

**The Place We Call Home**  
**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5777**  
**The Riverway Project @ Temple Israel**  
**Rabbi Jen Gubit**

When it was still a thing to print photos\*, for some reason I ended up with more hard copies of one particular image than any other photo that day. Perhaps it was a printing issue. Or more likely an over eager parent who took multiple snaps - and when printed in doubles, well, that was a lot of pictures. Move-in day freshman year of college and, if you look closely enough, you can see tears in our parents eyes. We had just hung a mezuzah on the doorpost of our dorm room. We all took turns hammering in that encased scroll which marked the room's entrance but was like punctuation on the end of a sentence. From the comfort of our parents' homes we were on the path to building our own.

When we leave home we discern for ourselves: what is the house I want to build? When we leave home we learn from others how they are fulfilled. When we leave home some of us yearn to return. Some of us yearn *never* to return again. And all of us travel our whole lives: journeying, leave-taking, trekking, searching, running, wandering, voyaging, exploring, and sometimes escaping. Whether by choice or by force, by call or by chance all of us journey our whole lives in search of the place we call home.

\*\*

The place we call home. Where exactly is it? What exactly is it?

This is the foundational question of growing up. It is the eternal question for the Jewish people and the fundamental question of being alive. Where is the place I call home? What does it feel like? What does it look like? What does it sound like, smell like? Does my vision of the place I call home even take shape like that? Is it physical or theoretical?

And how do I get there?

\*\*

How do we get there? Torah is one roadmap. Though some prefer GPS - God Positioning System (though the technology is a bit dated), on the Torah road map towards the place we call home we find ourselves in the beginning. And I mean, Bereshit, which means - in the beginning. It is the very first word of Torah that leads us into the sacred myth of the world's birth - which according to the sages is *this* day of Rosh Hashanah. It is mystically amazing that Torah starts with the letter Bet and not Aleph (the first letter in the Hebrew Alpha-Bet) but Bet because entrenched in the very building blocks of language the search for home begins. It

doesn't work for us in English, but in Semitic languages the letter Bet was likely derived from an Egyptian hieroglyphic: an image of a house. A Bayit. The first letter in Torah - Bet from Bayit - symbolizes a house. It has a firm base, that Bet - rooted in the ground,<sup>1</sup> a fertile resting place from which Judaism, Hebrew, and the narrative of Torah burst.

Bereshit: Bet was in the beginning, but after the world is created Adam and Eve must leave the safety of the garden; Abraham leaves the home of his birth and journeys to a home he does not know; Hagar is expelled from her house; Rebecca leaves her father's home for Isaac's. They become rootless all in hopes of rooting once more. And later the Israelites flee Egypt for home. They partner with God and Moses to create a system of guidelines for living in their new home, but not even Moses gets to go home with them.

Centuries pass and the ultimate Bayit in Jewish history, the Beit HaMikdash - the House Full of Holy - essentially God's House, is destroyed the rabbis say, because of baseless, ruthless hatred. Its destruction, which yielded the exile of the Jewish people, was the basis for the Jewish yearning to return home. There are some Jews who would wish to rebuild that particular Bayit, that grand house of God, but in the wake of its destruction emerged something beautiful: Rabbinic Judaism. Out with sacrificing animals, in with meaningful, embodied ritual practice in our temples, in our homes. And so the Judaism we practice today descends from a time when we were uprooted, deserted, exiled, home-less.

Bereshit - from the very beginning - we searched and sought to build home. And so "the Bible describes both God and Israel as homeless, [too]. Much of the Torah," writes Rabbi Larry Hoffman, "is the process by which Israel finds a home in the land God once promised Abraham. But equally, it is a record of Israel making a home for God..." Except God's home - called the mishkan (the dwelling place) and the title of our Machzor prayerbook is temporary, too. Even "God...is constantly in search of a place to land - to settle down, to be present, to be known, to be encountered."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, we encounter the idea of home in daily life. Many of us are born in Beit Cholim - hospitals, literally a house for the sick. School is called Beit Sefer, the house of books; a Beit Midrash, a house of sacred learning. A synagogue can be known as a Beit Knesset, a house of gathering. Courts of justice and religious practice are called Beit Din, a house for the just. We are praying right now in a Beit Tefillah, a house of prayer. And for many, life's final resting place, rooted in the ground, is a Beit K'varot - a cemetery. Fundamental then to each is not the

---

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *Sefer Otiyot: the Book of Letters*, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, *The Journey Home*.

actual physicality of location but that each are rooted, are housed in healing, in learning, in gathering, in justice, in prayer, and in rest.

So how do we get to the place we call home? Especially when what we've known might have been destroyed, may exist no longer, or remains only in memory? Like the letter Bet, we root down in values, we root down in the values of Torah, in the values of healing, learning, and gathering, and justice and prayer. A Bet is open to the left in the direction we read Hebrew, teaches Rabbi Lawrence Kushner because "we [should] concern ourselves with the day the world was created and onward."<sup>3</sup> So like a Bet we look ahead. We root down in creativity and hope and create anew.

\*\*

The privilege to ponder how we get to the place we wish to call home is a privilege a person can pursue when they already have a home. Even if it's not precisely the home one would ultimately wish to create, even if it still has Ikea furniture or poor heating or shared laundry, which are what I've been calling (this week only) - #firstDAYOFTHEworldproblems - it is a privilege to ponder and wonder about home compared to the struggle of actually being homeless, exiled, or in refuge from a homeland. These states of being are inhabited and lived by so many people that Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, wondered: "Isn't the twentieth century the age of the expatriate, the refugee, the stateless - and the wanderer?"

