

Bringing Us Home - Rabbi Aaron Alexander - Rosh Hashanah - 5777

Remember E.T.? What do you remember? Show me with your hand. E.T. Phone Home! Never gets old. Also, aliens probably don't look like that. I've been to enough Grateful Dead shows to be able to identify an actual alien. In all seriousness, kind of - the E.T. phone home pose is iconic because of its truth. He knows where home is, he just has no idea how to get there.

Just after **Gilad Shallit** was released from 5 years of Hamas Captivity, in his first interview, he spoke about what he did to pass the time. To give him hope. He said that he wrote down memories, and maps of Israel. "I would draw the map of the country, of Mitzpe Hila, my home town, of all the **homes**, so I can remember and imagine the places." He knew where home was, what it was, but had no idea when, or if, he would ever get there.

Of the many memorable and piercing quotes found in the diary of Anne Frank - this one forever haunts me: "...most of all, she wrote, I long for a home of my own..."

She had no idea where it would be, if it would be -- no map, no atlas, no compass.

I'd just like to point out that I've now mentioned 80s pop-culture, the Holocaust and Israel. Shana Tova. My work is done here.

I've been thinking a lot about the path home, about finding home, coming home, lately. You may have noticed that it's our synagogue theme this year. So there's that. But it's more likely embedded in my unexpected and heart-shattering summer, when my family, 5 siblings, uncles and aunts and cousins, quickly descended on one of our many childhood homes in South Florida to help my Mother, sleeping

peacefully in the center of her home, transition from life to death, to her next home, her eternal residence, a world I believe exists but still feels far too hidden from me.

In the Psalm recited twice daily for 40 straight days this time of year, Psalm 27, one phrase, one longing, soaks directly to me: "

אֶחָד, שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת-יְהוָה -- אוֹתָהּ אֶבְקֶשׁ:
שְׁבֹתִי בְּבֵית-יְהוָה, כָּל-יְמֵי חַיִּי;
לְחַזוֹת בְּנֹעַם-יְהוָה, וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהִכְלוֹ.

One thing I ask of the Lord, only this do I seek: to live in the House of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and worship in God's abode."
Psalm 27:4

Only a home. A holy space, a sacred place, a safe place.... a sanctuary. In this world. Here and now. Why that?

I'm going to go in two very different directions with this sermon. I hope to stick the landing. I'm sure you'll tell me if I don't.

Part 1

I was halfway through Taylor's conversion essay, a beautiful story of coming home to the religion she was always meant to be a part of, when the penultimate paragraph gave me pause. I already knew her story--she was a diligent student in our Introduction to Judaism course. But reading it a few days before she would immerse in the mikvah made my heart beat a little faster than usual. My body tensed in a way I hadn't expected. Taylor was engaged to be married. Mazal Tov. Like a number of our conversion students, actually. Except, Taylor, unlike anyone I've ever converted before, isn't engaged to a Jew. She wrote, and I share this with her kind permission:

Taylor Essay - *Of course, my original plan was to marry someone Jewish and then I would join his family and their traditions. I felt this was the best way to aid my*

integration into Jewish family values. However, life likes to throw curve balls every once and a while. I ended up falling for someone who was not only not Jewish, but also not religious at all. Brendan has been the light of my life since the day I met him and we are inseparable. While I didn't want to force Brendan to convert with me, I wanted him to be integrated into my Jewish life. While Brendan has decided converting to Judaism is not for him, he supports my decision to convert, the plan to send our kids to Hebrew school and allow them to grow up in the Jewish community. Brendan has also enjoyed attending many of my conversion classes and learning about Judaism. His favorite [Jewish activity] is attending Shabbat dinners with our friends.

As some of you may know, my membership in the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly, my union, essentially, prevents me from officiating at an inter-marriage - the marriage of a Jewish person to a non-Jewish person, be they of another faith or no faith. *This sermon... is not about that topic, so take a deep breath.* This is obviously different, as I was not asked to perform the wedding. But it also feels like a mere technicality, because I and the Beit Din, the supervising rabbis from the home institution, were, essentially, creating the conditions for something our Movement is at best ambivalent about. So it gave me pause. And a little anxiety. Actually, a lot of it. But it is complex decisions like these--when real people with real stories, real aspirations, and real pain--collide with real boundaries, doomsday predictions and foreboding statistics--that ask me, all of us, really, to weigh the competing claims--one against the other--and figure out what the closest thing to a "right" decision may be.

Taylor, primarily, was in search of a home. On a journey, *home*. Her soul home. A place where she could most authentically connect to the part of her seeking something more personally meaningful from life. A spirit-space, where the fringes of her heart could be woven together with mine, and yours, and Rabbi

Akiva's, and Miriam's, and Moshe's. And God's.

The Beit Din decided, pretty emphatically, that one obligation transcended the others and eclipsed any potential institutional boundaries: *Bring her home*. Open the doors. Widely. And that we did. We didn't defend it as "we permitted her to come to the mikvah despite her relationship" but rather, we celebrated the opportunity to unlock the doors and lift up the shades that dimmed her heart, so her soul could find sanctuary in the place it would sing the song it had been yearning to voice since the very day she was born."

