

Yom Kippur Morning 5787

If I never have to move again, it will be too soon. Fortunately, I probably only have a handful of residential shifts remaining before I make that ultimate eternal relocation—God willing. But the idea of navigating the selling and buying of a house--and then sorting all the junk I've hoarded from the treasure worth keeping--and then purging and packing and transporting—and then unpacking and decorating and settling in—*it's exhausting to the core*. The thought of having to restart cable and wifi themselves fills me with existential dread.

But setting aside the logistical labyrinth of things to undo and redo, there's the emotional poignancy of leaving, not merely a house, *but a home*. For a home is so much more than the stucco, carpeting, plumbing, electrical, and 2 x 4 framing. A home is where life happens, memories are forged, and love remains alive. That corner couch is where my grandmother—*aleha ha-shalom*—first held my son Ben in her arms. And over there is where my father-in-law—may his memory be blessed--first met and played with our dog Sadie when she was a puppy—and when she became his “grand-dog”. And there is where my father--z”l—played chess with Ben or laughed to convulsions when we forced him to play Cards Against Humanity on Thanksgiving. And there is where my daughter Julia slept the night before her wedding, embarking on a new life from the warm embrace of her childhood bedroom.

All of us have similar images of “home:” The chair at the head of the dining room table from which Seders were led or Turkeys carved. The pencil marks on the door frame measuring our children's growth year to year. The special nooks and crannies that shielded siblings from discovery during hours of hide and seek.

To feel at home is to feel comforted and supported—to enter a refuge in which we can be ourselves and take off the social armor we don before going out into the world. It is a place of safety and security—of holiness and of hope.

On a much larger but no less significant scale—for 250 years we American Jews have felt that this place and this time were finally the home we were looking for. But of late, so many of us have lost that sense rootedness in our American homeland. We increasingly feel homeless—a sense of political, social, and cultural dislocation, alienation, and loneliness.

In so many ways, this is not a new phenomenon. Our experience with Galut—as the wandering and exiled Jews of history--is ingrained in our memories and continues to haunt our collective psyche—marking even the most secure sense of normalcy with the possibility of “what if.”

But what we are experiencing now in America is unprecedented--- particularly in the last century. And it is all the more jarring in that we felt that this time and place were different. We felt that the upward trajectory of understanding and acceptance that warmly encompassed so many other

historically marginalized people would also extend to us. As it turns out, and as it's always been, we Jews are the excruciating exception.

Our historic homelessness emerged from many factors: We are history's oldest and most vilified "other." We have always been different and stood apart—less often by choice and more often by custom, practice, and faith. And yet, we've endured and overcome—defying the odds of any single people to survive the millennia—let alone the malicious visions of those who sought a world without Jews.

But we have also served as history's canary in a coal mine. When external threats and domestic unrest plague a society, we Jews are often the first to be scapegoated to distract from the discontent of a population and the dysfunction of a leader. And in our current moment, we canaries are chirping, as the noxious gas of polarization, demonization, and civil division poison our body politic.

Perhaps we were too complacent, too naïve, too optimistic that we were living in a different era. The last half of the 20th century did, indeed, feel like a Golden Age of American Jewry—as next month's Temple speaker Franklin Foer deemed it. But it is the speed and vehemence of our fall from grace that has been so disorienting, so mystifying, so triggering of that feeling of "otherness" that has forever marked our journey on this earth. Our dreams of a true and affirming home seem, yet again, to be a dream deferred.

We find ourselves in the same classic conundrum that has been our fate—caught between the forces and extremes that have emerged in a time of uncertainty and instability. We are wary of the attacks on liberal democracy from an ascendant Right that aspires to autocracy—a political climate that has always been "bad for the Jews." Borne out of a new nativism, the economic stresses of forever wars, the chilling rise of White Christian Nationalism, the celebration of a misogynistic manosphere, and a penchant for conspiracies and cult-followings over science and scholarship—some of the nastiest specters of our tortured past have donned the memes and modes of contemporary culture.

