My Grand-Daughter The Gibeonite, by Leon Moss

In a burst of misguided energy a few years ago, I decided to update the family tree. It's finally done. About 4 meters wide and one meter high, it'll stretch along the entire wall of the living room. In addition, I made a directory of everyone's whereabouts. Why not give the future generations a start when it comes to looking for free accommodation in far-away countries?

Up until the mid-seventies, the tree had a straightforward and regular look to it. The earlier generations are lost in the mists of Eastern Europe. So, I went back only as far as my great-grandparents, those valiant souls who sent their children out of the home knowing that in all probability they would never see them again. A prolific family, the tree grows sideways, meaning that I'm always sticking new sheets to the sides and forever looking for super-size copy machines.

The variety of names is formidable, but as in most Jewish family trees, first names repeat regularly as the new-born are named after departed ancestors. The tree has other common threads running through it as though it was a woven blanket which had been spun on one loom by a single weaver who always bought his thread from the same dealer.

The early entries are quite boring: Born - Lithuania; Migrations - Lithuania to South Africa; Education - South Africa; Married - so-and-so from Lithuania; Died - South Africa; Buried - such-and-such cemetery, South Africa. Not much in the way of variety and color. It's a nice, comfortable tree that you would never see in the front of a thousand-page, prize-winning family saga.

In the fifties changes began to creep into the details. Suddenly the brides and grooms were born in South Africa instead of Lithuania. One cousin even married a woman who came from England. There were few migrations and the large majority of the family are respectably buried in well-known South African cemeteries where they are visited regularly by relatives, each of whom carefully leaves a small stone on the grave at the end of their visit.

In the sixties and seventies new items are recorded. Someone received a doctorate at an American university, a third cousin emigrated to Australia and another to Israel. Unimportant but interesting family trivia.

By the end of the seventies, the tree began to undergo violent quakes as various brothers, cousins and other assorted relatives began searching the world for new attractions. Migrations flourished. New names began to appear, names that no longer had that old Lithuanian ring to them. A German sounding name here and a name with Polish spelling there added new spice to the old tree.

Then in the late nineties, the tree became twisted, gnarled and tangled - parts of it are quite unrecognizable. Migrations? We can no longer list them as families wander from country to country in search of a new Goldene Medina, a new Paradise to replace the crumbling South Africa. Family branches creep all over the world sending exploratory shoots into the most unlikely and exotic places on the planet. If the shoot takes root, it sends back a cry to the old country, "It's good here! Come over!" And another family branch can be seen clutching airline tickets in their hands as they rush around frantically attending to emigration procedures.

The tree also contains previously inconceivable changes in both religion and sex, and the directory listing 'current place of residence' resembles the index at the back of a world atlas.

No branch of the family has been spared the upheavals. Even my own direct family line receives a jolt from time to time.

Take grandchild number four, for example. A five-year-old with an all-over, all-year-round sun-tan. Religion - Jewish both sides; Place of residence - Sydney, Australia; Mother - born in Australia; Maternal grandmother - born in Calcutta. A grandmother born in Calcutta, India, listed side by side with one born in South Africa? On the same line? Unheard of!

Let's look at grandchild number five. Religion - Jewish both sides; Maternal grandmother - born in Boston; Place of residence - Gibeon. Gibeon? My grand-daughter is a Gibeonite?

Gibeon is the English for Givon, where son number three has built a house. Situated on the north-west outskirts of Jerusalem, it was the capital of a league of cities northwest of Jerusalem in the period of the Israelite conquest. Here Joshua called for a miracle - "Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, moon, in the valley of Ayalon." The city flourished in the Israelite period and was destroyed during the Babylonian invasion. Today it is a thriving and growing community.

For all we know, grand-daughter may be turning the family wheel full circle - perhaps we were Gibeonites to start with and she's simply coming home. Or is it the start of a new branch of the family?

Like Gibeon, the family tree will continue to grow and will contain many strange entries as we Jews thread our way through the world. In the years to come, perhaps one of my adventurous Gibeonite descendants will become mother or father of the Martian branch.

Someone else can attend to those records.

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