

## Home

Goldie Cohen, an elderly Jewish lady from New York, goes to her travel agent. "I want to go to India."

"Mrs. Cohen, why India? The crowds, the heat, the spicy food?!"

"I want to go to India."

"But it's a long journey, how will you manage? What will you eat? What will you drink? You'll get sick: the plague, cholera, malaria, God only knows!"

"I want to go to India."

The arrangements are made, and off she goes. Goldie arrives in India and makes her way to an ashram. There she joins a long line of people waiting for audience with the guru. An aide tells her that it will take at least three days of waiting to see him.

"It's OK," Goldie says.

Eventually she reaches the entrance. There she is told that she can only say three words to the guru.

"It's OK," she says.

She is ushered into the inner sanctum where the guru is seated, bestowing spiritual blessings upon eager initiates. Just before she reaches him Goldie is once again reminded: "Remember, just three words."

Unlike the other devotees, she does not prostrate at his feet. She stands directly in front of him, crosses her arms over her chest, fixes her gaze on his, and says:

"Sheldon, come home."<sup>1</sup>

In his book *After Heaven*, the American sociologist Robert Wuthnow articulates decades of research on the trends of religion in America. He notes that most Americans fall into two categories - dwellers and seekers. Those who find meaning and purpose in stability, in the known, are dwellers. Those who find meaning and purpose in the journey, in wandering and shifting landscapes beyond safe walls, are seekers. But he notes that within Judaism, we are presented with both modes of meaning. He writes:

[In Judaism, dwelling] spirituality is suggested in stories of the Garden of Eden and of the Promised Land; it consists of temple religion; and it occurs in the time of kings and priests. And spirituality of seeking is tabernacle religion, the faith of pilgrims and sojourners; it clings to the Diaspora and to prophets and judges, rather than to priests and kings. The one inheres to the mighty fortress, the other in desert mystics and itinerant preachers. The one is symbolized by

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.anotherqueerjubu.com/another\\_queer\\_jewish\\_budd/2009/02/sheldon-come-home-jewish-jokes-bhuddist-masters-and-advertising.html](http://www.anotherqueerjubu.com/another_queer_jewish_budd/2009/02/sheldon-come-home-jewish-jokes-bhuddist-masters-and-advertising.html)

the secure life of the monastery, the cloister, the shtetl; the other by peregrination as a spiritual ideal.<sup>2</sup>

We are the bearers of two ideals, propelled over and over again in our tradition to leave home only to come home again. We leave a promised land, only to strive to return. Our patriarchs and matriarchs enter and leave and enter and leave. We are the wanderers, and we are the builders. We carry the tradition of the Tabernacle, carrying God's presence in the midst of seeking, and we bear the iconic Temple, a fixed house for God. Ours is a perpetual story of leaving in order to return.

Like the image from our great spiritual teacher - American baseball - we leave home only to return to it. And victory requires both the leaving and the returning.

Home.

Some of us in this room recall idyllic childhoods. The memories, the love, the smell, the feel of our bed or the floor beneath our feet. We recall a bygone age when life felt simple, felt safe, an Eden in the landscape of memory. And whether consciously or not, so many of us yearn and strive to return to that feeling. We might find ourselves attempting to recreate the look and feel, to restore the sense of a holiday, the warmth of unconditional love, the smell of something baking in the oven. So many of us carry the pain of an Eden lost, wishing that one day we may return. We may delight in the life we have built, and yet still, deep down, we want to go home.

For others, we never had such a sense of home - the childhood recollections stir pain and trauma more than comfort. We find ourselves perpetually reaching for a home we have never known, for a sense of belonging that never came from our childhood bedroom or our family of origin. We ache for a sense of belonging, for our life to make sense. We watch with horror as thousands seek asylum, seek safety, who risk a wilderness beyond our comprehension. And yet we too are searching. To arrive at a Promised Land we have experienced only in legend.

In 1798, the great Hassidic leader Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi was imprisoned for teaching Judaism. It is said that before his trial, his warden opted to shower him with religious questions. He said:

"We read in Genesis that when Adam and Eve sinned, they hid themselves in Eden, and God called out, 'Where are you?' What I want to know is this. If God knows and sees everything, why did God need to ask: 'Where are you?'"

