



Desperately Seeking Cheadle

In these troubled times, it feels like tuning into news about Israel is the back story to my every move.

A keen sense of collective identity reminds me that I have a heightened sense of community and belonging – both Jewish. And I know exactly why. I grew up in a place like no other. Cheadle, Cheshire.

Between 1992 and 1993 I was a wandering Jew: I lived in 15 countries. I was a database marketing consultant, and just as the technical support queries followed me around the globe, the perfect-community heat-seeking missile inside my head came too.

Singapore was like arriving in Cheadle, Sefardi-style. A small Baghdadi community with a *nusach* like none I'd ever experienced; lots of passers-through, with a Family that ran the show, a Guy who ran the shul, *broiguses*, failed invitations and disappointed spinsters.

People were enormously welcoming. On the second *shabbat*, an old woman who looked like the old women at Sefardi weddings who wear black and ululate through the chuppah invited me home to marry her nephew. I mean to have lunch.

People don't change. Wherever they are.

Whenever I meet anyone passing through London, I invite them to my house; I don't expect to be able to reciprocate to those who were so generous to me, but I feel like it's some kind of global karma. I grew up like that. My parents' Friday night dinners were replete with interesting people. Years later, I was involved in a London shul, and we were trying to organize how to be more hospitable (not a conversation I believe a provincial shul would have) and I suggested that we each invite someone for lunch. A woman piped up, 'But what if you haven't made enough?' And I thought of my lunch, and my mother's, and most of my friends' – they stretch. *Shabbat* lunch is not a portion-controlled experience: it's like manna; there's *always* enough. Anyway, it's not about the food. Also, everyone over-caters.

When I was growing up in Cheadle, my parents' house was very stylish, lots of purple swirls and big flowers. I remember Julie S's parents had black shagpile carpet and a red piano. We lived in houses that resembled the interiors in Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm*.

Perhaps it's only rose-tinted hindsight that makes me appreciate what I had. Strong female role models, taking an active – nay vociferous – part in running the community. Huge cheder. Local Jewish school. It felt like a vibrant, magical time. I learned what it's like being in a real community (when there's a Ladies' Guild do and there's a woman who can't bake, don't let her go home with a sad, uncut pie; cut a slice and throw it away; she won't feel so bad). I learned how to make tomatoes in the shape of flowers. There was a lot of catering.

But catering is about community – whether shivas, or school seders, or regular *kiddushim*. The doorbell was always ringing; people were always dropping in.

Life was both one very long cup of tea and a huge celebration of everything that's Jewish – although a lot of it was also about interior decoration, house prices and who was wearing what for Yom Tov. But that's part of those kinds of communities, and I remember it very warmly. I remember funerals and shivas. I remember when my grandpa died (aged four, I apparently wrote 'My grandpa died, we have parties every night').

Living in a community is a two-way deal. It's a relationship. Actually, it's a carefully constructed spiders' web of relationships – who collects the *etrogim* after Succot to make *etrog* jam, who repairs the *siddurim*, who can blow the shofar if someone's sick, who does *tahara* when someone dies, who'll collect your kids from school if you're stuck – that is balanced on years and years of give and take. It might not even be you who gives and takes equally, or at the same time.

There's been a lot written recently about the burgeoning happiness industry, and apparently people with strong family and community ties are happier. Certainly Cheadle taught me that living that interconnected, entwined existence gave our lives an added depth, an extra dimension.

The joy of a community is, when you can give, give. When you need to take, take. What goes around, comes around. Happy New Year. 