

L'Shana M'zuzah: Our Will to Welcome Home  
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780  
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Welcome.  
Welcome to Judea Reform.  
Welcome to Rosh HaShanah.  
Welcome to 5780.  
Welcome to your first 80 minute sermon!  
... You're welcome.

*This is a community that knows how to welcome, how to say, "welcome home."*

Two weeks ago I had lunch with the Founders of Judea Reform Congregation, in the home of Roxana and Ed Bossen. I learned a whole lot. I learned that from our very beginning, this has been a community that knows how to welcome, how to say, "welcome home."

At first it was literal, on a Sunday evening, in the basement of the home Ethel Mae and Dick Bernson, when our first 13 families made a commitment to each other: to *house* their Judaism here in Durham and Chapel Hill. That moment of "welcome home" infuses the stories of our founders. In our hallway here you'll see the words Charlotte Levin, of blessed memory, saying, "ya'll come over and join us, we've got a house full of Jews and we are having a party."

One founder relayed to me an experience coming to services, and said "our car hadn't even stopped when we were greeted." Our gift shop was proudly housed in the trunk of a car. Everyone came to everyone's Bar Mitzvah celebrations. Everyone knew everyone, and everyone pitched in.

Now, I'm sure many here might be thinking, "yeah, well that's just how things get started." But isn't that the point? That *is* how we begin.

With words, with blessings, with actions that say, "*welcome*" and "*welcome home*."

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Today, 58 years later, whenever anyone here is celebrating a new year of life or a new year of marriage, you can count on this community saying, "welcome." Once a month, 4 of our members grab the poles of a Chuppah, setting it up right on our *bima*, and we say words of blessing, as you begin again.

Now, when I arrived this was new to me—a Chuppah outside of a wedding?—ok, I'll roll with it...I recall that Shabbat in July we reached that moment in the service, and everyone knew what to do. I turned around to see community members packed inside, smiling ear to ear, waiting for a blessing.

To confess, I *almost* went into wedding autopilot mode and chanted:  
*B'ruchim HaBa'im B'Shem Adonai!*  
*Beirachnuchem mi-Beit Adonai!*

Words that open the Jewish wedding. These are the holiest words of welcome in our liturgy. They translate powerfully:

Blessed are those who come here in God's Name.  
We bless you, *mi-Beit Adonai*, from the House of God—from God's Home.

Translated literally, that's a bold statement: that we have the power to bless from God's Home! Now, I did not chant those words (out loud), but by importing the Chuppah, a symbol of a Holy Home, we do send that message—ultimate words of welcome.

The Chuppah is not the only symbol of Home, there are many. Another symbol of a Holy Home, we find at the very end of every wedding ritual. Just as we have a Chuppah to say, "Welcome Home," we have a cue for dismissal, a ritual for exiting, another symbol. And that ritual, too, has everything to do with *Beit Adonai*, God's Home.

You may not realize it but you know what it is.  
You know how it sounds.  
And afterwards, you even know what you're supposed to say.

*(Break wedding glass before congregation.... "Mazel tov!")*

Breaking the glass in a Jewish wedding has many interpretations but the most historically significant meaning, the one that locked it into Jewish tradition, is that breaking the glass recalls the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, Beit HaMikdash, literally, "Home of the Holy." The Destruction of Beit HaMikdash marks the beginning of the period of Exile.

So as beloveds begin their marriage Covenant, they do so with a Chuppah—"welcome to God's Home"—and then end the wedding with the symbol of the archetypal Home in Jewish history, a Holy Home destroyed. What a fraught symbol for that beginning, that moment of welcome. The breaking of the glass.

I tell couples it's important that they find a very breakable glass, usually a light bulb will do just fine. But in recent years, I've noticed more and more couples are not using a light bulb—they are choosing to tether this symbol to another symbol of Home—to the most popular Jewish symbol of the home, the one we see every day: the mezuzah.

More and more couples are now buying a "mezuzah kit."

