

Welcome Home  
Rosh Hashana 5772/2011  
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Welcome home.

How does it feel to be here, in this space that holds memories for so many of us? Some of you were married here...others stood next to your children as they became bar or bat mitzvah. Some of you have memorial plaques dedicated to people you love, others have powerful memories of sitting next to parents and grandparents. The sanctuary is transformed...but still so familiar. The ner tamid--- sculptured hands cradling light that flows from God through us; the seven branched menorah; the iconic tablets of the law...familiar, but bathed in so much more light—a bima more accessible, a midcentury architect's aesthetic reimagined by a contemporary architect's vision...

Welcome home ...familiar... but different. Home is never quite the way we remember....

The more you think about it, the more complicated the notion of home actually is. Aphorisms abound like: "Home is a place you grow up wanting to leave, and grow old wanting to get back to." Or "Home is where the heart is."

Both are, of course, true. Home is a place you grow up wanting to leave. Like many of you, I left home, literally, when I went off to college. But maybe it happened before, when my family moved from our suburban home outside Boston to New York City when I was in high school. I still have dreams set in that first home, in my yellow bedroom with the four poster bed. I can still see the view from my lace curtained windows overlooking our cul de sac. I think that one of the things that link brothers and sisters is that we carry the same childhood landscape in our subconscious minds.

And home is of course more than a place and a landscape; it is also the people who inhabited it. Much of who we are is shaped by that dimension of home—our family. I love my family, but still I left home and went out into the world to look for...to look for.... what? Another home... the one I would establish.

This morning we read the familiar stories of Abraham and Sara. The story begins when God suddenly, with no warning or explanation, says to Abraham: "Lech lecha, Go! go out from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you... and you shall be a blessing..."

Abraham had to leave home to become a blessing. Translate that into psychological terms: it is often hard for us as adults to be taken seriously by our family who may still see us as the children we once were. We need to leave the safety of familiar patterns, the constraints of other people's expectation, the guilt that often permeates even healthy family dynamics. One of my cousins is Rabbi Michael Paley, acknowledged as one of the truly great Jewish teachers of our generation. But he is still my little cousin

Mikey when he comes home to our family. I'm sure you all know the feeling...because we have each felt it ourselves. We have to leave home to become ourselves, to discover the place that God will show us. We have to leave home.... so we can create a new home, and be a blessing. So home is a place you have to leave....

And home is also where the heart is. We catch a glimpse of this in a different reading of the same verse that begins "Lech lecha m'aretzecha." It would have been enough to say "Lech... m'aretzecha...go from your land"... why "Lech lecha", the doubling? "Lech lecha" can be read as "Go to your self. Go to your heart. That is the place God will show you... that is how you will be a blessing. "

Not long ago, I visited with a congregant who had just had serious heart surgery. In preparation for the surgery a social worker asked her what most frightened her about the impending operation. She responded: the idea of doctors sawing open my chest. Then she told me that as soon as she articulated that fear, she was overwhelmed by a vision of this: the ark in our sanctuary. She saw the doors open, the curtains part, and her doctor's hands reaching in and opening her heart. The image made her feel safe... and at home. For her, home is where the heart can be opened and healed.

I can think of no more powerful metaphor for this season than that image. Home is an open heart in an ark that holds the Torah. Because Torah, Jewish tradition, teaches us how to open our hearts. The path is compassion.

We think of compassion as a feeling. But it is so much more than that. The Hebrew word for compassion is rachamim. The root means both "womb" and "soft." Compassion is the inner experience of touching another being so closely that you no longer perceive the other as separate from you, like. "Love your neighbor as yourself" actually means: love your neighbor because he really is yourself. Love your neighbor not because she is like you but because she is part of you.

So compassion comes out of a profound existential awareness. I am not really separate from you. If I hurt you, I am actually hurting myself, If I ignore your pain, I am cutting myself off from the Divine Spirit that flows through all of us.

Compassion is the central attribute of God, according to our tradition. In a few minutes we'll chant "Adonai Adonai El Rachum v'Chanun" in front of the open ark... "Adonai Adonai is a compassionate God." Those words are God's description of who God is; the name YHVH which we pronounce as "Adonai", is the God of compassion. Every time we say Baruch Ata Adonai, we are saying: "You are blessed, Compassionate One."

Yes, there is another dimension of God as well, the one the tradition calls DIN, Judgment. Unfortunately, for many of us, that is the only dimension of God we discover in the high holy day prayers like the *Unetanh tokef*: The God of "Who shall live and who shall die... who by fire and who by water." That is the image of God our ancestors experienced in natural disasters, the hurricane that doesn't distinguish between good

people and bad people, the earthquake that devastates a country. But it is by no means the totality of how our tradition views God. If God were only DIN/Judgment, the world couldn't exist. If God didn't temper justice with compassion, the world would crash and burn.

