

By Nava Greif

Almost every year, my family and I go to Worcester, Massachusetts for Thanksgiving, to my grandparents on my mother's side. Thanksgiving is a special celebration of American success and unity because both grandparents immigrated to America. I asked them both about their experience coming to America and how they feel about Thanksgiving.

My grandmother came to Israel from Morocco to join her family. From Israel, she was offered a job that required her to come to America along with the family she would soon work for. She was very thrilled to have the opportunity to learn English, be successful, be in a secure and safe country, and learn to fit in with American culture. She said that the main reason for coming was to gain freedom and to unlock her potential.

My grandfather lived in France post World War II and said it was a very turbulent and chaotic life with lots of distrust in the government. His cousins and uncles were planning on moving to America to try and grow their business so my grandfather and his sister went in their early 20s to set up an apartment for their parents to join them later on. He said that he fell right into place in America and absorbed the culture with joy. He said that because of all the American films, he expected America to be filled with cowboys and American Indians but he quickly had a reality check when greeted by very normal looking people who were not cowboys.

My grandparents met at a social event made for new citizens of America through a mutual friend. They went to school, learned English and adapted to this new life they had created for themselves. They married and started to settle their lives in America surrounded by many others who were new to the country just like them. When my grandfather was between jobs, the Rabbi of the local Chabad came to help them out by giving them kosher food and finding them a house which my mom grew up in and that I still visit every Thanksgiving.

When I asked them what Thanksgiving meant to them, they said that it is so special to see their children and grandchildren joined together to celebrate their success and happiness in a country filled with education, opportunity and family. My grandfather said that he didn't understand Thanksgiving his first time in America, so he came in a 3 piece suit. Apparently, a lot has changed since then. There were many challenges but in the end it gave them and me an even greater gratitude for our lives. They are very proud to have three children who went on to have high education jobs like an engineer, nurse practitioner, and teacher despite having only high school diplomas themselves. This accomplished feeling that we are so lucky to experience is the essence of Thanksgiving. Within the American and Jewish community, we are always surrounded with support and are then able to really achieve great things.

By Leora Khaimov:

I was raised to be proud of the country I live in. Unlike in the areas my parents grew up in, it is a land of freedom and opportunity. Here, I am able to learn about and practice my religion freely.

My mother arrived in the United States from Tashkent, Uzbekistan at only four years old in the year 1979. At the time there was religious persecution and many people tried to leave the Soviet Union. However, applying for a visa to leave was looked upon as treason. Under the Carter administration, an agreement was made and some Jews were given permission to leave. My mother's parents weren't well off financially and decided to move to the land of opportunity. Even though they came here with nothing, they were able to start over and build the lives they wanted for themselves.

Thirteen years later, my father and his family decided to leave Andezan, Uzbekistan. He was 21 years old and had his entire life ahead of him. However, in his small town, Muslim extremists attacked and burned property of those in other religions, especially Jews. My father's grandfather was the chief of police in their town and an important figure. Everyone knew his name. It was because of him and his connections that my father was less affected by the violence. His connections also helped many Jewish families and protected them from the abuse. Despite living comfortably and having good positions, my grandparents thought it was time to leave and did so in secret in fear of violence from the neighbors. They escaped the religious persecution and my father was able to begin his career in the United States.

To me, America is the place that took my family in and saved them from their religious persecution. I am extremely grateful to live in a country that allows each family to embrace its culture and not shy away from their beliefs.

By: Orah Massihraelian

When my parents were deciding whether or not to leave Iran, they were hesitant. My father tells me he would think about how much more comfortable he would be in a place that he recognized, a language that he knew, and a culture he was familiar with. Yet, me being here now is obvious evidence that they chose not to stay.

Instead, they ultimately came to the conclusion that they would not be making the move for themselves, but rather for the sake of a better future for their children. Today, I know that I would not be afforded a fraction of the opportunities for growth that I have been if I were living in Iran as opposed to America.

In Iran, both in 1994 when my parents immigrated with my two oldest siblings and now, there is a total and constant breach of freedom. Just within Central, I have learned so much about women's rights and feminism both within the Torah and within our American society, and how it is one of our core values. If I were in Iran two factors of this situation would be completely unattainable. Firstly, I would not have access to a Jewish day school or frankly to any substantial sort of Jewish education to even begin to understand halacha and Torah and women's role within these. Furthermore, both in the past and even today, the opportunities available to women are extremely limited. Women are expected to, as we say in WIJL, "fill the role of the mother and homemaker." In America, we are granted the freedom to be who we want to be, and that includes how we want to dress. Meanwhile in Iran, if a girl above the age of 9 merely steps outside without her head covering fully adjusted so that some helpless hair is exposed, she will be harshly reprimanded immediately. There are such high expectations of women yet they are being abused, attacked, and assaulted on a daily basis. Thank God, this room is filled with activists for all sorts of causes, but any sort of rally against these and other vile deeds would never be tolerated in Iran. People are shot down, both figuratively and literally, in a short time after any efforts are made. If you've seen any sort of news lately you know about the Iranian protests against the government's underplayed yet basic implementation of greater poverty among the people. Just from November 15 to 19, about 200 people were killed and 3,000 injured. Instances like these are difficult for me to contemplate as while I am thankfully safe here in America, half of my family is currently living in the midst of the chaos. It's even more challenging to think that if my parents had decided differently, I could have just as easily been there with them.

Living in the United States has afforded me a multitude of opportunities. In Iran I'd have approximately zero opportunity to speak up, meanwhile just a few weeks ago I was in Capitol hill lobbying Congressman Gregory Meeks for the safety of Israel. Jews in Iran are particularly treated badly, but here I have marched in the Israeli Day Parade countless times. While there are still unfortunate instances of anti-Semitism in America, they do not go without penalty. Even post something slightly incredulous online and you can expect to be banished by the social media gods.

From an even broader perspective, a lot of my motivation to accomplish things and be better comes from the fact that I *can*. I have the freedom to challenge myself on a daily basis. I have the freedom to express myself as who I am and as who I want to be. Obviously, things don't always work out to fulfill our personal versions of "the American Dream," but as The Script once famously sang: How you ever gonna know if you never even try?