I want you to take a moment and think about home. What is the first place you ever considered “your home.” Maybe it’s the place you grew up, maybe it’s the 1st house you can actively remember, maybe it’s one specific room. But just take a moment and call this place to mind. Can you see it?

How many of you thought of a different place that the address where your mail goes today? I would say that for most adults, the homes we live in are not the homes of our youth. But at what point did the house we grew up in or the city of our childhoods stop being home? Was it the day you left to travel or go to college or start your first job? Was it after you had lived in multiple other cities across the country or around the world? Perhaps you are like me; as of 2019, I have officially lived
more years outside of Milwaukee than as a resident of the city in which I was born.

For most of us, it isn’t only the passage of time that helps us realize we have left home. Rather, the active process of making another place our home often helps us realize a change has occurred. I realized I had a new home the first moment I set foot onto my college campus, before they had even accepted me. I felt at home wandering the streets of Boston. The change was immediate. And when I left to start my rabbinical studies in Los Angeles, I felt, for the first time in my life, without a home. LA is a strange place; for one who felt at home in the city of brownstones and Red Sox, the land of beaches and seas and giant palm trees was a shock to the system.

In fact, I felt so profoundly uncomfortable there that within 3 days of moving to LA, I left to go visit my brother in San Diego, where he was studying for his Ph.D. At the time, I couldn’t understand it. I was excited to start my journey into the rabbinate, thrilled at where my life
had taken me, and yet, I couldn’t stand to be in this new place. It wasn’t only that the place was unfamiliar, it was that it was odd, distinct, and truly, I missed that feeling of being home.

But a few weeks later, when the rest of my classmates arrived and school began, I discovered that feeling once again. Because it turns out that it’s not only, or even primarily, a building or a city or a landscape that makes us feel at home. We are at home when we find our people, the ones with whom we truly connect, the ones who feel, to us, like home.

In Parashat Vayeishev, we are introduced to Joseph, whose story encompasses the last thirteen chapters of the Book of Genesis. From the time of his birth, he was an outsider, singled out by his father, Jacob, for special love and attention, and yet at odds with the rest of his siblings. Jacob dreams of worlds he cannot see, envisions a future he cannot yet fully comprehend, and it is this vision that distances him from the people he wants most to love.
At one point in this parashah, Jacob sends Joseph to look for his brothers, who are supposedly shepherding their flocks near Shechem. But when Joseph gets there, he cannot find them. As we read in the second aliyah this morning:

“Israel said to Joseph, ‘Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them.’ Joseph answered, ‘I am ready.’ And Jacob said to him, ‘Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word.’ So he sent Joseph from the valley of Hebron. When he reached Shechem, a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, ‘What are you looking for?’ He answered, ‘I am looking for my brothers. Tell me where they are pasturing!’ The man said, ‘They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan.’ So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan. (Gen. 37:13-17)

Joseph is on a journey to find his brothers, and yet when he searches, he is unable to find them. They are not where he was told they would be, where he expected them to be, and Joseph finds himself lost.
The Da’at Z’kanim, a compiled commentary on Torah redacted in the 18th century, makes the comment that Joseph was unable to find his brothers because they had moved themselves in order not to be found. When Joseph asks the man he encounters to tell him where his brothers are, he answers נסעו מזוה - “They have moved from here.” But where is “here?” The commentary explains, by re-interpreting the Hebrew word זוה, meaning “here”:

“They [the brothers] have moved away from here; they have said that they are no longer interested as being 12 tribes”. The numerical value of the letters in the word זוה is 12 \[5 = ה , 7 = ז\].

In effect, what this commentary is saying is not only that the brothers were shepherding their sheep in some far away area, or even that they were hiding from Joseph. The commentary here hints at something much larger: that they are renouncing the ethical teachings of their ancestors, moving away from the future that will establish the Jewish People.
Why would they do such a thing? We get a clue given where they were headed, toward Shechem. When we last encountered the people of Shechem, the most powerful person in their city was forcing himself on Dinah, daughter of Jacob and sister to all of these brothers. Why would they go there, seeing as they had just slaughtered people in that same town in order to avenge her?! What the Da’at Z’kanim is pointing out is that they are moving, not physically, but morally toward the people of Shechem, toward their values, their ideals, their way of life.

This is why Joseph cannot find them when he journeys toward the city of Shechem, because though their bodies are in Dotan, their hearts are moving ever closer to the values exemplified by the people of Shechem within the narrative of our rabbinic texts. It would also explain why Jacob sends Joseph in the first place, that he is concerned about how his sons are faring, literally instructing him to “see about their peace [רָאָה אֲחַרְשָׁנָיו אֶת שִׁלֹּר].” So who does he send to bring them back into the fold? His favored son, his blessed one, the child he knows is living
an ethical and moral life, the son who, even before he knows what his task will be, responds “אני כאן, אני מוכן” (“I am here, I am ready”) when his father calls on him, just as so many prophets have responded throughout our history when called to a sacred task.

The question remains, however, why the brothers would want to be more like the people of Shechem. They spent much of last week’s parashah decrying these people, especially their leaders, for their selfish and abusive practices, for the harshness with which they treat the stranger and those in need, for their callous disregard of other human beings.

