

High Holiday Sermon 1 5776

My first apartment in New York City was on the Upper West Side, West 86th Street, just off Central Park West, to be precise. It was a fairly big building, probably 16 stories, and had a rooftop where people could go to sunbathe in the summer heat. I had a one- bedroom apartment on the 10th floor with a large window in the living room, where I enjoyed a spectacular view of another building's back wall. My kitchen was, literally, in a broom closet – with a laboratory sink not wide enough to fit a single dish, a mini dorm refrigerator, and a hot plate that I never trusted enough to plug in, let alone use. For years, my walls remained entirely blank, as if any personal touch might signal a desire to stay, or put down roots. It was just the apartment where I lived; it was not my home.

New York City was not quite as romantic in the mid to late 1980's as it is today. Those were the days of the Howard Beach riots and the Central Park 5, a time when the walk to the subway felt more like Calcutta than Manhattan, as scores of homeless men and women, their bodies ravaged by crack addiction and abuse, lay on ragged blankets in search of spare change and maybe an inkling of compassion.

I spent my days in a law office, toiling anonymously with the many thousands of other young lawyers in the city, most of whom worked late hours and weekends, as we sacrificed our lives to the rather uninspiring god of billable hours. In the evenings, I went out with friends or alone to the movies (I went to a lot of movies), or came back to my apartment to read serious literature. In my spare time, I was free to do whatever I wished – no social obligations, no errands to run, no demands on my time, and aside from my work, no one required anything from me. I had money in the bank and no one to tell me how to spend it. I had never felt so miserable.

How had this happened? I had specifically moved from New Hampshire to New York to be closer to family, to live in a big city, or perhaps to meet a nice Jewish woman. And within a few months of arriving, I realized what was missing in my life: the gentle touch of a loved one's hand, a companion for a game of gin, the relationship that thrives on mutual obligation, unselfishness, and the shared experience of life.

Sometimes, alone in my apartment, I thought about what it might be like to light Shabbat candles. My boss was Orthodox, and on Monday mornings he would regale me with the details of Shabbos dinner, so the idea was never too far away. But I never did, because I believed that Shabbat candles – in my

apartment – would bring not light, but ridicule – silently mocking my existence, my uninspired freedom, and the absence of any meaningful connection in my life. I told myself that I would light the candles when I had found a home.

Our search for home: it's the only search that matters, the only thing worth searching for. In Greek myth, Homer's epic tale leads Odysseus' back home through years of war and conquest, while Huck and Jim, America's displaced soul mates, discover their home on the Mississippi. Jacob and Moses wandered the barren, desert landscape – lodging in tents and sukkahs - each seeking a home, a plot of land to rest their weary bones – a place neither of them would ever find.

The rabbis, perhaps because their home life was so precarious, defined the concept of home much more broadly, reminding us that home is any place where we are free to study Torah. Personally, I'll take my advice from the wisest of our ancestors, the citizens of Anatevka, who said, as they were leaving their shtetl, "Someone should have set a match to this place years ago," and then sang, in the very next breath, "Where else could Sabbath be so sweet. Anatevka, intimate, obstinate, Anatevka. Where I know everyone I

meet.” The Anatevkans knew that home is not about where you are; it’s about the people you’re with.

In his last biennial address, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the head of the Union for Reform Judaism, challenged every Reform synagogue to practice “audacious hospitality,” the idea that our synagogues – in their essence – would be places that welcomed us all; places that felt like – and were like – home. After all, here at Temple Beth-El, we have been blessed; our worship spaces are beautiful and our meeting spaces comfortable; our library is filled with books, and our artwork would be at home in any Jewish museum. And yet, amidst all of the splendor that surrounds us, we come to Temple not to admire the architecture or its interior design; but rather to laugh and to cry, to pray and to remember, and to share these High Holy Days with friends, loved ones and to those with whom we share our lives; to be together...in our home.

