

Going Home

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It is said that you can never really go home again. I don't know if this is true, but I thought of this in reflecting on an experience, and a realization that I had last Shabbos. By way of background, due to an aggressive recruitment campaign and cheap housing, the Rochester Orthodox community has experienced considerable growth over the past few years. Among the institutions that have benefitted from this has been the shul of my youth, Congregation Beth Harnesses HaChodosh (despite its name, it was founded in 1885). Three years ago, in an effort to make the shul more attractive and "user friendly," they renovated the sanctuary. Gone were the hard wooden pews I remember as a child, installed well before 1962, when the shul moved from a different part of town and purchased the Centenary Methodist Church. These pews had accumulated decades of grime, rendering shiny generations of suit pants. Instead, they were replaced by comfortable seats and turn-down shtenders, and a few rows of tables in the front. The women's section, too, had been reconfigured- moved to one side of the room rather than on both sides of an aisle. When I looked around at the people in the seats, I also saw change. I was startled to realize that I knew anyone in shul, and, even more shocking, no one knew who I was. And then I looked at the yahrtzeit boards, the ones right near

our seat. I used to memorize these in my callow youth, instead of paying attention during sermons; to this day, you can ask me a name on that board and I can tell you the Hebrew name of that person (I always was a shul nerd). Of course, the old names-dating back to the turn of the 20th century- were still there. But there were new names that joined them in the four years since I was last there. I saw, for the first time, the plaque memorializing Rabbi Yosef Amster, my tenth grade Rebbe- a man who experienced unimaginable tragedy and extreme hardship in his lifetime, yet was still a walking *Mussar sefer* who always strove to be the best person Hashem wanted him to be. New on the wall was Mrs. Naomi Lederman- a rather formidable woman who was the cornerstone of the sisterhood, and a popular piano teacher. And then there was the plaque of Beryl Vilinsky, a traveling liquor salesman; Mr. Vilinsky gave enormous amounts of money to tzedaka, but he did it quietly, often single handedly saving the shul- and people- from financial distress. His plaque was the last one affixed on the board near our seat, alongside many other family members of his, replacing the “reserved” spot everyone knew was waiting for him. Suddenly it hit me: I knew many more people on the wall of the shul than in the seats! Shul felt disorienting, but familiar and comfortable at the same time. For a few days now, I’ve been thinking about why.

In retelling the story of Korach and his band of malcontents, the Torah does something curious.

Devarim 11:6

וְאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְדָתָן וּלְאֶבְרָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב בֶּן־רְאוּבֵן אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה הָאֲרֶץ אֶת־פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַעֵם וְאֶת־בְּתִיָּהֶם וְאֶת־אֹהֲלֵיהֶם וְאֶת־כָּל־הַחַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר בְּרַגְלֵיהֶם בְּקֶרֶב כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

and what [God] did to Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab son of Reuben, when the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them, along with their households, their tents, and every living thing in their train, from amidst all Israel—

We refer to the rebellion as that of Korach, but when the Torah reviews the story of Korach and his followers, it omits his name entirely! It tells us about Datan and Aviram, and how they and their possessions were swallowed up. Korach met the same ignominious fate, yet the Torah says nothing about him or his possessions. Why not?

Permit me to share with you an innovative approach from Rav Yosef Rosen, known as the Rogatchover Gaon- one of the most brilliant and remarkable Torah personalities of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Rogatchover had rather long hair- because he rarely cut it, as he could not remove his kippa and refrain from thinking about Torah for any meaningful amount of time. The Rogatchover explained that the possessions of Datan and Aviram had the status of those

belonging to an *Ir HaNidachat*, a city whose inhabitants all practice idolatry. While our sages tell us that an actual *Ir Hanidachat* never existed, in principle, the inhabitants of such a city must be exterminated and their possessions must be destroyed. Datan and Aviram were a two-man *Ir HaNidachat* and their possessions were annihilated along with them. Korach, however, was a resident of the *Machaneh Leviyah*, the encampment of the Levites. According to the Talmud *Yerushalmi*, this encampment as a city of refuge for those who committed accidental murder, and an *Ir Miklat* can never become an *Ir Nidachat*. Being a resident of the encampment of the Leviim didn't protect Korach from sinning, of course. But something about the environment in the cities of the Leviim acted as insurance, preventing all of its inhabitants from sinking irrevocably into idolatry and sin. What was it? An *Ir Miklat* is a place of refuge, of sanctuary, of rehabilitation. It was, in short, a place dedicated to *chessed*, and a place dedicated to *chessed* can never be completely lost. No matter how much the people change, that essential aspect of its character- that aspect of caring for others at their most vulnerable times of need- will always remain ingrained in its communal DNA.