The rabbi replied:

"The words of the Torah were not meant for their time alone but for all time. So it is with the question God asked in Eden. It is a question posed to every generation. We leave from our home, we stumble along the way. But always, no matter where we find ourselves, we can hear the voice of God in our heart asking, 'Where are you?'" Come home. Come back to me.<sup>3</sup>

Even in Eden, a person can find herself alone. Even in the security of our apartments, enshrouded in supreme comforts, we may still hear that whisper in our hearts. Come home. At work, in our marriages, while adventuring, in times of solitude, and in courage and in defeat, again and again God calls to us

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, p. 4

<sup>3</sup> *The Torah's Seventy Faces*, ed. Simcha Raz, p.7

“Where are you?” You who seek? You who dwell? What path are you on? Do you remember your purpose? Come home.

In the Torah, our patriarch Jacob is in exile. His own ego and pride tears apart his family, and he flees in fear. Stumbling towards an unknown future, he watches the sun set and the world darken around him. Alone and afraid, with only a stone for a pillow, he goes to sleep. He dreams of a ladder stretching from the earth towards heaven. God promises Jacob “Remember – I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go.”

When Jacob wakes up from his dream he exclaims, “Surely God is present in this place, and I did not know it!” Shaken, he says, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.” Jacob names the place “Beit El,” meaning, “the home of God.”<sup>4</sup>

For some of us, home may be a place fixed in space. For others, an experience fixed in time. For others, a relationship fixed in connection. But our tradition reminds us that home may be found wherever we go. In a barren desert, upon a dark rock, within paradise, in a land flowing with milk and honey. Dwellers and seekers, savorers and strugglers, our tradition calls us home in wherever we are.

Home. So many of us grasp at shadows of the past, hearts breaking as we try to bring ourselves back to the place that now exists only in memory. So many of us cling to whispers of a promised land, feeling despair and solitude as we struggle in the wilderness. Wondering when we may finally arrive.

So long as we tether our sense of home to the shadows or to dreams, our life leaves us parched in the desert. But what if we could mirror the illuminations of Jacob? What if, in our wanderings we could open our eyes, to find relationship, connection, divinity before us. What if we could live in Beit El, if we could leave and come home each and every day of our life?

אחת שאשאלתי מאת־יהוה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתַי  
One thing I ask of the Holy One  
only this do I seek:  
To live in the home of God  
all the days of my life...<sup>5</sup>

For the psalmist, this is our most elemental yearning. To arrive wherever we are. To be at home wherever we may be. To find belonging in the divine presence always. We who have been cast out. We who have exiled ourselves. We who reach and stumble, who dream and fall? What if, even with our heads on stone we could open our eyes to find God beside us?

This season of *teshuvah* is so often framed as our season of repentance and resolution. But “teshuvah” more accurately translates as “returning” - or as Rabbi Lawrence Kushner puts it - “coming home.”<sup>6</sup> Now is our time to come home. Come home Sheldon. Come home.

That is our task at this season. For each of us individually. But also for us as a collective.

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 28

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 27

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Words*, p. 31-32

So goes the well-worn synagogue joke:

A Jew is shipwrecked on a desert island. Years later, a passing ship stops to rescue him. When the captain comes ashore, the castaway thanks him and gives him a tour of the little island. He shows off his tools, his fire pit, the synagogue he built for praying in, his hammock. On their way back to the ship, however, the captain notices a second synagogue. "I don't understand," the captain asks; "why did you need to build two synagogues?" "Oh," says the Jew, "this is the synagogue I would never step foot in."

The trouble is, the humorous truth behind that joke is beginning to fade into a different era of American Jewry. For two years, Jewish leadership has been grappling with the mountain of data emerging from the 2013 Pew Study on American Jewish life. There is fascinating information about a wide range of the American Jewish experience, from politics to practices. The most thought-provoking data concerns the decline of synagogue life. Forty years ago, 70% of American Jews belonged to a synagogue. Today that number hovers at only 30%.<sup>7</sup>

Here at Rodeph Sholom membership is stable, our walls filled with energy of all ages, and so we seem sheltered from this larger trend. But the world is filled with an increasing number of Sheldons, those who find their meaning and purpose beyond these walls. The Pew study made it clear - the question is no longer, which is the synagogue I go to and which is the one I would never step foot in. The question now is - "why synagogue" at all?

