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Shabbat Shuvah 5780
Congregation Rodeph Shalom

Return

Good evening and Shabbat Shalom. Tonight, in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we celebrate Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat of Return.

As a people, we hope to return one day to the land of Israel.

As congregants, we return each year to synagogue for the High Holy Days.

As individuals, we hope to return to our true selves—better, stronger, more self-aware and ready to use our gifts and live our potential.

Consider Shabbat Shuvah to be a kind of annual check-in point. We are all on life journeys. But no matter how far we go, or how close we choose to stay, we all, eventually, return home. Tonight I'm here to tell you about my own journey and return.

As a journalist, I thought that if tragedy would come, it would happen overseas, while I was covering the ethnic wars and conflict that had spread from Russia to Central Asia and the Balkans following the collapse of Communism, bearing witness and trying to give voice to people who had none. There were moments I'll never forget. Like being shelled in Chechnya while my mother in her heart of hearts knew that I was in danger, and, worse, that there was nothing she could do. Or covering a massacre outside the village of Samashky, when another mother held my hand and told me through tears that I looked just like the daughter she had lost in war. Why was I ok when so many people weren't? It was a question I had been asking since I had studied political philosophy in college.

When tragedy hit, however, it was at home, on the Upper West Side.

Ten years ago, my beloved husband died of cancer. Our children were three and five years old at the time. The following year, my mother died of cancer and then my father. All were relatively young and died far too soon. I can't begin to describe how deeply I still feel the loss of those I love so much. They were my anchors. Now I needed to become the anchor.

Looking back, it's hard to imagine how I survived that terrible time. I credit and thank my children, who were and are my joy and my salvation. It may sound strange that small children could play such a pivotal role in my return, but that's my reality. I also credit so many dear friends and family, an inner circle who comforted me and advised me on the intricate realities I needed to deal with. The Rabbis here at Rodeph Sholom also helped me navigate the challenging and comforting rituals that help us heal.

But instead of talking about loss, I want to focus on recovery and return. We often can't change or control what happens to us but we certainly have the power to choose how we react.

Three and a half weeks after my husband died, I was at his desk at the *New York Post*, writing his column, which I had taken over. I had written it for him, under his byline, while he had been in the hospital. I didn't have a moment to grieve. I had to support my children. "I could never have done what you did," is something I heard a lot back then. Yes you could. What other choice is there?

Yes, I've been through a lot. But, really, who hasn't? I am reminded of the story of Buddha and the mustard seed. It's a story my father told me as a child. A woman begs the Buddha to bring back her dead son. No problem, he says. Just bring me back a mustard seed from a home that has not known death. The mother knocks on a lot of doors. And she hears a lot of stories. She could have gathered buckets of tears. But not one mustard seed.

I, too, heard a lot of stories, and soon realized that we are all on this journey together. There were people in my life, including at this synagogue, who became my angels. You still are. And that was perhaps one of the toughest things I had to do. To learn how to accept help. The reality is that I could not have raised my kids the way I did without the help of so many people, many of whom are in this sanctuary tonight. It takes a village to raise children in the best of circumstances. My thanks are eternal.

I grew up in Toronto, where my family belonged to a similar congregation, so joining Rodeph Sholom was natural. But the synagogue and the community that came with it took on new meaning after so much death. My children had to know that we were part of a community, that we were part of something bigger than just us.

Most importantly, I put my children in the synagogue's choir. It was something I did as a child, and now here was the return: my children following suit, only in New York instead of Toronto.

And here, in this great sanctuary, is where I healed, thanks to the power of music and the children's sweet voices, singing with such joy. Every Monday at 6:00 PM I would come to this sanctuary and listen to my children and all the others. I looked forward to this time every week. There was nothing better than hearing their voices. Some of the lyrics and melodies carried me back to my own childhood too. It was yet another return.

As women, we devote ourselves to our families. In my case, that meant being a good daughter, a good sister, and then a good wife and mother. I remember when I first met my husband, I was so happy that I negated everything I did before I met him. Living on my own in Moscow? Reporting from war zones? Covering Russian Organized Crime? That was nothing! It's true, it's nothing in the big scheme of things. But I became so focused on my kids that I lost sight, for a time, of who I am. I wrote my first book, in a sense, so my future kids could get a sense of who I was before I had them. Now it's time to write another one. To give them a sense of who I am today.

Ten years after my husband's death, I have finally returned to my true self. It has taken a long time. Each of us has our own personal timeline that is unique to who we are and what our circumstances have been. I have survived, in part, because of my return. It is good to remember that we are all in this together. If there is a law of unintended consequences, perhaps it is that my children and I now share an even more unbreakable bond and a depth of compassion and strength that will carry us forward, through whatever life brings.

Looking back, I harnessed the power and strength that I always had. I value the person I was, and the person I am. I think of Nietzsche's eternal return of the same, which was part of my college studies—reading the same book, the collected works of Nietzsche—that my great-grandfather had given my father for his bar mitzvah! As Jews, we, too are on an eternal return. Jews talk a lot about life cycles and circles. We return, over and over, to read the same book, the Torah, to go to the same service, to be the same person—only better, stronger, more in touch with who we really are and, thus, better equipped to reach our true potential. Adversity—as a tribe, as a community, as an individual—doesn't build strength. Instead, it reveals character. We heal ourselves first, and then we go out to help heal and repair the world.

Economist Cyril Northcore Parkinson once wrote that work expands to fill the time allotted for it. The same can be said of the heart. I've always believed that the heart can expand to fill the need. Our capacity for love—to give love and to be loved—is never-ending. That's how we find our way back home. It is our own eternal return. Coming back home. Owning who you are, and the experiences that make you who you are. The people you love and will do everything to protect and fight for. And the people who do that right back for you. On this Shabbat Shuvah, return to love. Return to you. Check in, and then continue on your beautiful journey. You never know where it will lead. Thank you, and Shabbat Shalom.