It comes with nice silk bag, inside of which is a glass for them to break at their wedding. Afterwards they carefully pour the broken glass inside the mezuzah, which of course in another compartment holds the central text of the *Shema* and *V'ahavta*. And that mezuzah remains forever on the doorpost of their home.

Now, that got me wondering-- how many couples these days are buying these kits?  
So I put in a call to my now *second* favorite Judaica store, a family-owned shop in Massachusetts.

At this very moment, they have in stock more than 25 varieties of these mezuzot.  
This store doesn't even consider it simply a mezuzah;  
it's so popular that, for inventory sake, they give it its own category.

This new form of Judaica is brilliant. The ritual of the wedding dramatizes the building and the breaking the Holiest Home. And now, this kit takes it one step further, hammering home that message, about the sanctity and the fragility of home.

This is a community that knows how to say, "welcome home," and the mezuzah is our most ancient and

everyday symbol of welcoming home. So in these welcoming hours of the home of 5780, let's talk about the meaning and mitzvah of the mezuzah.

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On the one hand, the mezuzah is as common as any symbol in our tradition. Yet the mezuzah's story is filled with irony and contradiction. It begins in our story in Exodus, when the Israelites painted blood on their doorposts to keep them alive and safe in their homes during a plague. The word *mezuzah* in that story isn't something you *put* on a doorpost, it's the doorpost itself.

Only later did the meaning of mezuzah morph into something that you attach to a doorpost. The historian Josephus described this "something" as an actual text, a blessing posted on the home. Centuries later it became a box with Scripture inside, affixed to the doorways of our homes.

In the Jerusalem Talmud we find a cryptic instruction, specifying how it should be placed on the doorpost. We read: "it should be oriented '*K'min nagar*' - the way of the builder." Hang it up the way a builder hangs it up. So how does a builder hang up a mezuzah?

We can deduce that the Jews were not great architects then because 700 years later they were still arguing over how builders hang things up. In the 11<sup>th</sup> c. Rashi said it should be upright, vertical, facing the heavens. But his grandson Rabbeinu Tam argued otherwise, saying it should be horizontal, flat -- because that is how the 10 Commandments were placed in the ark in the Temple, in the Home of the Holy, destroyed twice over.

So Rashi's mezuzah said, "*welcome to a heavenly home!*"

And his grandson's mezuzah said: "*welcome but remember you are in exile!*" — the Temple, the broken glass. Eventually tradition split the difference, and today we affix the mezuzah at a slant to bend in both directions, an enduring contradiction...

not so different from a Chuppah that says "You are in God's Home" and broken glass that replies, "You are in Exile."

When we say, *welcome home*—are we affirming: "*Welcome! You are home!*"?  
Or are we soberly commanding: "[Thou Shalt] welcome home!"?

Friends: the writing on the wall signals that 5780 will be a year that tests our *will to welcome*; a year that challenges our devotion to mitzvah of, "*welcoming home.*"

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Our Rosh Hashanah liturgy tells us that this Holy Day is *HaYom Harat Olam*, literally "the Day the World was conceived." This invokes imagery of the whole universe within a single womb, the primordial Home. The implication is clear: this is a day of Home-Coming.

Yet, today, our world could not be more at odds with that message, with that prayer.

How can we reckon with this Day while humanity is so deprived of home: so home-less or home-sick. The test of our commitment to the *mezuzah* is not limited to one place or issue or crisis—it is ubiquitous.

On our globe, according to the UN Refugee Agency, we are living amidst the worst crisis of displaced peoples ever recorded in human history, afflicting ~70 million people: refugees, asylum seekers, and those homeless in their own homeland.

In our own country another record number: more than 50,000 immigrants are locked up behind bars: countless of our neighbors, “huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” are instead forced into cages, deprived of enough room to sleep, food to eat; water to drink or bathe in. And thousands of children many never feel the Home of the embrace of their mothers or fathers again.

In our own neighborhood, here in Durham, 28% of our children live in poverty, 28%—thousands of families have to choose between shelter or food or healthcare.