Just shy of 100 years ago, the late Mordecai Kaplan founded his vision of the future of the Jewish synagogue – the Jewish Center up on 86<sup>th</sup> Street. Kaplan made this ten-story structure into "a shul with a pool and a school." At that time, he knew that the synagogue had to both create community and help integrate American Jewry into civic life. Kaplan, the father of the JCC model, saw the future of Jewish institutions to be a multi-faceted clearinghouse of culture and connection. It was meant to be a home for everything Jewish.<sup>8</sup>

40 years ago synagogues and churches had a veritable monopoly in the marketplace of meaning. As Wuthnow pointed out, it was an era where dwellers defined religion, and the synagogue thrived as a result. Now we live at a time when the world is flooded with organizations offering meaning in life, structured for this era of seekers - from book clubs to Pilates studios. If learning is what you want - you can take a class at Skirball with the top Jewish scholars in the world. If social justice is your thing - AJWS and the JDC frankly make a bigger impact than we do. If you want to advocate for Israel - join ARZA or AIPAC or JStreet depending on your politics. Need friends? MeetUp.com has thousands of groups based on age and interest. And we all see that nowadays, wanting your child to become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is not reason enough for a synagogue to exist. Rooms and rabbis can be rented through a simple search on Google. Synagogues, which once were the great centers of Jewish meaning now find themselves surrounded by an array of offerings, each specialized for specific needs and interests.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-3-jewish-identity/>; The number for American Jewry as a whole currently is 31%; amongst Reform Jews the number is 34%, Conservative Jews 50%, and Orthodox Jews 69%, which indicates the urgency within the Reform world in particular.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.jewishcenter.org/history.html>; not to be confused with the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, which Kaplan founded in 1922 as an exploration to new approaches in bringing Judaism into modern American life.

So, why synagogue? It just so happens, I think our answer is the very same answer given thousands of years ago in our first communal structure. The *mishkan*, the mobile desert tabernacle, the house of seeking, the dwelling of God. "Let them make for me a sanctuary," instructs God, "that I may dwell amongst them."<sup>9</sup> The collective builds a sanctuary, a home for God and for the entire nation. And sense of belonging through all the wilderness wanderings.

Over the centuries, this portable portal of divinity would become a fixed marble Temple. Destruction and diaspora would fragment it into a multitude of study halls and synagogues, but the model remained the same. The collective building belonging. And these homes would evolve and change in each and every era.

Kaplan's vision for a synagogue as a Jewish intermediary with the broader world worked in a time when Jews couldn't afford, had no access to, or weren't interested in what secular society offered - conditions that do not exist today. In fact, if Kaplan were alive today, I believe he would demand that we once again reconstruct the central structure of Jewish life to fit the needs of American Jewry as it finds itself now, not a hundred years ago.

All of which means that the time has come to articulate the purpose of synagogue today and for the future. And I believe the answer, the purpose of this synagogue echoes the very same lesson of Jacob and our tabernacle long ago. This place is meant to be a home for us wherever we are in our life. Dwellers and seekers alike. This is meant to be Beit El, a house of God, a home for all people, wherever our journeys make take us.

Only here, only in a synagogue, is the divinity of every human being brought into display. This is the one institution whose purpose is to open our eyes to wonder, to incline our hearts to the sacred. Only in a synagogue can you be part of a community whose default assumption is that everyone - young and old, single and married, dweller and seeker, people who interest you and those who really, really annoy you - all belong together. With each birth, a new world is born. With each death, we lose an irreplaceable life. In our missteps, we arrive here knowing that despite our failings, we may still seek redemption. In our joy and in our heartbreak, we come here to ponder a universe in which unfathomable pain exists alongside inexplicable miracle. For so many of us, this is our home, the place in which we have wept and laughed, a place of constancy in a sea of change. We may not walk in here often enough, but when we do, we feel the wood of the pews, the smell of the prayerbooks. We feel like we've come home. Here we belong.

