

Kol Nidre 5778

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A number of years ago my wife Anne and I introduced a Wise Aging curriculum to TBZ, a fifth cohort will begin after the Holidays. One of the important components in the 8-week common exploration about becoming elders rather than old people, is humor.

Without humor we are less human.

A joke the groups enjoyed:

An older man is sitting on a bench in Miami Beach weeping loudly.

A young man goes by and stops to see if he could be of any help.

The man looks up and asks the passerby to guess how old he is?

Well, the younger man says, I'd say you're in your early 70's.

The man begins sobbing again. Well I'm close to 85

The man continues to pour out his heart.

I was married for close to fifty to a marvelous woman who became ill and died

I continued to travel every winter to Florida as we had for so many years. I kept meeting the same flight attendant and after a while we became companions- she's a bit younger than I am, she's warm, affectionate, smart and a gourmet cook.

Well, mister that doesn't sound very bad. Why are you crying? "

The man through his tears answers, "I forgot where I live"

What a poignant question for us all. Where do we live? We, blessedly, have addresses and mail boxes, but sometimes we forget where we live and forget the challenge of making where we live not only an address but a Jewish home. As we sit and absorb the lilting and melancholic melody of Kol Nidrei, I'd like to help us not to forget that it is a Jewish home that enhances our present as well as our future. Synagogues and Hebrew school can help but we can't do it alone. It is in our homes that we are able to live our values, and if we share our homes with others, it is here

that our values are passed on, one generation teaching the next. Our homes could and should be houses of study.

So what is it that defines a Jewish home?

Living Shabbat at home leads not only to individual renewal, but it paves the way for our families and friends to find their way back home. The anomalous existence of the Jews after so many years in exile is linked to our observance of Shabbat. In the past I have talked about how observance of the Shabbat will be a result of “observing” what is going on in the world. Especially in these tumultuous times I can think of no better way to respond to the turmoil around us than the respite of Shabbat. If we would market Shabbat to busy Executives of the Fortune 500 as a non-drug based 25-hour foolproof treatment for anxiety at \$1000 a week, we’d make a fortune.

We are blessed that Shabbat, the central pillar of our survival, is our ongoing legacy. In short order, Shabbat permits us to become aware of the sanctity of time over space; it punctures our egocentric and anthropocentric illusions by celebrating the Creation of the Universe and our very small part in it. Shabbat is a day to restrain ourselves from manipulating the world around us, but rather it offers the opportunity to sit (laShevet) and to observe and appreciate Creation. Shabbat encourages us to loosen our bonds of slavery, to free ourselves from digital or human tyranny. It encourages the strengthening of the bonds of family, friends and community; and it invites the benefit of gathering in community to sing out our praises and gratitude for the gifts we have enjoyed. It’s good to sing- if not every day then at least once a week-it helps the lungs and the heart. Having sung together on Rosh haShana and singing together tonight and tomorrow, I know you can all sing. You sound beautiful -the angelic chorus is looking down with jealousy on all of your beautiful faces.

Shabbat is a unique contribution to the world. We offer up the notion of shavat vayinafash- to sit in order for our soul to be refreshed. It’s the weekly booster shot to keep your High Holiday vaccination at its greatest potency.

Yom Kippur is referred to in the Torah as the Shabbat of Shabbats - Shabbat Shabbaton. However, this name is somewhat misleading. I have

often referred to the fact that all of the self-denial that we practice today is prohibited on the Shabbatot during the year. Yom Kippur in an ironic way teaches us how to observe Shabbat -how to enjoy the physicality of it and to relish it. Our tradition firmly affirms that we serve the Divine purpose with both our bodies and our souls. The weekly Shabbat is a palpable reminder that we best serve this purpose through pleasure and joy.

So much for my plug to infuse where you live with a deeper dimension of Shabbat, to create a real home for you, your family and your friends. I know it's counter cultural, but with the culture around us these days it is more necessary than ever before. Please consult us to find your individual way into Shabbat. It isn't all or nothing.

