

Shabbat shalom.

February 11, 1979. The day before my sixth birthday, my world was turned upside down. There was an Islamic revolution in Iran, where I was born into a prominent Jewish family. My paternal grandfather was the first principal of the first Jewish school in Tehran at age 22. One of my paternal great-uncles was one of the founding physicians of the only Jewish hospital in Iran and my father was a respected psychiatrist. My maternal grandparents came from two well-known Cohen families and my mother had gone to schools in Switzerland and England for many years. Within a few years of the revolution, almost all my relatives and Jewish friends immigrated to the US and Europe but my father had no intention of leaving Iran because he loved his work.

By the time I started second grade, religious education had become mandatory and my non-observant parents were forced to take me to a synagogue every week for Jewish studies so I wouldn't have to take Islamic studies classes. That was when I learned about the story of Purim, the holiday which we just celebrated, a story that has reinforced my life-long pride in being Jewish as well as Persian. Persian King Akhashverosh or Khashayar Shah in Persian was a descendent of Cyrus the Great, savior of the Jews from Babylonian tyranny, who allowed the Jews the freedom to immigrate to the big cities of the Persian Empire, which included 126 nations from Egypt to India. When Akhashverosh was looking for a new queen among the 126 nations, he chose a beautiful Jewish woman, Esther. Queen Esther and her uncle, Mordechai, didn't forget their people, who were immigrants, and had become the objects of Prime Minister Haman's scapegoating and threats of annihilation. Esther and Mordechai put themselves at risk to bring the plight of the Jews to the attention of Akhashverosh and seek his

mercy. Thanks to Esther and Mordechai, no Jew was hurt by Haman and to this day, Jews all over the world celebrate Purim to remember them. Also, many Jews all over the globe continue to be proud of being Persian and some, including my mother and brother, still live in Iran and freely practice Judaism at home and synagogues in Tehran and other big cities of Iran.

However, for me, since I was 12 years old, I knew I didn't want to live in Iran and there was no future for me there. As a freedom-loving, outspoken Jew, who was coming to realize I was attracted to only boys and men, I would have had a really hard time surviving in the oppressive, homophobic, anti-Zionist (but not anti-semitic) Islamic Republic of Iran, which with its Shi'a Moslem theocracy discriminated against all religious minorities. One of my last remaining close relatives, Uncle David, just before leaving Iran in 1985, gave me the idea of immigrating to the US. After I gave my parents hell for two years and after being a top student in sixth grade dropped out of school in eighth grade, my father asked Uncle David if I could come and live with him and his wife, Afsaneh, in Los Angeles. Fortunately, Uncle David agreed without asking any question.

Thanks to Uncle David and Afsaneh and HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, on the day I otherwise would have started high school in 1987, when I was 14 years old, I started my journey to immigrate to the US. With the help of smugglers, I fled Iran with other Jews by spending Rosh Hashana in the dangerous desert between Iran and Pakistan and then spent about a month and a half in Karachi in a hotel full of Jewish refugees from Iran. Subsequently, I flew to Austria and stayed in Vienna for about 10 months with many other Jewish refugees from Iran and the Soviet block. Finally, about a

year after leaving my parents in Iran, on July 26th of exactly 30 years ago, I arrived in Los Angeles as a Jewish refugee. Fortunately, when I left Iran, I thought I'd be in Los Angeles in a few days, maybe weeks. If I had known I'd be on my own for a year, I wonder if I would have given my parents hell for two years to let me go! When I left Iran, I had no idea when, if ever, I'd see my parents again. Unfortunately, I never again saw my father, who passed away three years later. Fortunately, my mother was able to come and visit me and the rest of the family five years later and as recently as last year, when she had the pleasure of meeting some of you.

Yes, I was only 14, on my own; my journey was more dangerous and difficult and much longer than I had anticipated. However, compared to the journey these days of many Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Hondurans, Syrians, Africans and many others, some much younger than 14, mine was a 5-star luxury trip! Unlike many refugees and immigrants, I was lucky to have an extended family welcoming me to my new country, new home. And, of course, if I weren't so fortunate to have Uncle David, I wouldn't be who I am, where I am! I'm forever grateful to my dear Uncle David and Afsaneh, for taking the big risk of accepting responsibility for a difficult teenager.

I have also been lucky to be able to follow the example of Esther and Mordechai in a very small way. I try not to forget my people, whom I consider to be refugees and other immigrants. Especially these days, when immigrants are the objects of scapegoating and tyranny by today's Haman in this country. As a refugee and now an Immigration Attorney, I consider it my duty to do everything I can to advocate for immigrants and their rights, and also encourage everyone I know to do the same. Not everyone can do what immigration attorneys do but everyone can advocate for

immigrants and their rights: For instance my dear friend, Sha'ar Zahav member Terry Fletcher has been volunteering as a Spanish interpreter for Central American asylee women through the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights' Asylum Program. Another dear friend, Sha'ar Zahav member Ron Lezell and also Sha'ar Zahav President Michael Chertok and my dear mentor for this drash, Ora Prochovnick, and her partner have opened their homes and hosted gay and trans asylees from Iran, Georgia, Syria and Eritrea through the East Bay Jewish Family & Community Services. And, Sha'ar Zahav members Michael and Jane Rice have made advocating for refugees and other immigrants a priority for Sha'ar Zahav's Social Action Committee, creating a path for all Sha'ar Zahav members to become advocates for refugee and other immigrants.

Unfortunately, during the past year today's Haman has given us so many reasons to advocate for refugees and other immigrants. For instance, we need to advocate against the discriminatory Travel Ban on nationals of Iran, Syria, Yemen and several other Muslim-majority countries; we should advocate in support of Dreamers, who came to this county when they were minors, and in support of Temporary Protected Status for Salvadorans, Hondurans, Haitians and others who have been here for many years because of the dire conditions in their home countries. I encourage each of us to consider ways to participate that may work for each of us. As our Torah repeatedly reminds us, we should "love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Just as the Jews of the Persian Empire had Queen Esther and I had my Uncle David, I wish the same for every refugee and immigrant! Or for a day when that is no longer needed.

Shabbat shalom.