Two weeks ago, I sat at Karen Borger’s kitchen table, the only man in a room filled with women. It was an excellent meeting. We were stuffing envelopes with invitations to the World Series of Cooking (October 25th – we’ll see you there), while having a business meeting to discuss the planning and marketing of the event. As you know, I’ve never been to a Temple World Series, but I feel certain that it’s both delightful and delicious, and the money

we raise for Temple is, you'll pardon the expression, icing on the cake. But what mattered most to me about the evening was hearing everyone's story: how they got involved with the World Series, how much they enjoyed the planning and the cooking, and the friendships they had made with one another along the way. The women talked about new business ventures, children's colleges and weddings, aging and infirm parents, and the bond they shared with one another. The following day, the newest member of the committee emailed to say how much it meant to her to be involved, and how connected she felt – both to the committee members and to the Temple. They had come together to work on a Temple fundraiser, and along the way, found meaningful friendship and connection.

Some of you this evening may have noticed the sanctuary pews that have been removed, and the increased access our disabled members now have for worship. Our members, who may use a wheelchair or a walker, or who have some other infirmity, are no longer segregated by disability; now, instead of being shunted off to the side, they pray with everyone, in the centre of the sanctuary. As we care for one another in times of pain and difficulty, we find our most caring and compassionate voice – a voice we hear in Social

Action, in the Temple Sisterhood, in Brotherhood, and in Hineinu, our caring community. It is a voice that must never cease to be heard.

And certainly our evening minyan is about prayer and rhythm, lay leadership and spiritual discipline, and the daily recitation of the Kaddish. But those who attend on a regular, or semi-regular basis, also know that in times of sadness, they are there for each other, that close friendships and relationships have blossomed in the chapel and beyond, and that because they are participating – together - in the ancient and sacred ritual of prayer, they share a unique bond – a covenantal bond of mutuality, solace, and gratitude that continues to strengthen over time. They too have found a Jewish home at Temple.

Temple Beth-El's audacious hospitality, its emphasis on meaningful relationships and covenantal connections, has now extended beyond the Temple family. Standing here today, it feels wonderful to say that Annie, Emilie, Judah, Adi, and I are now, after just two whirlwind months (and for the children, just a few weeks) a part of the TBE family. When Annie and I moved from the West to the East, moved from Canada back to the United States, moved our children from the only home they had ever really known to a brand new city and culture, and made this move just as they were entering

high school and junior high respectively, we expected to feel a few bumps along the way. But except for the bureaucratic nightmare of the Division of Motor Vehicles (Annie and I, with more than 70 years of combined driving experience, are now proudly driving with our Rhode Island... Learner's Permits) the city of Providence and Temple Beth-El are starting to feel like our home, a place where our roots will dig deep, a place where community and friendship will flourish.

But such feelings of comfort and inclusion don't occur by accident or by happenstance. From the moment we started meeting our Temple family – at Laurel Meade, Tockwotten and other senior facilities – at Chavurah gatherings, Havdalah services, and tasty brunches, at teacher orientation and Sisterhood and Brotherhood meetings, at Shabbat services, Torah study, and the daily minyan, at staff and board meetings, we have been so touched by the community's generosity and openness, the willingness to share your stories, and the energy and enthusiasm with which we've been welcomed. As our ancestors from Anatevka remind us, it's about knowing the people we meet. As we share these experiences - the prayer, the study, the *teshuvah*, the births and the deaths, the weddings and the B'nai Mitzvahs, the *simchas* and the obligations of our Jewish lives - our bonds will strengthen and we'll grow, the

way families do. We'll welcome one another, in sacred covenant, and together, we'll build our home.

It is my hope that in this new year, and for decades to come, all of us will embrace Temple Beth-El as a place of covenant. May it be the place where we are welcome, where we are validated, where we find meaningful connection, where we are inspired, where we give and receive "audacious hospitality," and where the light of the Shabbos candles will always be a beacon, welcoming us home. On behalf of Annie, Emilie, Judah and Adi, we wish you all a Shanah Tovah, a happy, healthy, and peaceful new year.