

“Come Back Soon”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Some phrases come charged with all the weight of history. Lucette Lagnado’s elegant, anguished memoir, *The Man In the Sharkskin Suit*, tells the story of her family’s leaving once-cosmopolitan Cairo in 1963: “As we boarded the boat, an inspector made us sign one last official document. It was known as ‘un Aller sans Retour’ — we were promising to leave and never come back.”

In that moment Lagnado’s family, with its roots in Aleppo, stood in a line that stretched back to the refugees from Assyrian conquest, through Babylonia, Rome, Spain and countless other countries. Leave, we were told, and do not return. Robert Frost’s famous definition of home is, “The place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” For centuries Jews understood that no place in the world was our home.

Contributions to culture, service in the military, eminence, accomplishment — none of it mattered, for we were not home. The whim of a monarch or a popular revolt spelled the end of the Jewish community. As I read Lagnado’s book I remembered a conversation I had with an Israeli passport official the last time I returned from Israel. He asked, Why are you leaving? When I pleaded family and work, he smiled. It is all right, he said, so long as you come back soon.