

Kol Nidre 5771
Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills
Rabbi Jonathan Aaron

What are you doing here? Here we are. This is our HERE...this is our place...from the eternal light, to the purple seats, to the Torah in the ark. This is where we are. If you were asked, "Where are you?" you would have this response: Here! And take a good look, this HERE is about to change. Next year there will be different seats, a different feel, but it will still be our PLACE, our HERE.

So...you...are...here. This is our synagogue. From this angle it looks like just a building (with a nice new HVAC system on the roof, you can see right there). You can't see us sitting here, but we are – and depending on when this was taken, there are generations that could have been in this HERE, in this PLACE.

Now we move back a little further, and we can still see our HERE, 300 Herzl Way. But it has expanded, and most of Beverly Hills is in this picture. Now this PLACE has changed a little bit, and the HERE has grown. Some of us would say, "HERE is where I played my first baseball game" Others would say, HERE is where I was on stage at the High School when I was a kid". Or, "HERE is where I had my business for 40 years." Someone might even say, "HERE is where I fell and broke my arm." There are a lot more HERES, a lot more PLACES that you can identify and relate to. This is how a community is formed, when a whole group of people share a certain sense of HERE even though we might relate to that same place a bit differently.

Now it's getting a little harder to find what we otherwise so easily speak about as being "here, or there..." The phrase "you are here," is losing focus, and you can only get a general sense of places that are important to you, and those places have become more of a sense memory in your mind other than something you can see.

Now we see the world. The focus on our particular places is now much blurrier. (how did that get in there?) Maybe you can recall places on this globe, but you can't touch them, smell them, see them. But those places can be felt in your mind and your heart.

Now take a look at us positioned in our solar system. can you even pick out this country, this state, city, building from this angle?

Now here we are in the Milky Way Galaxy. There are between 100 and 300 BILLION stars in the Milky Way Galaxy. Our Sun, is one of those hundreds of billions of stars, and we're on the third planet of that sun. Would someone like to identify exactly where we are on this picture? There is a small arrow pointing at the sun, but my HERE is lost. The sun is so small in this picture that it is not perceptible, how can I find where I am within that? The sun is not even a dot in this galaxy.

Now look at this picture taken from the Hubble space telescope. All of those large blue and orange and green and white lights are galaxies, some larger and some smaller than

ours, and there are billions of those in the universe. My HERE is completely lost. Now I know how Woody Allen felt when he said, "I'm astounded by people who want to 'know' the universe when it's hard enough to find your way around Chinatown." Out here, I feel meaningless. I'm floating in space, and I have no home, no place, no HERE. In this universe, we are really nowhere at all. And if that's true, who cares if I write or don't write this sermon, or if I treat people well, or if I celebrate my daughter's birthday?

Michael Polanyi from the University of Chicago wrote: "*as human beings, we must inevitably see the universe from a centre lying within ourselves and speak about it in terms of a human language shaped by the exigencies of human intercourse. Any attempt rigorously to eliminate our human perspective from our picture of the world must lead to absurdity.*" For a moment there I lost the personal human perspective, which varies with each individual. We must be HERE – and – THERE at the same time. We have to come to terms with the fact that our HERE is in Beverly Hills, in these seats, and at the same time our HERE is as an infinitesimal spot in the universe.

It requires us to create a grounding for our humanity. That grounding is in the HERE, in the PLACES where we find ourselves. And it can be hard, even painful to give up those places. Anyone who has moved from a house that had been his or her home for years can attest to that. Or leaving a Job that had been your work home for decades. But it really wasn't the PLACE itself that was the pain, but the *meaning* that was found in that PLACE.

Have you ever noticed that a person touring another around their childhood home is always more excited than the one being toured around. The tourist has never felt anything in that place, and yet the tour guide feels the meaning of every nook and cranny.

Is there a collective Jewish PLACE that we all share as a people? I'm not thinking of Nate'n'Al's Deli. A HERE that is central to all Jews? That answer has changed throughout history. THE JEWISH PLACE was uprooted along with the Jewish people from their homeland with the destruction of the Temple. At that moment, we became a wandering people, with no physical HERE that we could call our own.

Over the centuries Jews have put our HERE somewhere other than any place where we found ourselves. After the destruction, Jerusalem became utopia (which literally means "no place") for the Jew, praying each and every day for the return to that place, and every year for almost two thousand years, singing "Bashanah Haba'ah Birushalayim," "Next year in Jerusalem," at the end of the Passover seder. Perhaps we Jews have meant it in our hearts, but our minds knew differently, because the reality of the wandering Jew's life was that most would not leave Iran and Iraq, northern Africa and Europe to live in Jerusalem the next year. Since 1948, Israel has held the place of the Jewish HERE, and there are many whose sole connection to Judaism is by participating in numerous missions to Israel. But is it our HERE? Jerusalem? Israel?

