

## “There’s No Place Like Home”

Rosh haShanah, 2<sup>nd</sup> Day, 5778

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Shanah Tovah! As I mused, through the months of the summer and into September, about what I wanted to say to you here – my one moment in the Jewish year when I have the opportunity to address more than just our regular Friday night attendees – I asked myself, “Well, what do I want to say?” If you have been reading any of my columns in the TBE bulletin, or in the Fall River Herald News, you know already that I am extremely concerned about our beautiful planet, about safeguarding environmental protections, and taking the reality of climate change seriously. You know that I have a soft spot in my heart for immigrants and refugees. You know that I bristle easily at anything that smacks of racism, and you can guess that I am no fan of nuclear brinksmanship.

But these issues are not the ones that I want to address today. We all read the paper, listen to the radio, watch the news, or catch it online, and draw our own conclusions, and that is not why we are here today.

Why are we here, then? Why, when all the rest of the year our heimish little chapel downstairs more than suffices for the numbers who feel moved to attend regular Shabbat services, why are there so many more of us gathered on these 2 days of Rosh haShanah, and on Yom Kippur?

You might answer: “tradition!” – but let’s take this word apart.

The biggest part of *tradition*, I would argue, comes from the functioning of *community*. We may feel a kind of thrill, awe, or comforting reassurance in certain rituals, such as hearing the blasts of the shofar, or seeing all the beautiful Torah scrolls being taken out of the ark on the night of Kol Nidrei, singing familiar high holiday melodies together...

But we come, more than for this, I believe, *to be with one another*. That’s why we have members who, although they have moved out of the area, and have joined another congregation, nevertheless, come “home” to TBE for the holidays. It is a sort of family reunion. And in thinking of this, I remembered a line from Robert Frost,

*Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/They have to take you in.*

But in looking up this line (it's from his poem "The Death of the Hired Man"), I found that line somewhat off-putting – as if we were all potentially rejected people whom others would not naturally welcome into their company. I found that the second speaker in this same poem uttered much less-famous but much more affirming words in defining the word "home":

*"I should have called it/ Something you somehow haven't to deserve."*

For *home* is not about *deserving* – it is about a feeling of *belonging*. I think I would not be wrong in conjecturing that you are not here because you feel an obligation to say all the High Holiday prayers; nor because you can't get enough of listening to the Torah-reading, or the cantor's davening – and certainly not because you love sitting in these seats with very little leg room! Perhaps the idea that this is a season of reflection, of soul-accounting, resonates with some of you, and some of you may even welcome these days as a "check-in" with the Blessed Holy One. Of course we clergy know that many Jews do not have much use for the notion of God, or of any divine judgement for our deeds, or for repentance. And yet here we all are. Why?

What is the strongest force, or yearning, that brings us all together?

I think it is the yearning for *belonging*.

We live today in a world in which there are so many ways to "connect" with others instantly – not just by phone, but by texting, e-mail, video chatting, Facebook, Twitter, etc. And yet – do you feel more connected to others now than you did 30 years ago? Look at teenagers. According to a recent cover story in Atlantic magazine by Jean M. Twenge, ("Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?", September 2017), teenagers and young adults spend an inordinate amount of time online or with their phones (not actually *talking* on them, however), but very little time actually *with* one another. And even when they are with one another face to face, they are still checking their phones.

Greater technology has brought us more ways to reach out to others with similar interests: we can join an online "community" of people who love Corgis, or Jane Austen, or the cultivation of Japanese Bonsai. But this cannot wholly fulfill that deep human yearning to feel part of a real community – by which I mean a place where we do not have to have a special interest, we do not have to post a picture of

ourselves with our Corgi or our Bonsai, or say clever things about Jane Austen (and then look anxiously to see how many “likes” we have garnered). The yearning for *belonging* is the yearning to be accepted just for who we are; to feel welcome, not to have to show off or prove ourselves – just to feel warm, okay, loved.

Ultimately, for those of us who are more religiously-inclined (those of us who are fine with using the word “God,” and perhaps even with the notion of “talking” to God), this is what we seek from God, too. It’s not really about being “inscribed in the Book of Life,” or having our sins forgiven so that we can start out the New Year with a clean slate. It’s not about “salvation,” or any future reckoning in the World to Come. It’s about feeling that God is with us, that God loves us, that God wants us to be here, that we are valued simply for who we are.

For those of you who can’t think in such a traditional way about God, or who think of yourselves as “non-believers,” this yearning to be accepted and to feel “belonging” is, I would imagine, equally strong – perhaps even stronger than for your more traditional fellow Jews. Of course you could conceivably find some other type of “community” or “family” to belong to rather than that of the Jewish people. But I believe that there is something very powerful here that no political action group, Tai-chi class or country club can begin to offer.

And that is a **continuity** that extends back through deep time – back to the founders of this temple, back to Jewish life in the Old Country, back to the time of the rabbis under the dominion of the Roman Empire, back to the era of King David...all the way back to Abraham and Sarah. All these generations of Jews, the good the bad, the heroes and the less-than heroes, yes, even the scoundrels, those who suffered through countless periods of persecution, those who tasted miraculous triumphs, such as the one that happened in 1948 – they are always with us. And in a different way, for most of you (there are some of us, like myself, who being converts, have a slightly different experience) – but for most of you, from what I have heard in listening to you talk about growing up here, or in the Jewish neighborhoods of Providence, Boston, or New York, your parents (and for some, grandparents as well) – they are presences, voices that never wholly leave you. They may have been pious believers; they may have been feisty atheists – but you feel their presence especially strongly when you come to temple on the High Holy Days. This is a powerful thing, to feel yourself firmly rooted in a tradition and history that reaches so far back, with people who have gone through so much together.

