

Kol Nidre 5778

The Wandering Jew

In September, 1963, just prior to my third birthday, our family - my parents, my older sister and me - moved from our apartment in Fort Lee, NJ to a house - a split-level with a two-car garage - in Englewood Cliffs, the next town over. Most of the houses in our homogeneous suburb were built within a few years, without any shops or communal spaces nearby, and I think it's safe to say that the physical surroundings of my youth lacked the intangible quality we often refer to as "character." Looking back, though, our

family's life mirrored our surroundings: we lived in that house for twenty-two years, but had hardly left a footprint.

My parents, Allan and Pam, were both only children. My mother was from a well-to-do family in Manhattan's East Village, while my father was born in the Bronx, to a poor, sickly 17-year old girl and her neer-do-well husband, a young man much more inclined to the temptations of the racetrack than a steady job. Neither my father nor my mother ever really experienced the loving warmth of family life, and without any siblings to love or connect with, their relationship to "family" was mixed at best.

Of course, both of my parents had aunts and uncles and cousins, all of whom lived in the New York area, but visiting them - or even worse - having them visit us, was

portrayed as a burden, a day we simply had to get through. Even joyous occasions, like Erev Rosh Hashanah, Thanksgiving, and Passover, were almost always dreaded, as we were compelled to entertain our grandparents and an eccentric great aunt who had nowhere else to go.

And since our relationship to the idea of a family was so ambivalent, the four of us had an unspoken agreement to share the same house, but spending time together was more a matter of coincidence than desire. It's strange to admit this, but our family had almost no rituals - Jewish or otherwise - no special routines, no expectations, no activities that we always did together - the shared experiences - like road trips, or getting popcorn at the movies, or going to the beach, that bond parents and

children. It's not that we weren't loved; we were just untethered.

But I didn't know how disconnected we were until the day after I took the New York Bar Exam, the formal dividing line between my former status as a dependent student and my new status as a salaried attorney. On that same day, my parents put our house up for sale. Although we had grown up there, they had no specific attachment to our home, no particular memories to cherish, and little fondness for their surroundings. My bedroom furniture was given to my nephew - a toddler - and my books and records went with me. My parents could have taken some of their possessions with them - a sofa, a dining room table, a favorite comfy chair, maybe something sentimental, a

valued family heirloom, or a precious object from their past. But they didn't. They simply bought new things and began again in a high-rise condo in Hackensack, shedding their old lives as easily as a snake leaves behind its skin.

And though I couldn't express it at the time, the sadness I felt was not my parents' indifference to their things, but how utterly disconnected they were to the world around them. They were not involved with a single group. There were no civic associations, no synagogues, no charitable groups, no communal institutions - other than a golf club - that they were a part of. We weren't just untethered in our house. We were untethered from the world.

And so, I spent many years - actually, an entire decade of my life - wandering. It's really quite easy to do, and requires almost no commitment. Wherever I roamed - St. Louis, New Hampshire, New York City - I had a steady, professional life, and enough leisure time to travel and pursue my interests. But when friends would visit, they would ask me why there were no pictures on my walls, or plants, or tzotchkes, or really anything - other than my books - that reflected my life or character. I would lamely reply that I was still moving in, or that I didn't feel at home. I thought of myself as a nomad, and no amount of time in any one place could convince me otherwise.

During those years, I sought out friends with large extended families who would include me in their

celebrations. Sunday dinners for 12, a party at a sibling's house, Christmas Eve, where the minutiae of the rituals knocked me out. Sure, it was someone else's family, someone else's rituals, but I had none of my own. And though I may have been wandering, isn't that precisely what our tradition valorizes?

Our patriarch, Abraham, a wandering servant of God, worried little about his land or possessions, while his nephew, Lot, settled comfortably into the corruption of Sodom. Jacob found God when he was roaming alone in the desert, while his brother, Esau, was weighed down by his possessions and servants. And who can forget that we spent four decades wandering, searching, and wrestling with what it meant to be in covenant with God? Time and

time again, the Torah teaches that wanderers are God-fearing and searching for truth, while those who settle, certain of their good fortune, become lazy and complacent.

Closer to our own era, our European Jewish ancestors wandered courageously from nation to nation, in search of freedom, prosperity, and security. But I've come to realize during the past couple of years, that wandering, to paraphrase the old Janis Joplin song, is just another word for nowhere left to go. Sure, we've been terrific wanderers. But wherever we have gone, whether we've stayed for a decade or a century, our genius has not been our ability to travel, but instead our willingness and ability to build viable, meaningful institutions, a complex web of connection and concern for our people. These institutions

- burial societies, synagogues, schools, *landsmenschaftun*, banks, hospitals, community centers, newspapers, nursing homes, and so many others - enabled every wandering Jew to find a community, a culture, and an enormous array of connection points, that not only offered aid and support, but also provided the necessary framework for maintaining a Jewish identity.