The other collective Jewish PLACE that I think is embraced by many American Jews as *the* Jewish HERE is the shtetl. Fiddler on the Roof, Anatevka, Tevya, the clothes, the

accents, all recall the nostalgic time of our grand and great grandparents who had to endure the harsh living conditions of these small...shtetls in Eastern Europe. I'm sure the same could be said of Jewish communities all over the globe over a hundred years ago, but I just watched that movie recently, with my daughter for the first time, and I had such ambivalent feelings...*on the one hand*, I felt at home watching it, knowing that these are my people, except for my German side, and I had a warmth for the beauty of their appreciation for Tradition...*on the other hand*, it was that very tradition that created such pain and suffering for Tevya, and led him to alienating his daughter...*but on the other hand*, they are my people...*but on the other hand*, their Jewish place, nostalgia and all, is not my Jewish place.

And yet, *on the other hand*...the same ideas that made Anatevka their HERE, their PLACE, makes *this* PLACE, these very walls in this Synagogue, our HERE. And those notions are undoubtedly, Jewish.

The first notion that contains the Jewish HERE is found in the quiet, unspoken scene where the elderly Rabbi takes the Torah out of the ark of an empty synagogue, alone, wraps it in a Tallit, and takes it with him to wherever he's going. The Torah is our HERE and as long as we sustain, then our PLACE will always be beside it. George Steiner, in *Real Presences* wrote that the Jew's use of text "liberates the life of meaning from that historical-geographic contingency. In dispersion, the text is homeland." He wasn't merely talking about the Torah text itself, but the text of conversation and interpretation that is spawned from the Torah text. That discourse can happen anywhere. Where there is text study, there is the Jewish HERE.

The second notion that allows us to create the HERE comes in the song Anatevka. What exactly is this PLACE: *A little bit of this, a little bit of that. A pot, a pan, a broom, a hat. Someone should have set a match to this place years ago. People who pass through Anatevka don't even know they've been here. What do we leave? Nothing much. They call the place overworked, obstinate, tumble-down, work-a-day Anatevka.* So what's so great about it? Why is it so much their PLACE, why do we relate to it as the quintessential Jewish HERE? Because "*Where else could Sabbath be so sweet? Where I know everyone I meet, and I belong.*" And what do they dream? That in their strange new place, they will search and find "*an old familiar face from Anatevka.*"

What made it their PLACE wasn't the place itself. They didn't yearn to rebuild the shtetl somewhere else. They yearned to see each other in a new place, to find someone that was a part of their community, their experiences. Those two notions made up their HERE: The narrative of their heritage, combined with the narratives of their lives.

We cannot just assume a different era's HERE will work for us. We are not shtetl Jews; We are not Iranian Jews; We are not South African Jews, or Yemenite, or Iraqi Jews; nor are we Israelis; we are just Jews, and we are here in America, our HERE has to be actively formed by us and at the same time reflect who we are: people from all different backgrounds, religions and world outlooks, some more Jewishly educated than others. But no matter what our background: we are all involved in the activity of creating our

heres. And it starts from the moment we choose to be here rather than somewhere else.

We have many HERES in our lives, but this one is different. Our HERES like the gym, a favorite restaurant, or hike is about a specific role of meaning – to get in shape, to be nourished, or be with nature. But this HERE has the potential to be so much more. This place has the possibility of being a kind of anchor for your HERE. What do you do when someone is born, or dies, or enters into a new phase of life, or becomes sick, or is going through a difficult time, or a celebration? Or where do we go when we feel like the Fiddler on the Roof: *“Trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking our neck.”* And this place is like Anatevka...the physical space isn't the thing, it's not the carpeting, the seats, the lights. This PLACE can be our HERE because it has those two elements that make available the Jewish HERE, Torah and community.

Finally, isn't it interesting that the Jew, newly wandering the world back in the time of the Talmud, rather ironically decided to use the word "MAQOM," literally, "place" as an appellation for God. Imagine that: calling God on the basis of this generic notion of "PLACE." Some suggest that this idea allowed a Jew to think of all places as being related to God. Others suggest that this gives the Jew permission to find an appropriate place anywhere in the world. The wisdom is, perhaps, that we need to realize that we can make the “here and now” a holy place, wherever it might be. But the emphasis is on making any PLACE--wherever you find yourself--your HERE. Ultimately it is about an attitude. You can go your whole life feeling that you are "out of place," that you don't have a feeling for a HERE.

That feeling won't just come to you without effort. That's what this day is for. We're here to heighten our awareness, to find the moments of connection with the narratives of our Jewish heritage, and the moments of our lives. Not as a speck of nothingness in a vast universe, but as a living, breathing, human being, finding our way from HERE to there. Finding our way from nowhere, to HERE.