

**Building Our Home Together: On Membership in
Our Jewish Community**
Parashat Re'eh
The Glen Rock Jewish Center
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Well, here I am. And here are so many of you. I know I met many of you, but others I am still getting to know. Thank you for your patience as it's probably a lot easier for you to remember my name than for me to remember all of yours. But I'm getting there. Many people have been asking me "so...are you settled, rabbi?" "Settling," I say. "It's a process." But, it's one that my husband and I are experts at. In total, we have moved nine times in the last ten years: from DC to multiple locations in the city, to Jerusalem for my year abroad, to Long Island, not to mention numerous stops in Pennsylvania --- and that doesn't even include my cross-country experiences from Connecticut to Ohio to California and then back to Washington, DC again. Suffice it to say I have a very hard time calling a place my "home."

Where is home to you?

In this week's Torah portion, *parashat Re'eh*, we learn about the commandment for the Israelites to establish a place of worship upon entering the Promised Land. God is very specific with the request: "Take care not to sacrifice your burnt offerings in any place you like, but only in the place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribal territories. There you shall sacrifice your burnt offerings and there you shall observe all that I enjoin upon you." (Deut. 12:13-14). Essentially, God is telling us that we can only worship God in one specific place and nowhere else.

Now I hope that you take issue with this passage. I know I do. For starters, what about the idea that we can take God with us wherever we go? What about the idea that God is everywhere? I mean, look at us tonight, here we are, and we've taken our service outside of our regular prayer space, proving that we can worship God anywhere. So yes, you might just take issue with God's commandment to only worship God in one place. And that's just for starters.

On top of that, though, this commandment of only establishing one place for worship seems to go against all that the Israelites had known up until this point. I mean, think about it. They were wandering Jews! As they wandered through the dessert they had to build a portable sanctuary...they had no choice! And what's more is that God seemed to endorse this claiming: "in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you." (Exodus 20:21).

So I don't get it. Just months ago, we devoted weeks and weeks to the building of the *mishkan*, this portable Tabernacle, and now God makes it explicit that such portable houses of worship are no longer acceptable?! That just doesn't seem to make sense.

Well...let's sit back and remind ourselves what happened along the Israelites' journey. When God told the Israelites that God would meet them wherever they were, the Israelites were focused on one sole mission: to get to the Promised Land. Despite their bickering, despite their lack of gratitude, and the building of the Golden Calf and all that they did wrong to one another, they were still unified in achieving the dream of their ancestors, to enter into this sacred land, the Promised Land.

Why do we think that God changed God's mind from saying that the Israelites could worship anywhere to saying that they must worship in one place? Well, I think, it's simple.

Now that the Israelites were about to enter into the Promised Land, they would no longer have the same mission. Each tribe would be scattered throughout the land, with their own ideas about worship or the like. Would they continue to keep the commandments? Would they get along? Would they see each other? Would they ever come home? Wait, just where is home?

So God commanded the Israelites to build one central house of worship. God, too, understood the importance of feeling like we have a sacred home.

Our Jewish community is so vibrant and strong. We have opportunities that we've never had before. At the same time, we are up against so much. I am constantly being asked "why do I have to pay for my Judaism?" [To that, I could also quote the Torah's commandment in this week's Torah portion to offer various tithes for the purposes of maintaining the sanctuary...but that...that's for another time...] But yes, this is what people ask me. They challenge the amount that they give for membership and compare it with what they "get" in return, as if contributing to the building of a sanctuary, as if contributing to a Jewish community is a business exchange in the store. I hope that's not what our Judaism has boiled down to.

I've spoken with Budda Jews and Yogi Jews. And Jews who want Judaism out in nature...all by themselves. I've talked with Jews who Booze, and Foodie Jews and Jews who rent-a-rabbi for their child's bar/bat mitzvah. They want to get what they want to get and it's just not a priority for them to feel connected to something bigger, or they feel like what we offer doesn't do it for them. Some of them pay their dues and then drop their membership when we no longer "require" it for purposes of educating their children. And for those of us who work so hard to build a Jewish community...well, I just want to say "please...give us a chance. Be part of our family. Help us build our home together."

When we reached the Promised Land, God wanted us to build one house of worship not for God's sake, but for our sake. God recognized that we needed to be together. Sure, we each have our needs, we each have our own desires. Sure, being part of a larger family is not easy. We fight and we complain and we disagree. But we also lift each other up. We help wipe your tears. We help build your children into the mensches that we all want them to be.

I have moved nine times in the past ten years. Just where is home to me? Well...in many ways, I guess you could say that I'm like many people who are shopping for shuls. I'd like to say that I've finally found my home, that Glen Rock is it...at least for a while. But building a home is not something that I do by myself. I know that establishing a home comes with a bit of a risk on my part. And for those of you who have already made this house of worship your spiritual home, I know it takes a bit of risk on your part as well.

God says "There..." in that one place... "you shall observe all that I enjoin upon you" (Deut. 12:14).

Where is home to you?

I hope for those of you who have been part of our community for years, you will continue to call the Glen Rock Jewish Center your spiritual home. And I hope that those of you who are looking will be part of this very sacred effort in building our home together. Shabbat Shalom.