And particularly after October 7th—but seeded in the bilious bogs of debunked Marxist ideologies that have tainted academia--the Left's embrace of the oppressed/oppressor binary as an article of faith has met its moment—as the fever dreams of antizionists have gained momentum in the mainstream—and the line between criticism and bigotry has blurred, fueling a more "acceptable" form of antisemitism that is as at least as threatening as the classic Jew hatred of the Right.

The coming election in November, and the ramp up to the Presidential contest of 2028, are raising all of these toxins and this sickness to the surface. And the more these tribes battle with one another in our culture wars, the less accepted and secure—the less hopeful and at-home we feel as Jewish Americans.

And so, what can we do as Americans and as Jews to rise to this challenge? What can we do to embrace our responsibility as citizens to heal our

troubled nation—and to hold fast to our faith as Jews that our American home is redeemable from the dizzying cycles of history—bound to return again to a better time and a better place?

The first thing we must do is to have a little perspective. Even with all the justifiable concerns and threats we are encountering, we American Jews in 2026 remain the most secure, the most prosperous, and the most accepted generation of Jews to ever live. This is neither the rise of the Weimar Republic nor the threat of Hellenistic assimilation nor the persecution of Rome nor the Spanish Inquisition. So, first and foremost, if we are going to look at our current feelings of homelessness with any authenticity and effectiveness, *we all need to get a grip.*

But that doesn't mean we aren't facing old threats in new garb. Our complacency here bred a kind of ennui—an apathy and ignorance which we must replace with renewed vigilance, resilience, and advocacy. We need to build on what we've learned about ourselves as October 8th Jews: That there is strength that comes from binding ourselves to a community—that there is wisdom and insight to be found in our timeless tradition—and that these precious resources are as vital to us in times of quiet and confidence as they are in times of trial and threat.

But even more critically, we need to delve deeply into what constitutes a true “home”—especially when it feels that ours is receding. Home is more than a place, or a party, or a position. Home derives from the values that forge our identity. As a people that have been constantly beaten, buffeted, and driven out, we learned to carry our home deeply within our hearts. And thus, the values of home have been the staples and stalwarts of our survival.

The most essential quality of a Jewish home is the sense that it should be a *mikdash me'at*—a mini-sanctuary--reflecting the holiness and wholeness of our communal houses of worship. And these mini-sanctuaries should strive for the ideal of Shalom Bayit—a peaceful and supportive refuge infused with love and care.

The most iconic catastrophes in Jewish history prior to the Holocaust were the destructions of the two Temples in Jerusalem—the sanctuaries upon which we model the family home. And the enemies who destroyed our central shrines were seen as mere agents of God who punished our people for the sins of idolatry and *sinat chinam*—senseless hatred. And though that response is understood to come from God, a society stricken by idolatry and division will eventually destroy itself through its own devices.

The same is true for our national home here in America. The idols of our current moment—views and likes on social media, the pursuit of profit above principle, the enabling of corruption and criminality to curry favor from power—all of these have rendered our national home unlivable for all of us. And again, we Jews are where we've always been: On the leading edge of a society's devouring of itself.

And I scarcely need to comment on the ways in which rampant hatred and the demonization of the “enemy” has infected our national discourse. Lincoln famously warned in one of our nation’s most contentious times—with the voice of a prophet and the insight of the rabbis—that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” If we want our family homes--let alone our national home--to endure, we must find our way back to compromise in the face of conflict. And we must foster a basic respect for those with whom we disagree, and with whom we share the most fundamental qualities of citizenship and humanity.

And the most essential principle of our American home is the brilliant beacon of liberal democracy. Its virtues are indelibly etched upon our hearts: The sanctity of individual rights and freedoms, the embrace of vigorous and reasoned debate, and a deep and abiding respect for the rule of law. These civil mitzvot have sustained our nation for two and a half centuries. They are what attracted and inspired our people to endure hardship and sacrifice to come to this Goldene Medinah—this Golden Land of opportunity and possibility.