When my great-grandfather, Herman - who I'm named for - emigrated **by himself** from Budapest to New York City at the age of 13, (just think about that for a moment, kids) with just a name and address in his pocket, he was informally adopted by all of the relationships - the extended *mishpuchuh* that **was** the Lower East Side shtetl, so that he might learn a new language, set up a small shop,

and be able to make his way in the world. Hundreds of us, sitting here today, owe our existence to the vital, makeshift institutions provided by that shtetl; the institutions that defined and shaped Jewish communal life for two generations. It's not a gift to wander. It's a gift to discover your roots, a gift to be connected to others, a gift to be united with those who share your traditions and your values, a gift to find your most authentic identity.

But with all that said, I have to confess that just because you feel connected, just because Jewish institutions are at the center of your world, it doesn't always mean that everything fits together. Indeed, in my pulpits in both suburban Chicago and Calgary, I often felt as if I was re-living my childhood; living in homes whose value was

defined by their proximity to the train, in communities too new to have a sense of history or culture, in cities with bubbles and booms and bursts that privileged wealth above all. But then something changed. Something happened to me when I arrived here.

On an overcast, drizzly Sunday morning, the city was beautiful and gray, a little ragged, with lots of nooks and crannies to explore and make your own. If I were a more talented writer, perhaps I would be able to express the affinity I felt - the sense of belonging, warmth and one-ness; a feeling of total contentment that washed over me. It felt exactly the way a place should feel when you feel at home.

Maybe it feels like home because unlike the house I grew up in, the houses here have stories to share, and roots

that won't easily be pulled up. In our house, the basement coal bins are still filled with coal, Walter Jacobs's art is affixed to the walls, the mud room has ten coat hooks at just the right height for Mrs. Kapstein's piano students, and perfectly balanced on an interior basement ledge, rests an empty can of Rolling Rock, a moment in time left there decades ago, perhaps by one of Kit and Paul Silver's teenage children. When people ask me where I live, more often than not, they have invariably known one of the owners, and offer yet another piece of the house's historic puzzle. As Rabbi Mack once told me, Rhode Islanders always know what some place used to be.

But it's also the rootedness - the sense of home - I feel here at Beth-El. In our Temple's history, we find the story

of more than 160 years of Jewish Rhode Island; Rabbis Braude and Gutterman, who both served with compassion and distinction for more than forty years, those who built our community, and those who sustained our community through acts of loving kindness, those who studied Torah, and those who made it possible for others to study Torah. And during the school year, an entirely new generation of Temple members - our youngest - stand up each week to affirm their Jewish identity and spirit. At the end of the day, maybe my love and affection for our temple isn't just about its history. Maybe it's because we take such pride in **sharing** our history, from generation to generation, thus ensuring that Rhode Island's idiosyncratic "it used to be there" approach will always keep us rooted.

I think our friend, Bob Ducoff, offered the most moving testimonial of the meaning of Beth-El at his grandson Adam's Bar Mitzvah just three weeks ago. As he presented Adam with the Tanakh, Bob said this. "Let me say how lucky and blessed I am to be standing here on this bimah at Temple Beth-El, where my youngest daughter, your Auntie Lynn, and my oldest grandchild, your sister, Sydney, each became a Bat Mitzvah. Where two of my daughters, your mom and Auntie Lynn, were married, and where the funerals of my parents and my in-laws, your great-grandparents, took place. Long before you were born, the funeral of your great uncle Larry took place here as well. Temple Beth-El is a beloved place to our family."

Bob, you didn't just give your grandson the Hebrew Bible, the generational story of our people. You gave Adam four generations of his roots - his family's roots, his Jewish roots, and his roots at Temple Beth-El, the place where the most significant moments of your family's history have occurred. The life cycle ceremonies, the moments of both joy and sorrow that you've shared with family and friends, have all been connected to this place. Adam's Bar Mitzvah became a moment not only for his accomplishments as a young Jewish adult, but more importantly, he became another link in your family's Jewish chain, a continuity sustained and nurtured by his relationship with our Temple family.

In your final words to Adam, you extended the chain of tradition even further, saying, "May you be blessed with the honor of someday presenting the Bible to your grandchild on the occasion of his or her Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Trust me, it doesn't get better than this."

I couldn't agree more. When we give the gift of Torah, we give a gift to ourselves: a chance to discover who we were, who we are, and who we will become. When we give the gift of Jewish ritual to our children and grandchildren, we pass down a magnificent link from our ancestors, a link that offers an anchor of wisdom and sustenance in times of both celebration and sadness. And when we give the gift of community, we ensure that our loved ones will always have friendship and support, always feel connected to

something larger than themselves, and always be in relationship with those who care for them, those who share their values, and those who share their heritage. It is as simple as the gift of being home.

Gamar Chatimah Tovah. May our words and our deeds bring honor to us all, and may this year be sealed in peace, love, and understanding.