

Kol Nidrey Sermon 2021
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On The Doorposts Of Our Homes

Not so long ago, I hung up the *mezuzot* in our new home and ran into a perennially Midwestern problem: would I affix the mezuzah for my front door in *front* of or *behind* the glass storm door?

I gauged. The doorpost on the exterior side of the storm door did not leave enough space to affix my mezuzah. I would have no choice but to affix my mezuzah on the *inside* of the storm door. I grabbed my command strip (top tip - I highly recommend command strips) and angled my mezuzah, recited the relevant *brachah* (blessing) and stuck it diagonally on the doorframe *between* the storm door and the front door. A job well done, I might add. Besides, my mezuzah would be a little more protected from the elements and in Iowa, which can't be a bad thing.

Soon enough, there was something that perturbed me. The mezuzah was obscured from sight and no longer visible from the outside. One could only see the mezuzah upon entry by opening the storm door. This observation saddened me and got me thinking about Jewishness and how we live out that Jewishness in the privacy of our homes as well as the public spaces we inhabit.

In Parashat Ki Tavo, a Torah portion deep in the Book of Deuteronomy that we read a few weeks ago, there's a strange story among all the blessings and curses that the portion is famous for. Ki Tavo recounts the entry of the Israelites into the Promised Land and creates a peculiar and particular ritual to mark this longed-for entry. I teach this in the name of my dear colleague, Rabbi Michael Gilboa, for drawing my attention to this part of the story as well as its Talmudic commentary. In Chapter 27 of Deuteronomy we are told: '*V'haya bayom asher ta'avru et haYarden el ha'aretz asher Adonai eloheicha noten lach v'hakemotah l'cha avanim g'dolot v'seid'ta otam ba'sid v'chatav'ta aleichen et kol divrei ha'Torah hazot...*' As soon as you have crossed the Jordan into the land that the Eternal your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones. Coat them with plaster and inscribe upon them all the words of this Teaching... (Deut. 27:2-3).

It's easy to lose sight of this brief detail because of what the text talks about next: descriptions of a land flowing with milk and honey and a series of important ethical exhortations. Is it really all that important that the Torah instructs us to set up plastered pillars with Torah texts on the physical boundaries of the Promised Land? It seems like a footnote in the high drama of Deuteronomistic ethical monotheism.

Of course the Talmud, in Tractate 35b, excavates this story and uncovers complex, unsettling layers of meaning. The Talmud helps clarify what needs to be done: three sets of twelve pillars were meant to be set up at three different locations. The pillars

were meant to be plastered over with white plaster so that the carved, black letters would be revealed underneath and clear for all to read.

In true rabbinic fashion, Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Shimon start parsing what may have been the significance of these stones. Were they ordinary boundary markers or did they bear greater significance? Rabbi Shimon argues something radical: that the plastered pillars were not part of the pedagogy of educating the Jewish people *themselves*, but rather the nations of the earth. The Holy One of Blessing, Rabbi Shimon argued, gave the nations a 'binah yeteirah', extra understanding, to read the Torah on these pillars and to be able to carve off the plastered layer and take it with them for their own edification. Then, his lofty universalism takes a darker, more absolutist and more toxic turn: Rabbi Shimon expressed disappointment and condemnation that this is not what 'the nations' had done and this passage in the Gemara (Talmud) condemns them for it.

We are left with a bitter taste in our mouth as we struggle with the ultimate consequence of both Jewish particularism and universalism. At the base of this strange account lies a powerful question, however: for *who* are those pillars erected?

Rabbi Gilboa teaches that these pillars can be seen as the mezuzot to the Land of Israel, our collective Biblical Jewish home. If they are the 'mezuzot' of our collective home then what is their purpose? Are they meant to be, well, *hidden* behind the proverbial storm door or *visible* to all those passing by? Does a mezuzah mark internality - the space *in* our Jewish homes, our Jewish souls, our Jewish hearts? Or is it a communicator of something more boundless and universal, an example of how Judaism impacts the world?

As I closed my storm door, seeing my mezuzah disappear behind it, these were the thoughts that occurred to me. What does it mean to make a Jewish 'home' — metaphorically as well as practically—in a time such as this?

During Rosh haShanah, I introduced our three-part 'home' theme for the High Holidays. Basing ourselves on 'Achat Sha'alti', Psalm 27, we started on a journey to reimagine what home means: in terms of ourselves, our belonging to the Jewish people and being world citizens. During Rosh haShanah, we explored how important it is to ground ourselves compassionately in what home means to us as individuals. In this sermon, we dwell on what 'home' means to our Jewish people.

The dance between particularism and universalism in our tradition is subject to centrifugal forces.

We both orbit through the gravity our own concerns as well as launch ourselves outward into the limitless world. We need to be both spiritually grounded as well as morally extraverted in order to anchor ourselves in the Judaism for our day and to acknowledge its challenges and blessings. There is no better metaphor to capture this sacred tension than the mezuzah: that very identifying marker that signals to ourselves: *we are Jews*, and that signals to the world: *we are Jews*.

Do we hang our mezuzot primarily for ourselves or also a little bit for others? The Jewish people, after all, are *a particular people with a universal mission*.

And we stand on the edge of a precipice; our own tall Mount Ebal, overlooking our Promised Land.

