



THE MEMORY COAT

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In the early 1900's, a close-knit Russian family immigrates to the United States, and a boy's tattered coat helps tell the story.

In *The Memory Coat*, cousins Rachel and Grisha represent the untold thousands of immigrants who left behind the pogroms (organized massacres of minority groups, often Jews) as well as everything and everyone they knew, and came to America as immigrants. They traveled from Russia and other Eastern European countries in search of a better life in a place where they might live freely as Jews without anxiety or fear. It is impossible to put ourselves in the shoes of those pioneers who faced the hardships, apprehension, and uncertainty that accompany the unknown. That so many who came (and continue to come!) to the United States not only survived but thrived is testament to their might and courage. Strength of family and faith surely afforded these people the resources necessary to surmount the immigrant experience.

CARING FOR EACH OTHER

A traditional Hebrew song tells us that we are “one people with one heart,” while a Jewish precept states: “*Kol Yisrael aravim zeh l'zeh*” (All Jews are responsible for each other). “All” does not distinguish between secular and observant Jews, Argentinean and Abyssinian Jews, affiliated and unaffiliated Jews, poor and wealthy Jews, ill and healthy Jews, or old and young Jews. What many consider a moral obligation for each Jew to care for every other is, by extension, a duty we bear to all people, Jew and non-Jew alike. By acting in accordance with this ideal we have an opportunity of bringing about *tikkun olam* (the repair of the world).

USING THIS BOOK AT HOME

From what far-off places do your ancestors come? Are you or is someone in your family among those who live(d) the immigrant experience? We know that each person has a unique story to tell, and every story deserves a voice. Consider contacting someone who might find joy and meaning in sharing their experiences with you and your children. You might locate someone through friends, your children's school, a local synagogue, etc.

Many of us know people much less fortunate than ourselves; most of us know families who are new to our community. Discuss with your children what challenges newcomers face. Make an individual or family effort to befriend someone who is new to your block or your child's class at school.

Immigrants leave much behind when they depart from their homes. With often limited space to carry their belongings, people are forced to make difficult decision about what to take along and what to forfeit. To truly empathize with these hard choices, create a variation on the children's game, “I'm going on vacation and I'm taking with me...” Choose a small suitcase and ask your children to fill it with their most prized possessions, with the understanding that all else will be left behind as they become “immigrants.” Join in by taking part in this exercise yourself; then, as a family, discuss your choices. Talk about the emotional content objects may take on, just as Grisha's coat did for him. Pj