How do those of all cultures and religions who experience this state of being Wiesel describes get to the place they call home? They sought to shift and transform moments of exile by taking refuge in language. When returning to a homeland was no longer an option or a dream too difficult to realize - writers began to "inhabit their dwelling places poetically... and by doing so, ontologically to be," writes Dr. Amir Eshel.<sup>4</sup> Poetry is their state of being as if in writing about home they could be at home. For those in exile wrote exiled German Jewish philosopher Theodor Adorno, "the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing."<sup>5</sup> In agreement, exiled French Jewish poet Edmond Jabes wrote that literature and poetry are the "only habitat, the first and also the final place of a vaster non-place where I live."<sup>6</sup> And so Khalil ibn Ahmad, the eighth-century Arab philologist and scholar of poetic patterns named stanzas of poetry "bayit."<sup>7</sup> As we know, bayit means "a dwelling place," a home, in both

---

<sup>3</sup> Kushner, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Amir Eshel, "Cosmopolitanism and Searching for the Sacred Space in Jewish Literature," 125.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile", p. 147, [online available]  
[http://www.dartmouth.edu/~germ43/pdfs/said\\_reflections.pdf](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~germ43/pdfs/said_reflections.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Eshel, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Oran Zakai, "I was Traveling to a Foreign Land The New Hebrew Woman Meets "the Orient", Berman Jewish Policy Archive.

Hebrew and Arabic. In each line of a poem, there is a dwelling place. So how do we get to the place we call home when you have no home, when the home you wish to build is but a far off dream? "Language," Polish writer Czelaw Milosz wrote, "language is the only homeland."

At home in the power of poetry, prose and personal narrative - when language transforms into an exchange with another - whether read, spoken, heard, or even edited - it becomes a homeland, for in it dwells human connection and relationship. Together in language, humans join to search for home, to escape from what was home, or to return home.

And sometimes it's amid the return home where we find the language we need to rebuild ourselves.

\*\*

Sting, the musician, faced these same questions. In a 2014 TEDX talk recalling his childhood, "born and raised in the shadow of a shipyard in a little town on the northeast coast of England.. [his] earliest memories [were] of giant ships blocking the end of [the] street, as well as the sun, for a lot of the year...I dreamt I would leave this town," he shared, "and just like those ships, once they were launched, I'd never come back." But Sting hit a point in his career of crippling writer's block and so he went back. "It was ironic," he said, "that the landscape I'd worked so hard to escape from, and the community that I'd more or less abandoned and exiled myself from should be the very landscape, the very community I would have to return to find my missing muse."<sup>8</sup>

"Going back is a creative process,"<sup>9</sup> writes New York Times Columnist David Brooks of Sting's talk. "The events of childhood are like the Hebrew alphabet; the vowels are missing, and the older self has to make sense of them."

"The person going back home...has to see the world with two sets of eyes: the eyes of his own childhood self and the eyes of his current adult self. He has to circle back deeper inside and see parts of himself that were more exposed then than now. No wonder the process of going home again can be so catalyzing." For it is a chance for renewal.

Can we ever really go home again? Do we ever really leave home? And "why do we have to leave our home to find a home, and then leave again?"<sup>10</sup> This our spiritual challenge. We seek home because we seek what Rabbi Larry Hoffman calls "Landedness: [the] feeling

---

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/sting\\_how\\_i\\_started\\_writing\\_songs\\_again/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/sting_how_i_started_writing_songs_again/transcript?language=en)

<sup>9</sup> David Brooks, "Going Home Again," NYTIMES online available:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/21/opinion/brooks-going-home-again.html>

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Alan Lew, This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared, p. 20-21.

that somehow you have an attachment to a certain latitude and longitude where, indeed, somehow your Jewish center [or just your center] is located; [our lives are a state of] knowing what it is to have a perpetual home; and knowing also the infinite pain of homelessness.”<sup>11</sup>

When we leave home we discern for ourselves: what is the house I want to build? How will I be fulfilled? Some of us yearn to return, some of us yearn never to return again. And all of us travel our whole lives - journeying, wandering, exploring, and sometimes escaping. Whether by choice or by force, by call or by chance, all of us journey our whole lives in search of the place we call home.

“The Jewish sacred calendar... embodies the essential paradox of this homeward journey. [From] the observance of Tisha B’Av - the day we mourn the destruction of the Temple (Beit HaMikdash) - [to] Sukkot, when we erect a house that is not really a house, a home that is not really a home, a time when we seem to have come to the end of the journey only to begin it again.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, continues Rabbi Alan Lew, “the home we leave to begin this journey is necessarily a different place than the home we arrive at in the end...”

The Slonimer Rebbe<sup>13</sup> compares the task of humankind to “building an elaborate house on a foundation of rubble.” The person builds and builds and rebuilds, but the walls crack and tear. “The house...[is] always in danger of collapse. There is only one path before [us]... To have the courage to destroy... And to dig deep and [build] strong[er] foundations....The same,” he says, “applies in the realm of teshuvah.” That if our returning “isn’t built on strong foundations, new cracks and fissures [will] appear year after year” until we have the courage to “dig deep foundations” and build our homes on solid ground.

יְהוָה, יִשְׁמְרֶךָ וּבֹאֲרָךְ -- מִעֵתָהּ, וְעַד-עוֹלָם

May you find blessing and wholeness as you journey to the place you call Home.

And may you find home here with the Riverway Project at Temple Israel.

Shana Tova!

---

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Larry Hoffman, *The Journey Home*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Lew, p. 20-21.

<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Shalom Noach Berzovsky, *Netivot Shalom*, Teshuvah #9; adapted from Rabbi Shai Held of Mechon Hadar, “Why Don’t People Ever Seem to Change? (and How We Can)”

