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Kol Rinah
Parashat Mattot-Mas'ei
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After being away for a couple of weeks, I slept in my own bed last night. And it was the best night's sleep I've had since before I left. Dorothy had it right: there's no place like home.

And yet home is a complicated concept, and for many, a complicated place, and not everyone even has a place (a nation, a house or apartment, a room) they can call home. Home is not safe place for everyone, nor a place for good sleep for everyone.

Home appears in a few contexts in our double parasha. A woman's father can annul her vows while she lives in his house, and likewise when she lives in her husband's home.

There's a long conversation between the Gadites and the Reubenites, who want to settle on the east side of the Jordan (CisJordan, not Transjordan—the side that is not crossed over), and Moses. These two tribes promise to do their work to secure the land before returning to what will be their homes.

Parashat Mas'ei, chapter 33, enumerates the various stops along the Israelites' journey, none of which is a home. Chapter 34, in contrast, describes the borders of the land they are to enter—the southern border, the western border (the Great Sea, or the Mediterranean), the northern border, the eastern border (along the Kineret and Jordan). A process is announced for how tribes are allotted land. And towns are to be apportioned for Levites, and pasture land for them too, forty-two of them, plus six towns that are cities of refuge to which accidental murders can go.

I sense two themes running through this material. On the one hand, there's a clear longing for a home. And on the other hand, home is complicated, with tension, and is fluid, always in transition.

Let's focus first on this longing for home. Some of us here have now, or have had, or have been, kids at camp. Camp is a home away from home, a summer home, but I remember that feeling of being at camp yet longing for home (and being home and longing for camp).

The Israelites at this point in the story, forty years after leaving Egypt, don't remember the home they left, nor the home they are going to, but the Reubenites and the Gadites want it as soon as possible. The first land that looks good is good enough for them. That it's not technically in the land that God has promised them is irrelevant. Anywhere close will do. I sense their exhaustion with wandering, and their desire just to settle down, and as soon as possible.

There's sense of anxiety, of unsettledness, that can come from not being able to go home, whether because we've been forced to leave our home, or our homeland.

Jews' longing for Zion has been long-stated, but also ambivalent. We reference and pray for Zion in our liturgy, but much like American Jews did not all suddenly move to Israel in 1948, or since, because we are at home here, so too have Jews in fact felt at home around in the world for millennia, even as our neighbors have at times oppressed us, expelled us, killed us.

And I understand our longing for home in terms of synagogue. A minyan that I was a part of back in New York in the 2000s for a while didn't have a permanent home. That was a

possibility for Kol Rinah too, as we were thinking about selling both of our old buildings without a new home to go to. We would have been the legendary wandering Jew (which I think has been more legend than historic reality). But the longing within this community for a home was too strong to resist—it was clear to me, and I think to almost everyone in synagogue leadership at the time. So here we are, at our new home.

But being at home, and having a home, is rarely uncomplicated. A home, both in the physical and metaphorical senses, requires constant maintenance and upkeep. Painting, repairs, cleaning—there's so much work and responsibility that comes with a physical home.

Moreover, home is not just the physical space. It's the culture, the traditions, the modes of interaction. It is in this sense, of the constant negotiating of how people living together will define their home, who will make decisions, what the rules, the promises, the values will be—that a home is a constantly evolving entity, at times making a home a better or worse fit for us. And conflict over the values and norms of a home can be so intense. It's what the political process of a country is, in a sense. Whenever we say that an election is about the soul of a nation, we're talking about the kind of home we're continuously building.

And what does it mean to have or even be a home, and yet not have it be fully yours? A woman is referred to as her husband's house in rabbinic literature. But when she lives at home with her father or husband, she cannot make a vow they cannot annul—it is to say, she may be the home, but the home is not hers. And we are still negotiating gender roles and norms in homes.

There's one more thematic element related to home in our parasha, though, in addition to longing and fluid complexity. In the material about creating cities for Levites and accidental killers, I sense a prescription for generosity when it comes to thinking about home. The other tribes are required to create space in their own land for Levites, and there are also to be homes for those who can live safely nowhere else, the accidental killer. Homes are required, and ordered, for these two very different groups of people who would otherwise be homeless.

This doesn't suggest to me that we should, paraphrasing the Haggadah, have all who are homeless let them come and live in our homes. But it does suggest that there should be, that there is, enough space for there to be homes for everyone.

What about home, past, present or future, are you longing for?

How is home complicated, for you?

How can we make more people feel at home?

Shabbat shalom.