Our rabbinic tradition has a phrase, a name for what we did that day. We took someone out of their other-imposed life-maze and brought **her** *tachat kanfei haShecinah* - nestled within the wings of God's infinite love.

אחת, שאלתי מאת-יהוה -- אותה אבקש:
שבתי בבית-יהוה, כל-ימי חיי;

One thing I ask of you, God, is to dwell in your home. Just that one thing.

Another conversion class student, Betsy, has a very different story. She grew up as a non-believing Catholic in a devoutly Catholic family. As a teenager, when given the chance to affirm her faith publically amongst her peers, she declined the invitation. Hate mail ensued. She was chastised by Church elders. She responded then, in this way: "*I wished the time they spent chastising me had been spent helping the homeless on Division Street (the most impoverished street in town), or protesting against school-lunch budget cuts that would leave some poor kids without food.*"

That statement, as we all know, could be true of any religious community, that dangerously raises dogma over dignity.

She continued: With a bemused expression, my grandmother watched as I wrote my reply letters; she was the only person who hadn't said a word to me about my supposed defection. Then, one afternoon, she offered to take me to Cracker Barrel for lunch. Back then, Cracker Barrel was considered to be the classiest joint on the West Side. Over eggs and pancakes, she whispered, "I want to tell you something. I think you'll understand why I'm telling you this someday even if you don't understand it now. I'm originally Jewish. My mother was Jewish. I was forced to convert to Catholicism by my stepmother. I think you're being brave for not letting them get to you like they got to me. I'm proud of you."

Betsy, was always Jewish, already Jewish, in her heart and in her body and in her soul. She intuitively knew from a very young age that she was in the wrong religious home. She was fighting even when she didn't know *what* she was fighting for. And then a path emerged, a flickering candle pointed her towards a faith she believed in, a soul-home she craved.

She wrote of her journey:

Doors have homes—or perhaps, homes have doors. In turn, those doors have welcome mats or signs in bright orange blaring "No Trespassing". Homes can be places of welcome or places of rejection. One door leads to a hearth, another to an icy room. And, religions can be the same way: welcoming or rejecting, warm or cold, a place of unconditional love and belonging or a place of quiet contempt and resignation. After 30 some years of trying to find a door that led to a home or a home that finally led to a door, I believe that I've finally found the place that was supposed to my home all along: Judaism.

If you were to ask me on any given day what my calling is, what I think God put me on this earth to do, I'd likely answer: In most moments I'm simply trying to help people find their way home--spiritual, material, emotional--all of it, using Torah and tradition as the atlas. It is an imperfect science--there's no GPS, and I, too, am on a similar journey.. but it's what I do. Not because I'm a rabbi, but because I'm a Jew. There are no two words more potent that a community and its leadership can utter to an individual than: "Welcome Home."

Last Spring, Rabbi Holtzblatt and I, along with a few leaders from our Social Action Committee, attended a Washington Interfaith Network action in a Ward 8 Baptist Church. The community invited D.C. Mayor, Muriel Bowser, to remind her that we would all hold her accountable to her lofty promise of ending chronic homelessness in D.C., and, more urgently, closing down the deplorable, degrading and underserved homeless shelter known as D.C. General.

Here in DC, our backyard, on any given day there are 1,800 chronically homeless men and women living in our streets, alleys and parks – and 11,000 more experiencing some form of homelessness over the course of the year. Washington, D.C., again, our home, has one of the largest homeless populations of cities its size in the United States. Needless to say, I hope, homelessness is a [devastating experience](#). The average age of death of homeless people is just 47, roughly 30 years lower than the general population. Homeless people are over *nine times* more likely to commit suicide and they are [13 times more likely](#) to be a victim, not a perpetrator of violence.

Jennfier Speight, a resident of the D.C. General Shelter, spoke on that night to the Mayor and 700 others: *Good Evening WIN. My name is Jennifer Speight. I'm a current resident at DC General. These commitments are personal to me, not just because I currently stay at D.C. General, but because I'm a Washingtonian.*

The other day my daughter asked me while picking her up from school: "Mommy, when are we going home?" I don't want my daughter to call D.C. General Shelter home," she told the Mayor.

Jennifer continued, "Maintaining a family is a job in and of itself, doing so in an overcrowded shelter next to a Methadone clinic and a jail is not what any Washingtonian deserves. Sharing a bus stop with junkies, and sharing a building with raccoons and bats is not what any Washingtonian deserves. Just because we're homeless doesn't mean that we deserve this. We need to put money into these newer smaller shelters and get them built. We need a real home and a real community we can call our own.

"I don't want my daughter to call DC General home." Sit with that. Let it sink in. We cannot allow that to be someone's reality. Her pain, is our obligation. Her journey, our responsibility.

Deuteronomy 15 commands us--to this very day--to not only provide safe and dignified shelter and services to those in need, but to ensure those services reflect the inherent worthiness of each and every individual. It reads: "If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your fellows in any of your settlements in the land that God is providing you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy. Rather, you must open your hand and lend her sufficient for whatever she may need."

