

Reflections from CRT's trip to NYC – Shelly Cohen

NEW YORK CITY – It's big and bold and intimidating and we've all passed through the city at some point in our lives. But "experiencing" New York, well, that's something different. And experiencing it as a Jew whose relatives surely passed through it too at some point in their history – that's an entirely different order of magnitude.

And so there we were, the usual Central Reform Temple urban polyglot united by faith, by curiosity and the need for really good food, roaming the streets of New York, venturing on its subways (oh no, not that!) finding those sweet moments of solace and renewal worshipping with fellow Jews in some of the most astonishing synagogues in the country.

Many of us got to walk in the footsteps of our immigrant ancestors – parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. Ours was a far less arduous journey on a hot April day, to catch that first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty from the ferry boat – a journey of minutes, not weeks, crowded in but not for long. Then to land on Ellis Island. What did it feel like to be so near to their dream and yet so very far. Who would pass the medical inspection and who would not? Who would see their bags again – crammed with all they owned, all they treasured – and who would not?

Who would make it through the long and cumbersome process before the immigration rules all changed in 1924 – and only for the first time – and who would not?

This where their journey ended and where a new life would begin.

We walked in their footsteps up the darkened stairs of a tenement building on the Lower East Side now reverently preserved in all its decaying splendor so that our generation might know what sacrifices they made for their freedom, to escape the pogroms, to raise children who would have a better life. There in that tenement building in 1890 the Goldberg family – mom, day and three children – "shared one of those tiny spaces". One of seven families all together in that building that year.

Could they have been "my" Goldberg family? Too early really. But it didn't matter. They came and others would follow. And in that building – that dark and crumbling building without running water where children slept two or three or four to a bed – the sons of tailors were already listed on the 1890 census form as going to college and law school.

This is where their American dream began.

And in the balcony of the Eldridge Street shul – the women's balcony – we would quite literally walk in the footsteps of those who came before us – those whose very best shoes made tiny heel marks in the hardwood floor.

Uptown amid the grandeur and elegance of Temple Emanuel-el where Adom Olem is sung to a tango beat (some insisted bossa nova) Hyman Goldberg's daughter – one generation removed from he who landed at Ellis Island – took her seat and chanted the ancient words and gave thanks for his courage.