Notice what is being presented here. Compassion is more than a feeling, more even than an existential awareness of connectedness. Compassion is a necessary precondition for the universe; it is built into the deep structure of the cosmos.

Just as we imagine that God must balance judgment and compassion, so must we. This doesn't mean there is no place for judgment. Sometimes compassion actually requires judgment, punishment or setting limits. But it is important to be clear what motivates the judgment. If it genuinely emerges out of sensitivity to another's soul, then it is also compassion. But if it arises out of our own ego needs, or fear, or confusion, then it will never lead to an open heart. If we don't balance judgment with compassion in our own lives... our lives and our relationships, like the universe, will crash and burn as well.

Recently a congregant came to see me about his elderly widowed mother-in-law. He and his wife had recently decided that her mother should no longer be living alone in Florida so they brought her out to Los Angeles to live with them and their teenaged daughter. He told me that his wife was increasingly impatient with how slowly her mother moved and how loud she needed the television to be. She was angry with her mother much of time, and while he understood the anger, he felt it was making the situation worse. He asked for help finding support services to lighten their load and for some Jewish wisdom to help them think about their choices. I shared the well known Jewish folk tale about the wooden bowl.

A frail old man went to live with his son, daughter-in-law and young grandson. The family ate together at the table, but the elderly grandfather's shaky hands and failing sight made eating difficult. The son complained: "I have had enough of spilled milk, noisy eating, and food on the floor." So the husband and the wife sent the grandfather to eat in his room and since he had broken a dish or two, his food was served in a wooden bowl.

One evening before supper, the father noticed his son playing with wood scraps on the floor. He asked his son "What are you making?" The boy responded, "Oh, I am making a wooden bowl for you so you can eat your food when you get old."

You know the end of the story. The parents brought the grandfather back to the table; Neither the husband nor the wife seemed to care any more about spilled milk.

A sweet story... it doesn't deny the difficulty of the situation. But it responds out of compassion and out of the truth that the parents will someday get old and frail. That elderly mother is not really separate from her daughter. Responding out of compassion, taking a breath before getting angry, being less impatient... none of this is easy...but it is what it means to respond from an open heart.

Are there limits to compassion? The world is filled with suffering and injustice; immersing ourselves in it too deeply can be debilitating. It can lead to "compassion fatigue"--being overwhelmed by the magnitude of a problem and therefore unable to respond. I often feel paralyzed when I think of what is happening to women like me, to girls like my daughter, in the Congo, in Sudan, in Somalia. The world is so broken... my heart is broken too. To save myself from that broken heart, I sometimes harden my heart. Nicholas Kristoff describes readers' reactions to his column about a father of eight in Somalia who lost two children to famine. Many responded that when men have so many children it is pointless to try to help. What they are really saying is: this could never happen to me because I am smarter than he is, I am different from him, I would never have so many children. After reminding his readers that Somalis have little access to family planning and girls' education, Kristoff writes: "It would be monstrous to allow Somalis to starve to death because they lost the same lottery of birth that all of us won."

Compassion, real compassion, pushes me to realize that I have won the lottery, and there but for fortune go you or go I. That father is me. Those girls could be my daughter. My heart is broken.... if it is an open heart.

Compassion becomes real through action. Even though I can't protect those women, I can support Jewish World Watch which is providing resources for rape counseling. It won't change the world, but it will make a difference in someone's life. And much closer to home, while I can't heal someone who is sick, I can bring over a meal or pay a visit. That's why we have a Caring Committee; I would like to ask you tonight to commit to a few of these visits over the New Year. (In fact, there is a volunteer form in your HH announcements--- take it out now; hand it in to an usher when you leave today.) Again, it won't change the world, and yes, maybe it is inconvenient.... But if I really feel that this other person actually is connected to me...how can I not visit? If I know that my mother is really part of me, won't I try harder to be patient with her?

The Talmud tells us that "Jews are to be "rachmanim b'nai rachmanim," compassionate children of compassionate parents." It continues: "Anyone who lacks compassion is certainly not a descendant of our forefather Abraham." Strong words, aren't they! If we are not compassionate, how can we call ourselves Jewish? If we are not compassionate, we will not be the blessing God promised that Abraham and his descendants would be. To be Jewish means to be that blessing, to never stop working on ourselves, never stop working on opening our hearts.

Look again at this ark holding our Torah, and its teachings about compassion. Home: the place God shows us, so we, like Abraham, can be a blessing. Home: our open heart.

Welcome home.