The roots of our tradition begin in the search for a Jewish home. In fact, the story of Abram and Sarai, our progenitors, is about "forgetting where they live". They must leave from where they live in order to come home. The divine imperative "Lech Lecha" "to go" has two meanings. One is the command to move yourself physically but can also be understood as the demand to delve deeper into oneself (lech leCHA) to find that place within which one can call home. It took their openness and faith to accept the divine guidance when they were asked to leave behind everything they knew. It was their connection to the Divine that inspired their confidence. And it is our connection to the Divine that offers us the basis to create both a Jewish home within ourselves and in the world. When we are home with ourselves we can overcome our feelings of alienation and self-doubt and feel at home anywhere we go. When we are at home with ourselves we can confidently help others to feel at home.

In Parshat Balak in the book of Numbers we are introduced to King Balak and his rent a prophet, Bila'am - of talking donkey fame.

He was hired to stop the children of Israel as they were completing their wanderings in the desert on the way to the Promised Land. Bila'am was asked to so stop them dead in their tracks through a powerful curse. A curse that would paralyze them and perhaps even result in their return to slavery if they escaped the slaughter that King Balak would initiate then and there.

But as we know, Bila'am turns his glance to the camps of Israel from a lofty hill and proclaims instead of a curse, the blessing:

Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov mishkenotecha yisrael (sing it)

How goodly are your tents, Jacob.

Your dwelling places, Israel

“Wow!” Bila'am exclaims, look at how they live. They are a model for us all.

This took place millennia ago and yet we still utter this curse-turned blessing as we enter the synagogue before all other words.

What does it mean to have both tents and dwelling places? Is this a portent of the wanderings of the Jews over thousands of years? Does this describe the many ways we have had to learn to live in different environments, many of them hostile?

The Sages interpret the tents of Jacob as our spiritual and intellectually legacy -our Study house and its place in maintaining a Jewish community on the move. A Torah scroll and a backpack and you're off to continuing to interpret Torah at the next rest stop.

The dwellings of Israel are to be seen as those places where we would establish ourselves for expanded periods of time, places where we build structures -leave our tents for a more stable existence, establishing stability for our Houses of Study.

Bila'am foresaw in his blessing that the spiritual and intellectual world of our tradition isn't enough -in order to live one must create a home.

The Jewish people have had many periods of stability, but few, if any, ended well: Palestine for close to 1000 years; Babylon for almost 2 thousand years, Persia for close to 2 thousand years; Spain for hundreds of years, Poland, for close to a thousand; Central Europe for over 800 years, and here in the United States for only a few centuries so far...

Our tents were always packed and from century to century, millennium to millennium we traversed the world with that Torah scroll and its interpretations on our lips.

Time and time again, after vast destruction we rebuilt. Now, at this time in history, we have left our wanderings and established dwellings primarily in America and Israel.

We have chosen to make this land our home. Here in the States we are blessed that we no longer have to unfurl our tents and leave them in the basement. On the contrary, we have resurfaced them and hoisted them above our dwellings as sails to carry us onward to the horizon of tomorrow and as flags to salute our grand heritage. Let's unfurl our subterranean tents and make them into sails to glide towards the horizon, to our future.

Over the years I have mentioned that we must differentiate between acculturation and assimilation. The former allows us a path to return home, while the latter obliterates that path. There is no time in Jewish history in which we didn't acculturate in the society where we lived. In many ways this allowed us to feel that we were at home wherever we lived. There is no time in Jewish history, from way back to Father Abraham and Mother Sarah when we didn't acculturate. Avram visits Malchizedek the king of Salem and is introduced to the El Elyon -the supreme being. Parts of the Torah take customs and textual forms from other cultures of the ancient near East. As I said earlier, acculturation is for the most part a tool to reinvigorate our identity and continuity. Some examples of acculturation that are well known to us are: From the sublime -the use of Greek rhetoric and thought in the age of the Sages of the Talmud; Maimonides' adoption and adaption of Aristotelian philosophy, Jewish mysticism influenced by Sufism; Reform Jews modelling their services after Lutheran services, in order to keep Jews Jewish; to mahzorim and siddurim in translation. And in recent years, transliteration as well; Jewish renewal today using parts of Eastern religion to bolster Jewish meditation and other spiritual practices to open our hearts to compassion. This list can go on and on. A few more mundane examples are Hasidim wearing clothes associated with Polish nobility; kosher Chinese restaurants and the popularity of sushi at Hasidic weddings.

