I’ve wanted to see “Leopoldstadt” by Tom Stoppard since it opened on Broadway, but I never got the chance to do so. Since the show is closing Sunday July 2, I probably would never have seen it. But o my great good fortune, one of the congregants couldn’t go and generously offered two tickets to Tony and me.

“Leopoldstadt” is all about time. The story unfolds as a journey through nearly sixty years of history from 1899 to 1955. It follows a Jewish family over several generations as it is slowly sucked into the horrors of the Holocaust.

I had heard mixed reviews about the show but wanted to form my own opinion. The play runs two hours and ten minutes without intermission. I must be honest with you – now I realize what it must be like to sit in the congregation on High Holy Days!!

Jokes aside, the show was very moving and emotional. Despite some scenes that I thought were a bit too long, it certainly captured the horror people experienced throughout those historic 56 years.

The first scene opens with a Viennese family gathering in a fashionable apartment to celebrate Christmas. But the tree has a Jewish star at the top. Some members of the family have inter-married with non-Jews and some have even converted to Christianity. They pride themselves for being cosmopolitan and, as a result, being so well “accepted” in society. By all the standards that matter to them, they are doing well. After all, their businesses and careers and social lives are thriving. They are not troubled not interested much in the pogroms that are taking place in Eastern Europe nor in the plans to create a Jewish State.

As the time nears the Nazi’s take over, the family remains oblivious to the changing attitude toward the Jews. Only with the sounds of smashing windows and the cries of the babies on Kristallnacht, does it begin to dawn on them that they are not safe.

Finally, Nazi officers come and order them to pack just one suitcase. They are told they will be leaving the next day. “But where are we going?” they ask. They get no answer. At this point it is obviously too late for them to be saved: their wealth, social status and connections cannot help them at all.

Only three members of the family survive the holocaust. When they reunite in the same apartment years later, the only remaining pieces of furniture are a grand piano and two simple chairs.

As much as we read or watch movies about holocaust, we can never get used to the fatality of the stories that are told. The terror they experienced continues to haunt us. This show, which is written in the style of a Greek tragedy, is no acceptation. Although it carried a few very strong messages, the one that really struck a chord with me was about our Jewish identity.

We, the liberal Jews of the Diaspora, are historically known for our striving to integrate into the society in which we live. It is our goal to be more of a citizen in our country than a Jew. For us the social issues have become our number one concern, while at the same time, the State of Israel is not our top priority.

Unfortunately, history shows us time and time again – no matter what the scenario is, the end of the play remains the same. We can convert, inter-marry, even assume influential leadership roles in politics or business, but if and when the society we live in accepts and encourages antisemitism, rallying against Jews, all our efforts to assimilate and integrate will not matter.

In this week’s Torah portion, Balak, the king of Moab, wants to curse the Israelites who encamped near the border because he is threatened by them. He asks his seer Bala’am to do the job. Bala’am, despite a strong message from God not to do as Balak requests, makes his way to the top of the hill. From the vantage point he sees the Israelites and is so moved by the site they have established that, instead of cursing them, he exclaims: “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! They extend like streams, like gardens by the river, like aloes which the Lord planted, like cedars by the water.” (“Bamidbar” chapter 23:5-6)

Balak of course was besides himself with anger. He was furious that the curse he ordered turned into the blessing. Surely, this blessing offered by Bala’am was influenced by God’s goodness. Because even though God will reprimand His people, He still loves and blesses them – (that is, us).

So why don’t we recognize our unique history as God’s children? By acknowledging out uniqueness, I don’t mean we should put ourselves above others, but I want to encourage you to recognize our rich culture and strong roots.

Friends,

Let us be proud of our heritage.

Let us raise our children and grandchildren to be practicing Jews.

Let us not give up our identity - even in the face of spreading antisemitism and anti Zionism.

And yet, I am extremely moved that more and more young people of other faiths are reaching out to me with requests to convert to Judaism because our religion is so appealing to them.

So let us also see the goodness in being Jews too!