And yet, these brothers, who have played by the rules and lived ethically (more or less) up until this point within the framework their father Jacob and the God of their ancestors laid out for them, have seen themselves become second-class citizens in their own households. They see their brother Joseph being clearly favored and react with anger, confusion, self-loathing, and anxiety. All of a sudden, they might just
look at those Shemites, who are only out for themselves, and think, “If I can’t prosper and be favored by following the rules, then I’m going to look out for #1 and succeed however I can.” So they turn their backs on their home, and head in another direction. And by their actions, of selling their brother and convincing their father of his death, they are not only removing themselves from the ethical path their family forged, but staining their home so that it will never again be the place they, their father, or their brother Joseph will call home.

It’s not too far-fetched to attribute these motivations to the sons of Jacob. When we look around at our world, it is sometimes hard not to feel that everyone is moving closer to Shechem. Just this past week, purveyors of hate tried to stain the campus of the American Jewish University in LA, the home of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, which was my home for six years. It makes me sick to think of this sacred space, the place that took me in, trained me, built me a community of colleagues, introduced me to my wife, gave me every
opportunity, and conferred upon me the sacred title of Rav could be a place where anyone could harbor hatred in their hearts, let alone act on it in such egregious fashion. This is but one example of several anti-Semitic vandalism incidents in LA this past week, adding to the number of violent attacks, hateful markings of graffiti, and anti-Semitic rants we have been forced to endure as of late. It can be demoralizing to realize just how much hate persists in the world, that still, thousands of years after Joseph first experienced his brothers’ wrathful lashing-out, there are still so many in this world who will hate people, who will hate us here in this room, simple because they see us as threatening, as sub-human, as easy targets, as other.

What can we do in the face of such acts of terror (and these actions are meant to terrorize us)? Rabbi Lawrence Kushner comments on the verses from Genesis we looked at before, where Joseph cannot seem to find his brothers or his way, that this is merely the beginning of Joseph’s feeling of loss and confusion. His path, which starts out in earnest when
he loses his brothers, their love, their trust, and continues through slavery, servitude, prison, and ultimately redemptive freedom, is setting him on a course toward finding his own home, which is only realized decades later when he reunites with his family, who will eventually join him in Egypt.

Joseph’s experiences startlingly mirror our own, and teach us that we cannot let the cruel actions of others change who and what we are in this world. If we believe that every person is created in the image of God, with a shard of holiness embedded in the very core of their being, than this fundamental principle must always remain true whether they are kind to us or callous, whether they treat us with love and respect or scorn and derision.

Joseph, throughout his life, remains committed to loving all people. We know he goes on to care for all the others who cross his path, whether they are Egyptian nobles or disgraced prisoners. In fact, his primary duty as an Egyptian official is to make sure to manage their
resources during their years of plenty so that everyone, not only all of the Egyptian people, but anyone who is in need, will have food to eat when times are tough. Could there be a more beautiful illustration of compassion than bringing food and healing to the bodies of those in need?

Even more than this, we know that given the means and opportunity, Joseph never avenges himself against the brothers who wronged him or the family who deserted him. That may be difficult for some of us to imagine, especially when we see so much that frightens or angers us in this world on a daily basis.

But there is a way to fight back against this world of animosity and rancor. Be like Joseph, and continue to love. Start with the easiest ones, the ones who you care about and who care for you in return, and love them dearly. Love the people you see everyday, the ones you work with, even if you don’t know them well. Love the people you meet, the person
who makes your coffee, cleans your shul, sells you a phone, or holds a door open for you.

Then, love one another by joining together to speak out when the dischord and loathing of others cause them to do and say abhorrent things. Don’t let these terrifying acts stand, but raise your voices against them. Talk to your elected officials, your leaders, your social groups, and your families, and make it known that these actions can never be allowed to continue.

But don’t give in to hate. When we hate another, even one who does us wrong, we lower ourselves and become containers of hatred. In doing so, we weigh ourselves down and block ourselves from experiencing the sacred goodness of our world. When we allow others to change us into perpetually angry cynics, we lose that most precious gift of seeing the unique God-liness in every person, in every day.

Because home is not a building. Home is not a district, outlined on a map, and staked out from the rest of the world. Home is where family
lives, where friends take time to rest, where people gather to hold and to heal one another. Home is where love grows, and so we make our homes broader and wider each time we allow ourselves to love one another just a little more than any of us might deserve to.

The Psalmist proclaimed:

כִּֽי־אָמַּיעַֽעַֽמְּנָתְךָ רוֹדֶל וֹאָמְדוּ אַמְנוּתְךָ בּוֹפִֽי׃ כִּֽי־אָמַּיעַֽעַֽמְּנָתְךָ רוֹדֶל וֹאָמְדוּ אַמְנוּתְךָ בּוֹפִֽי׃

I will sing of the LORD’s steadfast love forever; to all generations I will proclaim Your faithfulness with my mouth. I declare, “Your steadfast love is confirmed forever; there in the heavens You establish Your faithful love.” [Psalm 89:2-3]

If God’s House can be filled with faithful love forever, then so too must ours. I believe that a home and a heart filled with love is our greatest weapon against a world replete with hate. I know this is not the last time hateful speech and acts will touch our lives, but the more we live our lives both with strength and with love and compassion, the better the world we build for ourselves and for one another. Because it will be
though our love of one another that we will, at long last, be able to find our way to our brothers and sisters once again.

    Shabbat Shalom.