will be felt for many more to come, choices ideally made in a community that truly sees and listens to its many, varied members. Shana Tova, Yom Tov, Saaleh No Mubarak, and Shabbat Shalom.