These last 18 months have either seen communal shifts and changes initiated or accelerated. The 2020/2021 Pew Report confirmed what many of us already know from our lived experience: our Jewish community is both more open and fluid than ever before in Jewish history. It is also desirous to root itself in a strong sense of self. We are, for instance, more ethnically and racially diverse. "Around nine-in-ten Jewish American adults (92%) identify as non-Hispanic White, while 8% identify with other racial or ethnic categories. Among Jews ages 18 to 29, however, the share who identify as a race or ethnicity other than non-Hispanic White rises to 15%."

Jews are also about half less likely to be religious than the general American population (no surprises there, friends!) While 27% of Americans attend worship services weekly, only 12% of Jews do. (That's why it's so great to see y'all on Zoom here tonight--I'm going to make it worth my while). Of course, there are more ways to be Jewish than just through religiosity and this is born out too in the rich cultural lives and experiences of American Jews where 72% 'cook Jewish food' and an impressive 62% share said food with their non-Jewish friends at Jewish holidays. (Let us pray that it's not gefilte fish). Jews also report increased concerns of antisemitism in this country (three-quarters indicated as such) while 82% indicated that their caring about Israel was either 'essential or important.'

Of course, these are just the cliff notes from the Pew Report, and we need to draw any conclusions cautiously and not be reductionist in how we read this data. Instead, we should take from it that our Jewish home is both riveted and invigorated by tension and contradiction. Today's America in many ways is an easier place to be Jewish; today's Jewish community in many ways is a more fraught place to be Jewish. As our fingers brush against the mezuzot of our Jewishness, we are called to reflect upon what it all means, especially during this time of great upheaval.

These last 18 months we have been growing and birthing a new kind of Judaism. Our Zoom services have built a new sense of home among us but are also a magnificent outreach opportunity where the walls fall away and the doors are opened for those new to our community or new to Judaism altogether. An unscientific poll among my colleagues has confirmed that membership affiliation as well as the interest in conversion has risen throughout the liberal Jewish world. People are searching for community and finding it with us, and fewer things could give me more joy. Now, exploring a synagogue service needs to be not so intimidating; just hop on Zoom. Accessibility, be it weather, age or ability-related, has been radically redefined in the age of Zoom worship. At the same time while large gatherings are contraindicated, I

have also witnessed the blossoming of smaller communal gatherings and even ‘drop-off services’ and one-on-one relationships.

At the same time, we also experience more stressors; internally as well as externally. For all the merits of Zoom, in-person community is crucial and we pray for the day that we can safely reopen to full capacity again. Antisemitism continues to be a concern these last five years (to such a degree that we too have implemented safety upgrades), and making space for a range of attachments to and opinions on the Land and State of Israel in our broader Jewish community continues to be crucial in our polarizing times.

Both families and individuals are facing more complex pressures in our day-to-day lives that compete with our attention, time and resources. A lot of ‘old school’ models for doing synagogue and supplementary education invite us to bold reimagining. The truth remains that people are still looking for connection, community, meaning, a sense of Jewishness and a sense of transcendence.

Building our ‘batei Adonai’, our ‘houses of God’, to paraphrase Psalm 27, requires *more* vision and intentionality than ever before. During Rosh haShanah, I pointed out the irony that while the Psalmist, King David, dreamed of dwelling in God’s House, he never actually merited building it. It was a bold vision and a deep spiritual yearning, cast into emotionally resonant metaphor. His son, King Solomon eventually put that vision to reality.

In the first book of Kings, a precise description is given of Solomon’s Temple; a space built up from the finest woods, carved with floral designs and overlaid with gold, like a fractal of the Ark of the Covenant. More striking than the descriptions of the Temple’s construction itself, was the extended prayer that King Solomon offered at its inauguration. Kneeling, with his palms upturned to Heaven, the King prayed the paradoxes of the ‘Bayit’; the Jewish ‘Home’: unbounded yet defined, particular yet universal, grounding the Israelite and inviting the foreigner. He prays that the Temple may be a vessel of atonement and sanctification.

He prays that the Temple is the seat of what makes the Jewish people unique as well as the door through which distant peoples can find their connection in God. ‘And may these words of mine... be close to the Eternal our God day and night, that He may provide for His servant and for His people Israel, according to each day’s needs—to the end that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Eternal alone is God, - *ki Adonai Hu haElohim, Eid Od* - there is no other.’ (1 Kings 8:60).

King Solomon prayed for a ‘menuchah l’amo Yisrael’, (1 Kings 8:56) a consolation for the people Israel, so that we would be ‘wholehearted’ (‘levav’chem shalem) in our journey. King David asked the question: ‘one thing I ask’—King Solomon provides the answer.

And so it is for us too. We ask questions of meaning, connection, community and transcendence in our torn age, and the answer rises up to meet us. We are *Jews*; a covenant-people. We build our house; a house of many, complicated, contradictory rooms, a house of many open doors. Our Jewish lives are not simple; nor are they to

be taken for granted. Our Jewishness demands commitment and while our bandwidth for such things is strained. Our Jewishness requires both healthy skepticism and a leap of faith. Our Jewishness invites a deep love of peoplehood together with an abiding embracing of profound difference.

These are not easy tasks, and while I grant my innate bias when it comes to the project of being Jewish, I can and will continue to heartily recommend it: *b'ahavah*, *b'simchah*, with love and with joy.

The mezuzot on our doorposts are there; inscribed like the tablets of our hearts. We may not always be able to see them; but they are there and they continue to remind us that this Jewish life is worth living. Let us walk through the doorposts of each other's homes and be connected in the redemptive vision of all that our people is and still become. *Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*: may we be strengthened.

G'mar chatimah tovah, wishing you a good, final sealing in the Book of Life.