

Rosh haShanah Sermon Day 2, 2021/5782
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Our Homes, Our Souls, Ourselves

'How are you?'

Let's take a deep breath.

Asking how we are doing these days has become a perennially fraught and complicated question. For many of us, I am sure, it feels that after over 18 months, we're stretched, pressed, squeezed or barely holding it together. The question 'is all well with our soul' is a difficult one to answer. The response is not found in what we can *say* but in what we can *imagine*.

The pandemic has uprooted our sense of 'home', sometimes with worrying and dire consequences. Reports of domestic violence in the United States have risen drastically during the pandemic, by at least 8.1% according to one international study¹. Even for families that suffer no such dynamics, the pandemic has stretched people to their limits. Juggling at-home work with at-home schooling; not being able to find distance, space and privacy in domestic relationships as well as worrying about the wellbeing of the members of your household are common refrains that I know personally all too well. That is not to mention people who have been made otherwise vulnerable: those who live alone and experience isolation, those who have suffered economic hardship, who have fallen ill with COVID, or other health issues as collateral damage—the list goes on. If we extend the metaphor of the home as our Temple, then the pandemic is our own '*Churban*', destructive trauma. *Our walls have been breached*.

While the Rosh haShanah liturgy does not necessarily center 'home' and the challenges of domestic life, the Torah readings do. Both the account of the *Akeidah* (the near-sacrifice of Isaac, Genesis 22) and the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21) candidly demonstrate the stressors and dysfunction of 'home.'

Truth to be told, home is not always a safe space—not even for our ancestors, the giants of our tradition. When we *daven* (pray) 'God of our ancestors, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah', we appeal to '*El Ro'i*', the 'God Who sees'—the One Who bears witness to Hagar's pain and ours. In the *Amidah*, we bear witness not only to the glory of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs but also to their suffering: the barrenness they endured, the sacrifices they offered, the toxic power dynamics that unfolded between them as they scrambled for the elusiveness of the covenantal promise; whether it is Sarah demanding Hagar's casting out into a forbidding desert or Abraham gaslighting Isaac to march to his own death.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/01/us/domestic-violence-pandemic-trnd/index.html>

Across the eons, their stories echo into our own. When our sureties fall away in a once-in-a-hundred-years cataclysmic event, *their* experiences gain both poignancy and relevance. The idolatry of sacrificing our children to the expediency of ideology no longer seems an abstraction. The cruelty of the expulsion of vulnerable refugee women are again a headline in our media. The conflict of people under one roof with little respite and even less recourse is now the story of millions. We heed the words of the *Machzor* as we pray for life; to stay the hand of death, plague, fire and water.

Our ancestors knew that 'home' was not always safe, and this continues to be the case. In our day and age, we bear witness to a renewed and rampant misogyny against women and pregnant people, whether it is controlling their basic freedoms to work and education half a globe from here or curtailing the autonomy over their reproductive health far closer to home. Just as the idea of 'home' has been a temple of love, it has also been a shrine to cruelty.

These Torah readings were chosen for a reason. Of course, they tie in with the classic themes of Divine will and sovereignty, linking together covenant, destiny and redemption. But I cannot help but shake the feelings that just like the confessional prayers on Yom Kippur, the Rabbis wanted to make explicit what is implicit: we are called to reflect on the state of our homes, and thus, of ourselves and our souls, through the prism of the Torah's gut-wrenching stories. The turmoil of our ancestors give us permission and invitation to struggle in our own lives.

And as many of us have experienced, those struggles have become amplified these one-and-a-half years. The pandemic has been an experience that cleaved us: it has both joined humanity together in an '*agudah achat*', a singular, universal experience, as well as divided us most cruelly and viscerally along every border of inequity. We hold both those truths in our hearts.

Our homes may be points of pain or conflict, but they are also oases of healing and connection. They are the nexus between our innermost selves and our world; skin between breath and air.

This High Holiday season, this new year 5782, we can all turn our hearts to our physical homes and to our spiritual homes, the '*chadrei beten*', the chambers of our innards, where our inner flames burn.