And we have a significant stake in fighting for these ideals in a moment of unprecedented threat—as citizens who are obligated to secure what our Founders bequeathed to us—and as Jews who have flourished under the miraculous magnanimity of this political experiment.

But perhaps most importantly—in this time of fear, vulnerability, and uncertainty for the American Jewish community—we cannot allow our trials to descend into tribalism. We cannot turn inward, to circle the wagons of insularity and distrust at precisely the time in which we must engage, we must stand up, we must join the national conversation toward a national reconciliation.

For October 8th Jews, the consequence for our relationships was clarifying: We suddenly knew that when the chips were down and the markers of support were called in, we learned who amongst our previous partners and allies stood with us--and who did not. But we also cherished those many friends who continued to stand shoulder to shoulder with us in our time of need.

We must build upon that realization and awareness. We must rejoin with others to fight for and to secure our shared American home. We must rise above the forces that seek to divide and to conquer us. We must pursue something more focused than a *Tikkun Olam*—a repair of the world. We must strive for a *Tikkun Leumi*—a national repair and restoration.

A brief word on Zionism and Israel. Though in so many ways, Israel is our people’s eternal and singular homeland, most American Jews see it as the spiritual center of peoplehood, not our physical and social base for real living. Especially as Reform Jews, our love for Israel does not dilute our ardor and regard for the grace and goodness of our American home. Our Aliyah is less about moving to Eretz Yisrael, and more about raising ourselves and this nation to realize it’s noblest ideals.

As a people who survived exile and annihilation—living through the worst that civilization can inflict on a community—we must garner the lessons and wisdom of our experience—to truly become an Or L’goyim—a Light Unto the Nations—illuminating for our nation, if not the world—the path back to wholeness and health—the road back to compromise and cooperation—the way back to a home that will sustain all of us under the loving care of a common Landlord.

The great Chasidic rabbi Eisik son of Yekel—known for his poverty as much as for his piety—once had a dream. It was a dream that came to him not once or twice, but seven times—even on the Sabbath. Each time it was the same: He was in the town square of his city—Krakow—as a beautiful black carriage pulled up next to him. A mysterious, tall figure—clad in black and masked—handed him a note, which read: *Go to the King’s palace in Prague and dig beneath the bridge leading to its gates. There you will find a treasure beyond your wildest dreams.*

If it had only been a dream of one or two nights, Eisik would have ignored it. But he saw in its repetition a divine message. So, he set out from his home for Prague. When he arrived at the King’s palace, he saw that it was well guarded. And so, he was unable to start digging at the bridge to its gate. He returned repeatedly, hoping the guards might take a break. But they were always there.

Finally, one of the guards approached Rabbi Eisik to ask who or what was he waiting for. With nothing left to lose, the rabbi shared his dream with the guard. The sentry laughed, and said, “I can’t believe you came all this way for a dream. If I followed all of my silly dreams, I’d go to the home of a man named Eisik in Krakow and dig under the stove in his house to find a hidden treasure. Can you imagine if I really followed that dream?”

Rabbi Eisik took his leave politely but quickly and hurried home. He immediately tore through the floor of his cabin beneath the stove—much to the shock and chagrin of his wife who had been cooking dinner. His shovel clanked against a metal box, and when he unearthed it, he opened it to find it filled with gold and diamonds. He turned the riches into another kind of treasure, founding a synagogue and a house of learning.

Often the good and the blessing and the comfort of the home we seek lies not in distant goals or utopian visions, but right here—right under our feet—at the core of our faith—deeply embedded in our hearts and driving our dreams. Home is in the communities we build and sustain—in the nations for which we sacrifice and fight—in a world that awaits our dedication and devotion to make it real—if not for ourselves, then for our children and our children’s children.

May the year ahead find us all bound for home—a place of purpose and passion—a place of love and care—a place of holiness and of peace. Ken y’hi ratzon. May this be God’s will. Amen.