Yes, I emphasize the word *together*. Because of course every human being alive came from somewhere, has a chain of his/her progenitors that came before them. This past year I had my DNA tested to learn something of my ancestry. I waited an extraordinarily long time it seemed to get the results, and when they came they were rather disappointing. I didn't feel that I had found out very much. My results from the National Geographic Genographic Project told me that I was:

59% Northwest European (incl. the British Isles, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and some Scandinavian and German groups)

26% Eastern European (incl. Poland, Germany, the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, the former Soviet Republic of Belarus, the Ukraine and Western Russia)

9% from the grouping of Italy and Southern Europe, and

5% Southwestern European (which includes Spain, Portugal and the Iberian Peninsula).

And also, I have 1.5 % Neanderthal DNA (and although I would like to use this statistic as an excuse for all the times that I may have said something awkward or stepped on someone's toes, it turns out that the average for Caucasians is 2.5%, so there goes my excuse!).

My point is that yes, every person on the earth necessarily has ancestry – we all came from somewhere. But most, or at least many of us don't know much about that past. After this DNA test, I don't feel like I know much more. Some ancestor of mine was East European? What does that mean (apparently, it doesn't mean Jewish, because the project has a separate "Ashkenazi Jewish" label for that)...someone was from Spain or Portugal...? Who? What was their life like, what religion did they practice, did they migrate and intermarry with a Northern European...? These results tell me next to nothing. They are scientific, but they don't tell a story, they don't tell me that if I were to travel to such-and-such a country, or village, I would experience a sense of *belonging*.

When I first began to "hang out" with Jews, however, I did experience a feeling of belonging – or, at least, of not sticking out like a sore thumb as I always had growing up in the culture of genteel, conservative white Southern Protestants. I always questioned everything growing up. My questions were never answered. I always had what seemed in that culture to be the "radical" opinion on any controversy of the day, and although for Jews **speaking up**, being argumentative, fighting for the rights of others – this has always been pretty "normal" for Jewish

culture – for my own culture it was not. I never felt like I belonged, as if a goose had laid an egg in a duck’s nest, and when it hatched it just didn’t look right, and never fit in with the other little ducklings.

So when I found my way to a people who accepted thinking “outside the box,” and even being argumentative – for a cause – I finally felt accepted. I felt that I could relax and be myself. This is what I mean by “belonging.” To be at *home* – “something,” to quote that Robert Frost line again, “you somehow haven’t to deserve.” You don’t have to do anything to *deserve* to be at home, you just *are*, or, sadly, for a few Jews down through history (the ones that come immediately to mind being Baruch Spinoza and the French philosopher, Simone Weil) you are not.

While I don’t embrace a literal interpretation of God’s having “chosen us out of all other peoples” (as we say in the Torah blessing and in a few other parts of our liturgy), I do see that we as Jews are inordinately fortunate and blessed to have such a deep, continuous sense of our history, where we came from, who our ancestors were, what they went through. I wouldn’t say definitively that other peoples don’t have a similar sense of this. But I know that I didn’t get that growing up in my native culture...but who knows? I was young then – perhaps the grownups around me tried to convey that history, and I rejected it. (I am happy to say that my mom and I are the best of friends, though, and as I get older, I recognize how much I am like her – so I didn’t come from a goose egg after all!)

It is hard to evaluate what this sense of history is worth. It doesn’t make us better than other peoples, though at times it *has* seemed to make us stick out, be rejected, persecuted, and even subjected to genocide. And while these negative, painful episodes do not enrich our cultural legacy, nevertheless, they drive the stakes deeper for many of us, making us feel it so much more fiercely – how sacred our inheritance is, what our ancestors went through, the miracle that we are still a recognizable people today, a people amongst whom, even though we do not all agree, we do not all believe or practice what it means to be a Jew the same way, we nevertheless can experience *belonging*.

With the low percentage of Jews who marry other Jews today (at least outside of Israel), with the dwindling interest that families tend to have in having their children well-educated Jewishly, with all the constant stream of media feeds that the younger generation is exposed to from morning until night...well, I don’t know where this is all going. It may be a good thing for all the families of humanity to be more embracing of one another, to be less clannish, to fight for the human rights of

all people, and for our planet...but I fear that if we lose our sense of history, of tradition, of community, of belonging, of *home*...we will lose something irreplaceable. Perhaps with the great sense of *loneliness* that I read about in that *Atlantic* article, and the rise in depression amongst young people, perhaps there will be a swing back towards community, towards investment in heritage, in a life lived with rituals, traditions, and knowledge of one's people's past. Who can say?

In any case, we are blessed to be together today. I am so glad you are all here, and I encourage you all to come back for many more of our gatherings throughout the year, for I truly believe that this is a place that will always accept you, a place you can always call "home."