The synagogue is meant to be many things. Since its inception as a Jewish home long ago, it was framed with three roles - to be a Beit Knesset - a house of gathering people into a collective; a Beit Midrash - a house of learning and growth; and a Beit T'filah - a house of prayer and sacred intention. Social bonding, education, and prayer. All things found within each and every synagogue. But what we often fail to focus on is that first Hebrew word of each of these layers - Beit. Bayit. This is meant to be a house, a home, for us all.

What does it mean to feel at home? A sense of belonging, no matter how long one spends within the walls. A sense of connection, no matter how many others are around. A sense of comfort, no matter what else is happening in the world. As we watch the pendulum again swing from dwelling to seeking

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<sup>9</sup> Exodus 25:8

and back again, we at Rodeph Sholom look to a bright future. We are looking to marry the models of our tradition, to bring both the Temple and the Tabernacle together, to help each of us find Beit El, whether in these walls or in our wilderness wanderings. We want this to be a year when we all come home.

As a Beit Knesset, a Home of Gathering, this year we will join a collection of other synagogues around the country as a Community of Practice. With the guidance of some of the best minds at the Union for Reform Judaism, we will begin exploring new ways of connecting our congregation through small groups, helping each person be seen and known and link to kindred spirits. We also celebrate the rise of Tribe, our new grassroots Millennial community built with B'nai Jeshurun of Short Hills – by bringing Jewish connection beyond these walls into young adults' homes and waterholes, we engaged nearly 1,500 Jewish Millennials in our first year.

As a Beit Midrash, a Home of Learning, this year we will be inviting you in to a salon-style learning experience with Rabbi Levine, sitting together to discuss some of the deepest questions at this time. We will continue our commitment to extend this home into your home with our "Give Us 10" initiative - find 10 fellow congregants, and we'll come to your home and learn with you. And for our youth, this year we will pilot dozens of new initiatives, from toddlers to teens, linking you, in new ways, to your CRS home.

As a Beit Tefilah, a Home of Prayer and Contemplation, this year we will deepen and broaden our doors for prayer and reflection. From Shireinu to Shir Chadash, we will continue to open modes of worship that offer connection for all members of our community. With a new Adult ensemble and American Sign Language choir, we will help ensure this house is built by all. With a new spirituality initiative launching this year, we will help create a space for seekers to join with others in a search of connection. Like Jacob long ago, we aim to make this a home for all to hear the whispers of divinity and the comfort of God.

And as we strive to do all we can to make this a home for each of you, in turn we ask something of you. Dwellers and seekers. Savorers and strugglers. Come home. Create the time and space to return. Pause, learn, connect, roll up your sleeves, be one of the builders of this home. Help us create new ways to bring this home out into the world beyond. Make this a stable dwelling of constancy, and make this a portable place of connection through all our journeys.

Because this is the primal yearning of this season. Belonging. Building. Connecting. Coming home. As Abraham Joshua Heschel would reflect:

"As a tree torn from the soil, as a river separated from its source, the human soul wanes when detached from what is greater than itself. Without the holy, the good turns chaotic; without the good, beauty becomes accidental. It is the pattern of the impeccable which makes the average possible. It is the attachment to what is spiritually superior: loyalty to a sacred person or idea, devotion to a noble friend or teacher, love for a person or for [humanity], which holds our life together."<sup>10</sup>

This is the very heart of the synagogue. The very purpose of our Tabernacle and Temple long ago. Hand in hand we build a shared sanctuary of the sacred together, linking people and generations with an awareness of meaning. The mobile tent of our ancestors has taken on new shapes in each era, but its

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<sup>10</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 342

purpose has echoed eternal. This is our home. Dwellers and seekers. Temple and Tabernacle. And in this space, in the bond of a people reaching and aspiring, we echo the same mission from long ago.

We are the builders of the sacred,  
we are the purveyors of divinity,  
we are the wanderers carrying hope towards a Promised Land.

*Come, come, whoever you are.  
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.  
It doesn't matter.  
Ours is not a caravan of despair.  
Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times.  
Come, yet again, come, come.<sup>11</sup>*

Come home Sheldon.  
This year  
Come home.

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<sup>11</sup> Rumi, inscription on his tombstone. As quoted in *In the Footsteps of Rumi* by Rashid Osmani, xx.