American culture offers us a great deal and still has more to offer us, especially in the realm of technology. The internet removes any excuse for many Jews to remain ignorant of our tradition. Recent internet projects like Sefaria, and others, plan to make all of the classics of the Jewish spiritual and intellectual traditions available in English to anyone who desires to read them. Commentaries on the weekly parsha are abundant- they reflect the full range of our Jewish community. Study opportunities are manifold with interactive sites and more. One of the first groups, way before internet, to use the cutting-edge technology of the time successfully was Chabad who were the first to broadcast the talks of their Rebbe internationally via satellite.

From the very beginning of our journey we have always acculturated and took from the cultures around us in order to renew and reinvigorate Judaism and Jewish life. We saw this as a way to make sure that we pass on a Judaism that is vibrant and viable for the coming generation, who in turn will acculturate and take in what they will need to keep Judaism going.

Over the millennia we have lived for more than survival. We have lived to propagate a value driven life, we have thankfully acculturated to many positive American values. We have taken to them as mother's milk. Values like democracy, the separation of Church and State, freedom of assembly and speech, and many others. These are not explicit values in traditional Judaism.

Assimilation, on the other hand, is a technical word that means that something is added to something else so that it completely disappears. In Biology it is defined as the process of absorbing nutrients that disappear into the whole organism. In America this organism was the Crucible, the melting pot. We poured our identity into the melting pot where individual identities are diminished in order to create what was then called a new America.

Many Jews, now, perhaps more than ever, live on the periphery of Jewish life and culture, many in our own families, who do not find a home in our tradition.

Either consciously or unconsciously, Jews under 30, mirror their American counterparts. In the last major Pew study on the American Jewish

community many of these millennials do not see a need to support Jewish education, or for that matter the continuity of the Jewish people. They are fairly explicit that they want to cast themselves into the melting pot and assimilate. They disdain corporate Jewish identity, attachment to Israel and its complications, and any claims of distinctiveness. They choose extinction over distinction. Distinctiveness does mean not superiority- rather it is a blessing to live a life of distinction.

There are of course many exceptions to all of these trends all around the States. We are pleased that we co-sponsor our monthly Kabbalat Shabbat Nariya Sing-Outs with Moshe Kavod House, a branch of international Jewish social service communal living centers. If you've never been to Nariya come, and come early. It's a marvelous experience. Get here early--we fill the place. I kvell a lot when I see these young Jews in their 20's and 30's so heavily committed to continuing our traditions. But they are outliers to many of their peers.

Those of us who live in both the tents of Israel and the dwelling places of Jacob have a responsibility to create a home that will not only strengthen ourselves, but will invite those on the brink of assimilation back home.

We would be enriched greatly from the numerous talents of so-called "marginal" Jews in the process of renewing Judaism for the future. We cherish them and need them. If there are friends and family in this situation tell them that they are loved and cherished.

I'm an adherent of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan who defined Judaism as a civilization, a tapestry created by the Jewish people over the millennia.

The strongest and oldest of the strands woven into this fabric is the spiritual and religious one. It is the baseline for all of our other contributions to all the other aspects of that civilization: food, music, dance, poetry, prose, etc.

Each Jew brings her own ingredient to the Jewish salad bowl in America. When they put their portions on their plates, each adds their own unique home-made dressing to the table.

Wherever we venture into the culture around us we more and more realize there's no place like home.

While we as Jews have created a home in this country, many of us, as of late, feel disconcerted about where we live. We are disturbed by the divisions around us.

Over the last year, many of you have asked me about the rise of Anti-Semitism. Many of us are affected emotionally by the drama and flux of events around us. Are there ways of overcoming these feelings of anxiety and frustration? Where do we find refuge? There is no simple formula to deal with all of these feelings.

So how do we deal with the perplexities around us? First of all, I try to provide perspective. Over the millennia we have lived for more than survival and over the last year we have seen many heartening examples of brother and sisterhood, solidarity of folks of all faiths and backgrounds offering resistance to recently initiated policies that seem unwise and unfair. We have also seen acts of courage and faith in light of the natural disasters our brothers and sisters of all faiths and colors have suffered. We have formed coalitions of black and white, Muslims, Christians and Jews.

However, this past year has also seen virulent anti-Jewish behaviors and attitudes on both the far right and the far left extremes of our American political landscape. For the leftists, not just only extremists, attitudes towards Jews are tainted with old right wing prejudices that declare that Jews have dual loyalties - that their support of Israel makes their claims to speak for social justice meaningless, at best, and nefarious at worst.