In 2005, the State of Utah had nearly 2,000 chronically homeless. Ten years later, the state is "approaching a functional zero." How is this possible?

"If you want to end homelessness, you put people in stable housing," Utah officials claimed. So the state started setting up each chronically homeless person with his or her own house."

Anne Frank House, a life-saving program founded by this very congregation, has employed this approach successfully for more than 20 years—providing permanent housing and social services support for homeless men and women with chronic mental illness. Fulfilling the ever-poignant words of its namesake, Anne Frank: "...most of all, I long for a home of my own..."

We are all of us, spiritual insomniacs, when any one of us sleeps unwillingly without a roof over her head. We are all of us, morally wandering, aimlessly in the desert, with no *sukkah*, no safety, when so many of us cannot find their way to stable and dignified shelter.

One of the first projects our Adas Israel Social Action Committee engaged in this year as a new member of the IAFs Washington Interfaith Network, is this necessary closing of D.C. General, coupled with opening smaller short-term housing facilities with wrap-around services for families experiencing homelessness. It's not solution, but a necessary and compassionate stop along the way. Here in Ward 3, our backyard, there's been loud opposition and even a lawsuit. So we've created a counter-movement, a counter conscience, named WARD 3 for ALL. Please visit the website, talk to your neighbors with the FAQ sheets provided there, and make your voice louder in favor of a more welcoming WARD 3 -- the one in which this synagogue sits. Our home. Our Backyard. (<http://www.ward3forall.com>)

On Friday morning, as Rosh Hashanah preparations reach their pinnacle, Rabbi Holtzblatt went back to that church in Ward 8. We sat down with Pastor Wiley and a few other colleagues from Southeast D.C. for some reflection, relationship building, and prayer. Throughout our time together, one simple and essential

question continued to emerge from our colleagues re their churches. They all seemed to be asking: "If we were to pick up our churches and move them to the suburbs, or another Ward, would the community in which we sit notice? Would they care?" In other words, are we, as a community religious institution, serving the actual needs of the communities that host us beyond the needs of our membership?

We haven't been able to get this very question out of our minds. Listen, I know that Adas Israel is important to this city as a whole, to its history. We do matter to Washington D.C. But I want to ask us all to reflect on a more local question. If we were to pick up and move to another Ward, or to Chevy Chase, would Ward 3 be any the less. (Obviously, aside from our membership who lives nearby... this is a different question.) Would it matter? Fighting together with our neighbors, leading the campaign to make sure this facility is built, soon, not only gives us a chance to do a *mitzvah* and walk the walk of Torah, but also to give an emphatic "Yes" to that question. Ward 3, *davka*, appreciates us here and needs us (and all of its religious communities) for Ward 3 to live up to its greatest potential. To actually embody fully the values we so often preach from our perches.

In Tractate Megillah of the Talmud, R. Yosi taught: All the days of my life I was troubled by this verse: "And you will grope at midday as the blind gropes in the darkness." (Deuteronomy 28:29) What difference does it make to a blind person whether it is dark or light? Until the following incident happened to me: I was once walking on a pitch black night, and I saw a blind person walking on the road, and they had a torch in their hand. And I said to them, why are you carrying this torch? They said to me, As long as this torch is in my hand, people see me and save me from the holes and the thorns and briars.

This isn't, in my opinion, a text about disability inclusion. In fact, it may even be interpreted as offensive to that community. Rather, it feels like the whole of

Torah in one short commentary. Everyone of us, in here and out there, has a torch. An inner light desperate to emerge. And when we see another with a spark that seems to be dimming, we can look the other way, or we can ask ourselves: What is my obligation in this moment. To this human. To their journey.

This year, I view the world through that prism.

It's why I feel that when the stakes are home or no home, shelter or no shelter, safety or no safety--we can temporarily look past an imperfect process. We can rise above our own perceived, potential loss of stability or security. Compassion, first, this prism demands.

It's why I now understand that when somebody desires with earnest to join our religion, even if the circumstances challenge other pre-concieved ideas of what a Jewish this or that ought look like, we should not reluctantly say, fine okay, (or worse ,turn our backs) but cherish the chance to say, yes, please, *welcome home*. We've been waiting for you a long, long time.

It's why my father and siblings, led courageously by my youngest sister, would not leave my Mom alone with no loved one closeby, for even a minute, for 5 straight weeks, while she transitioned from her home in this world this world, to her home in the next.

"One thing I ask of the Lord, only this do I seek: to live in the House of the Lord the days of my life..."

From a place of deep fear, shattered dreams, and an unending reality of loss, the Psalmist seeks out one thing with which to begin again, to dream again - a path home. A place in which fear melts into love, despair gives way to hope, and doubt becomes the very source of faith.

This world is both perfect and imperfect. Filled with flaws, winding journeys, disaster, limitless love, loss, devastation; to be able to respond to one of those needs, to answer someone's cry, is to open the doors to God's house; to compassionately re-route the journey toward love and safe shelter. Welcome home is not only what Jews ought to do, it's what Jews ought to be. It's what we are.

Shana Tova.