When I started thinking about my sermon series over the summer, I admit that I had chosen the theme 'Rededication'. I had hoped (against hope) after all, that we had turned a corner with the pandemic. I imagined that we would rededicate our synagogue and our lives, emerge from isolation and re-embrace community at its fullest. I was contemplating Hanukkah imagery; 'Kislev in Tishrey', dwelling on the notion of what it must have been like for the Maccabees to not just light the oil lamps of the Menorah, but to pick up the pieces of a broken sanctuary, sweep the floors, throw out the idols, polish the silver and stitch back together the *parochet*, the curtain, separating the Holy of Holies.

A lot a 'clean-up' will be required after this pandemic ends; both physically and metaphorically, and that cleansing will invite a new beginning and a fresh vision.

Alas, we are not there yet. We are still in the moment of disruption. The metaphor that comes to mind instead is the gap of time between the destruction of the First Temple and the rebuilding of the Second. We are all a little bit in exile; carried off to Babylon, where as Psalm 137 states; '*...sham yashav'nu gam bachinu b'zacharnu et Tzion*' - 'We sit and weep, singing songs of Zion. We haven't returned yet; we know that one day we will, and though we have sown in tears, we will reap in joy, as Psalm 126 proclaims, but it hasn't happened yet. The Delta variant is prolonging our exile—but we must also remember that some of Judaism's deepest truths and transformations were found during this exilic period. This is a period of darkness but also a time of truth; a time of night but also, revelation.

Home is our greatest treasure store; our '*Maoz Tzur*', fortress and stronghold. The High Holidays are early, and the weather mild. But the days are shortening steadily, and we are left with questions on how to find meaning for the days ahead.

'How are you?' remains a fraught question, but we can find the answer in *ourselves*. We can be intentional in how we recognize our trauma and accept it as authentic, carve out compassionate space to tend to our souls. We have the experience of our first exile and can be heartened that though we are a lot wearier, we are also stronger, smarter and wiser. We have the vaccine. We have the redemptive instruments of science. But *most of all*, we have each other.

The Torah's stories of Hagar, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael and Sarah converge on points of poignant redemption. While Sarah is never reunited with Isaac after Abraham returns with his son, Ishmael and Isaac, the two traumatized, estranged brothers, come together to bury Abraham in the Cave of Machpelah (Gen. 25:9), processing the aftermath of their home, engaging in a unique and preternal kind of *t'shuvah*. I don't think this *t'shuvah* would have been possible without the healing power of home. Only a few verses earlier, in Gen. 24:67, do we learn that Isaac found healing when he brought his bride Rebecca into his tent and loved her. '*Vayinachem Yitzchak acharei imo*' – 'and Isaac was comforted after his mother's [death].' Rashi, citing Midrash Genesis Rabbah (60:16) makes clear what made this healing possible: it was Rebecca's wisdom and tending to the fires of hearth and home. It was purposeful love. Rebecca returned Sarah's lit Shabbat candles, rising dough and hovering cloud of the Divine presence. In short, home became an anchoring place of sanctuary, despite the pain and loss suffered. Home became a place of healing; of discovery, delight and intimate connection.

So too can it be for us. As we see each Zoom tile light up for a second year in a row, we are reminded of the ambivalence of the medium. Zoom is disruptive and distracting, but also bonding and unifying. These little tiles allow us to peek into each other's homes, to form a communion of vignettes that underscore our shared humanity. We see living rooms, pets and children in the background and

we are reminded of how much we are alike. Our sense of home and ability to build a home, be it actual or spiritual, will give us the endurance to ride out the pandemic. Home is the incubator for powerful Jewish ideas and professed Jewish lives. Home is where we sow in tears and harvest in song—with joy and resilience, with grace where possible and hope where probable.

And next year, perhaps, ‘how are you?’ may very well be answered with, ‘no matter where I find myself or how I find the world, all is well with my soul.’ May the Holy One of Blessing grant us both strength and wholeness to ground ourselves in this New Year.

L'shanah tovah u'metukah—a good and sweet New Year.