If the mezuzah is a symbol of home, than how can we enter and leave our homes without what sociologist Sam Richards calls “radical empathy”? As a community that knows how to welcome home, how do we affix a mezuzah without trembling?

These are, indeed, Days of Awe, are they not?

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And there is another part to this symbol. The homes that we call “home.” Our radical empathy for the physically or metaphysically exiled does not prevent us from taking account of the state of our own homes. When we pass by our mezuzot, what are we walking into?

How are we doing at home?

Five years ago, I was one a few rabbis attending the White House Summit on Working Families. The crisis prompting the Summit was clear, with data irrefutable: Parents in America are working harder than ever—family itself requires extraordinary work, not only in raising children, but also in caring for our aging parents—and our workplace and public policies have not caught up.

Workplaces are structured for a family of the 50’s. Our nation, unlike so many others, lacks policies that families need: like paid parental leave; paid sick leave, including care-giving for sick kids and aging parents; equal pay for women. In North Carolina, by the way, the gender wage gap is worse than most States. Average wages for women here are nearly 20% less than men, and far worse in communities of color.

And it’s not just oppressive for adults. Kids too are facing more pressure to succeed, to diversify their extra-curriculars, to pass tests, to be “professional students.” NYTimes reporter Jennifer Senior, in her book *All Joy No Fun*, researches and explores the pressures on working families and children. One parent said to her, “Homework is the new dinner.” Well, if Homework is the new dinner, then we are “home-sick.”

Maybe that new category of Judaica, the mezuzah kit, is onto something: with the broken glass of exile inside the box that welcomes us home.

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If the mezuzah is a symbol of the healthy home, then perhaps the “Jewish thing to do” this year is to affix mezuzot across our whole society, “*k’min nagar*, the way of the builder.”

Because we have been building homes for 2000 years:

- When the Home for the Holy, the Temple, was destroyed, we adapted and built a Beit Midrash, a Home for Learning - for our teachers and students.
- Right now we're in a room our ancestors would call a Beit T'filah, the Home for Prayer.

- A school is a Beit Sefer, a Home for Books.
- A courthouse is a Beit Mishpat, a Home for Justice.
- A hospital is a Beit Cholim, a Home for the Sick.
- Our synagogue is a Beit Knesset, a Home for Gathering or Welcoming.

This is a community that knows how to welcome home, and we welcome home today through our mitzvot, through our actions:

When we come together as a holy community, we welcome home.

On this wonderful campus, with our partners at the Federation and JCC, and the Lerner School, we are uniquely built to welcome home.

When we put a chuppah on our *bima* to celebrate each other and bless each other, we welcome home.

When we make this place accessible and embracing for people of all abilities, we welcome home.

When through our Caring Community we offer friendly visits or cooked meals, when we comfort each other in times of loss or loneliness, we affix a mezuzah and we welcome home.

When we listen to each other, even and especially amidst the torment of conflict, remembering the broken glass, we affix that slanted mezuzah—and we welcome home.

Within *and beyond* our community:

When we stand up with compassion for those who have no country to call home—we welcome home.

When we allow more babies to begin their lives in the warm arms of their parents—we welcome home.

When we make sure that when people are sick it doesn't cost them the bread they need to get well—we welcome home.

When we work together to make sure that working families can make family work—we welcome home.

When we build homes for those who don't have homes—we welcome home.

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The Talmud tells us it's not on us to do it all,  
but we have no choice but to try—  
because welcoming home is *what we do*, is *who we are*,  
and is *why* on every one of our homes we affix the mezuzah:  
a blessing, *MiBeit Adonai*, from the House of God.

May the year 5780 be a *Shana Mezuzah*,  
a year of blessed doorways  
and Holy Homecoming.

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Haolam  
asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivano al likboa mezuzah.*

Blessed are You Eternal our God...

who makes us holy

with the commandment to affix the mezuzah,

the symbol of our will

to welcome home.

*Amen.*