On the right, the claims are all too familiar- fear and anxiety of Jewish power and its plot to control the world. *Jews will not replace us* was chanted in Charlottesville. Jews are feared as the leaders of the plot to undermine white America. For the left, support of Israel often transforms all Jews, including its Ethiopian citizens, into pale faced Protestant colonialists. For the right -we are viewed as the vanguard of the black revolution, the revival of the Bolshevik revolution, and as Jews who “own everything”.

Those with historical memory know that the Jews and their cantankerous non-conformity were always deemed dangerous. Jews found themselves on all sides of social issues and economic considerations. What was most irking to those who feared us or hated us was our capacity to say no to fleeting theories, trends and monarchs.

Jews didn't follow the baton of the majority orchestra, no matter who the conductor was at the time.

While I was growing up, overt anti-Semitism wasn't polite. The years following the Shoah made it impolite and impolitic to be overtly anti-Semitic. Boardroom anti-Semitism persisted and all the snakes we see today were always there hidden under rocks. There were always occasional desecrations of Jewish monuments and facilities. For the most part it was attributed to a few bad apples. I am so sorry that my kids and their generation will have to face the more open assault on Jewish sensibilities, and that this venom comes from both the right and the left.

And yet, at the same time, I hope they will be educated enough in the story of the Jews to appreciate how remarkably different the American Jewish Experience has been than any other in Jewish history.

Few Jews could have imagined in the 1920's or 30's, a period of quotas and restrictions, the amount of Jews now studying at and administrating America's top colleges. Who would have imagined, that for the first time in Jewish history we have 3 Jewish members of the US supreme court and strong representation in the United States Congress for a group that makes up only 2% of the American population.

But for many of us this doesn't assuage our anxieties.

A way to alleviate these anxieties is not by laughing them off, but rather, as mentioned above, to be political and social activists, strengthened by our capacity to go deeper into ourselves and find that deep home that we build in ourselves over the years. Being here in community tonight contributes to our commitment to both social action and psychological well-being.

I hope that this Yom Kippur will allow us to realize that we are not enslaved to our regrets about the past and our anxieties about the future. We are not enslaved to all the chatter around us.

The melody of the beloved Kol Nidrei has not yet faded. We sit and start our journey home together. We don't click the heels of our ruby slippers to get there. We get there through choices that we make. These choices are particularly important as we look for grounding in our tumultuous and unsure times.

More than ever we need to find our way home.

Tonight, at this precious moment we stand at a crossroads- one that forces us to decide what direction we will choose in the coming year to find our way home.

We gather together to connect or re-connect to our core-identities. Living in an increasing multicultural environment we have to ask ourselves where do we create our home? What does this complexity of American identity offer us as we are creating a Jewish life for the future?

What will be the touchstones of home for our next generation?

The first paragraph of the Shma says it all. We are obligated to live and to teach the values of devotion of the heart, the soul and the mind. If this is the case what are those values? Simply put, these eternal values amount to devotion through our emotions, our minds, and our treasure to the cause of Jewish continuity and distinction.

As we look out into our surrounding culture we must investigate carefully what is it we want to bring into the formation of our Jewish lives and what do we want to reject.

Let's take this opportunity of examining our lives, its frailties and its many satisfactions as we make our journey home. We recalibrate our consciousness of the Divine within and all around us to find our way home.

When I was 16, in the fall of 1965, the Dodgers ace pitcher, Sandy Koufax, said he would not take the mound in Game 1 of the World Series against the Minnesota Twins as it fell on Yom Kippur. Mind you, this was no ordinary pitcher. Koufax dominated on the hill that season for Los Angeles and would be elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Koufax (now in his early 80s) and his choice would go down in Jewish lore, to be recalled annually on Yom Kippur - or perhaps whenever his coreligionists have a tough call to make. "There was no hard decision for me," he would say later in an ESPN documentary released in 2000. "It was just a thing of respect. I wasn't trying to make a statement, and I had no idea that it would impact that many people.

Sandy Koufax and his self-respect reminded us that we who live as American Jews can always find a home within ourselves and where we

live, find ways to make decisions that value our Jewish identity whose impact goes far beyond what we can imagine. We live in a society where our neighbors are inspired by our capacities as individuals and a community to be devoted to our traditions and our homes are always open to them. Don't forget where you live.

Let us seal ourselves in the Book of a life and a home well lived.

Gmar Hatima Tova.