When I thought about how much the shul changed- in its physical appearance and human makeup- I realized that many of those changes were only on the surface. What made the shul a wonderful place to grow up in was its character- as a place that welcomed guests, that did *chessed* very well, that took learning seriously. None

of that had changed, because that was part of the DNA of the community. That's why the shul felt so different, yet so familiar, too. I won't deny that it felt disorienting not to be recognized in my own shul, a place where I was always viewed, with considerable justification, as something of a local legend (as you can no doubt imagine). But so many people who didn't know me came up to me and asked who I was; there were still shiurim going on and still chessed initiatives taking place.

It is Shabbos Mevarchim Elul, a time when our thoughts become introspective, where we take inventory of who we are as individuals- but also as a community. When people come back to Shaare after a long time away, they are blown away by our stunning building; they are impressed and shocked at our growth, in all sectors and demographics. But they also feel instantly at home again, because they sense that we are still a family and a community, that we are a place of purpose and growth, and that we are still committed to that which is most important. Our challenge as a community is to focus, this month, on that which makes us special, and take it to the next level. You may have seen an email from the Mikvah announcing the commencement of renovations as of this coming Sunday. A beautiful mikvah, and not just a functional one, is essential for the growth of a Jewish community because the observance of *taharat hamishpachah*, the laws of a Jewish marriage and Jewish couplehood, is the bedrock of a Jewish home. Rebbetzin Annette Wolk z"l dedicated her life to promoting this mitzvah and, *lehavdil bein*

chaim lechaim, Jessica and I are a resource in our community for any women or couples with questions at every age or stage of life. Supporting this renovation is a way for each of us to partner in what is essential about a community and what makes it grow- and do it better than we have been. Tefilla is an important part of our experience as well- it's in our name, for God's sake! Our tefilah is soulful and decorous, but we could do it better- especially Friday nights, that are often sparsely attended and occasionally feel perfunctory. I've heard all the excuses. "I can daven at home and it's a really nice and spirited davening with my family." Well, bring your family to shul! "It's not so *lebedik*; *there's no energy*." It's really simple- the more people come, the more *lebedik* the davening will be. The energy of a minyan rises in proportion to the attendance- even if you use the oldest, tiredest Young Israel tunes. Of course, it helps to have "special" tefillot on occasion. That's why we had a *ruach* Kabbalat Shabbat last night, and will have one, please God at least every Shabbos mevarchim. It is also why we will be bringing guest baalei tefilla from time to time. I am delighted to announce that, with God's help, we will be hosting the chassidic singing and cantorial sensation Shulem Lemmer on the Shabbos of November 19th, accompanied by the amazing Shirah Choir. It will be an unforgettable weekend that you won't want to miss. I am already hearing from people in the North Eruv- and even other cities- who want to be here for that Shabbos! We will also be working on our Israel activism, partnering with various Israeli organizations that are on the ground working to improve the lives of Israelis,

and benefit Israeli society. On Shabbat Bereishit, we will be hosting a Shabbaton with the Friends of the IDF, featuring Israeli soldiers and the new Executive VP of FIDF, someone who is no stranger to Shaare- Rabbi Steven Weil. Our community, our shul, is built on the bedrock of our youth- and we are always improving and varying our youth offerings, too. That is why, please God, this year, we hope to bring NCSY Shabbatonim back to Shaare, and have more youth activity that is more awesome than ever before. Shaare is a family, and we are working on increased opportunities just to be able to spend time together as a community, including themed Shabbat dinners and other social gatherings. And of course, we are also envisioning longer term initiatives that promote Torah study in our community. In the shorter term, though, stay tuned for our STEP- the Shaare Tefilla Elul Program, featuring opportunities for virtual and real engagement with meaningful and inspiring Torah. Next week, we will begin a sermon series titled “Tips to Tip the Scales”- each week, focusing on a practical suggestion for being sealed, please God, for a healthy and positive new year. We are fortunate to have Torah personalities join us this coming year, including Dr. Yael Ziegler, the legendary author and teacher of Tanach, who will be with us on Presidents’ Weekend. Torah and Mitzvos, our children, chessed, Israel and our feeling of family- these define our character as a community in its essence, no matter who lives here, and these are what we should all work on together to make even better. The community that surrounded Korach nurtured him- and ultimately protected him. it is our commitment, too, to what is

important that defines our home, and protects everyone in it. As a shul, and as a community, let us recommit to those values and initiatives- and may that elevate us all in return.