I have a weakness – and I’m not ashamed to admit it. I love second-hand bookshops. I could, and often do, spend ages browsing through dusty shelves in search of treasures. And a few weeks ago, in Tim's Used Books in Provincetown, I found one – a recent facsimile of an important old book.

The title page tells us that it was composed in 1771 by ‘a society of gentlemen in Scotland.’ It is 3 volumes long and calls itself ‘a dictionary of arts and sciences.’ It is the first edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, one of the world’s very first encyclopaedias. In thousands of pages of information, one of the most interesting entries is the one entitled ‘Jews’.

It begins:
‘JEWS, those who profess obedience to the laws and religion of Moses.’ So far so good. There follow 14 short lines intended to sum up the most important things you need to know about the Jews. And the fascinating thing about this piece is that of all the things that could have been written about the central elements of Judaism, the first was the following:

‘when a modern Jew builds an [sic] house, he must leave part of it unfurnished, in remembrance that the temple and Jerusalem now lie desolate.’

This is no doubt a reference to the halacha recorded in Shluchan Aruch as follows:
‘After the Temple was destroyed the sages of that generation instituted a law that a house may never be constructed [by a Jew] fully plastered and paneled like a royal house. Rather the walls of the house it should be filled in and plastered but a part of the wall one cubit square should be left unplastered opposite the door.’

And although this law has largely fallen into disuse, it is still a followed in many communities.

But why did this ‘society of Gentlemen’ single out this particular practice of all things? It seems unlikely, but in fact, wittingly or not, they settled upon something which is strongly resonant with Jewish experience. A notion
which runs deep in our communal psyche and is wound up with our history, our theology and our practice.

What is the meaning of a home? At home we are supported by people who accept us, surrounded by the objects and memories that have shaped our identities, protected from the inhospitable elements of nature and of humanity. To own a home is part of the American dream; to be at home is a fundamentally human dream. We all yearn for somewhere we are welcome, safe, and free to be ourselves. A place that, however far we roam, waits to accept us back in. As Robert Frost put it: “home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

And yet a Jewish home has something different about it. Part of the wall - and not somewhere hidden in an attic or a cellar, but right opposite the front door - is unfinished. It is not lovingly covered, decorated and personalized wall of a home; it is bare and exposed. The feeling of at-homeness is disturbed by a raw intrusion, a reminder of the outside world.

What does this represent for us? This feeling of exposure even as we sit at home, the sense that no place can fully be our own, a vulnerability even in our inner sanctum, can be summed up in one word: Galut. Galut is normally translated as exile and its primary meaning is the exile of the Jews from Israel after the destruction of the Temple. But beyond that it conveys a sense of alienation, dispersion, vulnerability, being cast out and displaced. In short, being not at-home.

It is no surprise, then, that the law about leaving the wall unfinished is listed in the Shulchan Aruch in a section about responses to the destruction of Jerusalem. And it immediately follows the section about the part of the year we find ourselves in: 9 Av and the days leading up to it. 9 Av, which we will observe on Thursday is set aside for fasting and other deprivations, as a physical expression of what it means to be in Galut. So what does it mean? What should we be thinking about on Thursday?

Galut is a concept which informs Jewish identity on every level and I want to map out now three spheres in which it makes itself felt: the political, the cosmological and the existential.

Political galut is lack of sovereignty, a physical vulnerability, subordination to rulers, regimes and a world order that is threatening and fearsome. It is
epitomized by blood libels, expulsions and pogroms and its peak was the Shoah. But does this continue to resonate with us in New York, at a time when the Jewish community as a whole is perhaps more secure and at-home than ever before? Does political galut maintain its significance while the sovereign Jewish state flourishes? Unfortunately, the question is easily answered by a glance at the openly anti-semitic government of Venezuela, a rise in anti-semitic violence all across Europe and the need for a police presence even outside these doors at KJ. Unfortunately, political galut remains a reality.

But the idea of galut, or not-at-homeness, goes far beyond the Jewish people itself; it is cosmological in scope. Megilla 29a tells us that ‘wherever the Jewish people were exiled, the presence of God was exiled too.’ God in exile! This is difficult to contemplate in itself. But the Kabbalists, especially from the 16th century on, expanded this concept yet further to say that Galut is not just something that occurs to one people situated in history but is woven into the very fabric of creation. According to kabbalistic doctrine of shevirat ha-kelim, the divine light that was used to create the world broke the vessels that were meant to contain it and dispersed throughout all of creation. Not just the Jews but all things, even the presence of God is in exile. Galut, until the messianic age, is a condition of existence itself.

Finally, we turn from esoteric contemplation of the cosmos to the individual person - what I referred to as existential galut. The prophet Ezekiel lived in the exile himself and his book opens with his declaration ‘Va-ani be-toch ha-golah.’ I am in exile. Rav Kook in his Shemoneh Kevatzim has an innovative interpretation of this phrase. ‘Va-ani be-toch ha-golah.’ Not ‘I am in exile,’ but ‘the ‘I’ is in exile.’ We are all, says Rav Kook, to some degree alienated from ourselves. This means, he says, that we are distracted from our true selves by meaningless externals. We lose sight of what is really important: following the divine path, which is to be found within us if we look carefully enough. And this can result in damage not just for the individual but for the wider community. As we have been ashamed to see in this past year, and especially in recent days, a debilitating hillul Hashem can reflect from the bad behavior of individuals onto the Jews as a whole.

This existential galut what Rav Soloveitchik referred to as 'being banished from oneself, being exiled from a full and true existence.' It is reflected in the very first moments of creation. Adam and Eve were commanded not to
eat from the tree of knowledge. When they did, they transgressed the word of God and in so doing, they lost hold of themselves. After the sin God asked Adam 'Ayeka?' 'Where are you?' – not ‘where are you?’ geographically (God hardly needed Adam to answer that) but ‘where are you?’ – in relation to yourself. And this was a question that Adam could not answer. Exile from the garden was one consequence of the sin. But the first consequence was exile from the self. It is no coincidence that the book we read on 9 Av is called Eichah - made up of the same letters, alef yod kaf heh, which constitute God's unanswered question Ayeka. If we do not know the answer to 'where are you?', then the response will be made for us: the sob of Eichah.

We have talked about three kinds of galut: political, cosmological and existential. The thread that runs through them all is a state of distance from God. The distancing of God from the political nation of Israel, from the state of creation as a whole and from each of us as individuals. Can those distances be closed? Is there any room for hope in this bleak picture of galut? The answer is emphatically yes. But as the rhythm of the Jewish calendar teachers us, for everything there is a time. From the month of Elul, through the High Holidays and beyond we will think as a community about teshuva - returning; a reconciliation with God and with ourselves. But this week our task is to take note of the distance because unless we do, we will be unable to appreciate the gap that needs to be filled and then to go about filling it.

The Scottish Gentlemen had it right: Our homes are fully furnished but for that one patch of wall. And although we could look away from it in an attempt to feel at home, this is a time of year when we stare straight on at the unfinished plaster. We sit on the ground, we cry and we mourn the galut.