

# Away from Home

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During Rosh Hashana I spoke about our journey home as well as about our responsibilities beyond our home. Tonight, I would like to focus on some of the lessons I gained by being away from home.

As many of you know, my family was fortunate to spend a six-month sabbatical in Jerusalem this past year. I must admit that the first few weeks were quite strange for me.

First, phone calls from shul members stopped. Then, the emails stopped and with that, the different Halakhic and administrative questions stopped as well. This experience was heightened every time I would go to shul in Jerusalem. Suddenly, I was completely anonymous at shul. Nobody knew me and at times nobody even spoke to me.

There was something even deeper than that.

During services, I could sit carefree at shul without worrying about the flow of the prayers, about who was leading, or about when services should end, or what needs to be announced at the conclusion.

I was utterly not in control...and I (mostly) loved it!

About two months ago, once I returned to our shul, it was powerful to become aware, perhaps more explicitly than ever before, of the space that I fill. Some of the choices that I made about my role when I first arrived in our shul, and some of the ways that my role evolved over the years, whether through conscious choice or not, didn't seem as obvious to me anymore.

In particular, I remember that something minor transpired during one of the morning services and I immediately wanted to jump up and fix it and then an internal force stopped me and a voice within me exclaimed, "Rabbi, we did fine without you for six months, surely we can handle this one."

This experience reminded of something peculiar, although in retrospect not so unique, that happened to my family when years ago I left my parents' home in Montreal to go spend my freshman year abroad in Jerusalem. I was seventeen at the time and until then I was my family's standup comedian, entertainer, and main source of comedic relief. Still, a few months after I left home, my parents told me that they discovered something new about my younger brother, who was about 12 years old at the time. "Your brother is funny," they said to me, "in fact, he's even funnier than you." In my absence, aspects of my brother's personality were able to come out in ways that were restrained while I was still around.

I believe that this is certainly true of our community as well.

During my time away, our professional team and lay leadership grew and stepped up in important ways. As individuals and as a community we were given the unique opportunity to

assess the roles that we play in the makeup of our shul and make different choices than in past years.

In truth, this lesson applies to each one of us individually as well.

This High Holiday season, some of us may feel like we are not yet at home, be it physically, religiously, or existentially. Tonight, in contrast to my Rosh Hashanah message, I would like to suggest that there might be some power and advantages to this experience as well. An important step in our journey of Teshuvah is for each of us to become better aware of the dynamics and habits that set in through the home structure – whether home is a house in the physical sense or a more abstract set of relationships and circumstances.

How many of us have assumed a role not befitting us within our relationships – within our friendships or our families? How many of us have taken up too much space or have not stepped up enough within our friendships or our families?

In a similar vein, how many of us have assumed a role not befitting us in our relationship with Torah and with God? Sadly, at times, some of us even sin by miss-stepping into the role of God, trying desperately to control people in our life and even events in our life that lie well beyond our control.

Friends, sometimes it is important to feel not at home. It gives us a necessary opportunity to assess our roles within a perceived set structure or dynamic and allows us to recalibrate or redirect our relationships.

As importantly, only those who realize that they are not yet home, will maintain hope to still make it back home.

I had another important experience this past six months. Over the course of my sabbatical in Israel I fell in love with Torah again.

This may sound like a surprise to many of you. After all, over the past eleven years you've seen me teach Torah with great passion (sometimes with too much passion...if there is such a thing!). And yet, it seems to me, that prior to my sabbatical, without really knowing it, I grew tired of Torah or perhaps my Torah became tiresome.

In many ways, a person can find his or her home, his or her comfort zone, within the palace of Torah. Without even knowing it, a person can return to the same sort of Torah, the same genre of Torah study, and the same areas of learning, over and over again, without venturing out to unfamiliar rooms in the vast halls of Torah study.

Simply put, prior to my sabbatical, I felt too at home in the world of Torah. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a great danger of spiritual ossification if one becomes too settled or too comfortable on the path of Torah study.

During my time in Israel, I sought several new and unfamiliar learning experiences. Every day I spent three to four hours studying Talmud on my own, and though I have continued to learn

Talmud every year in my eleven years in Berkeley, I have done so always for the sake of teaching others. In contrast, during my sabbatical I was able to learn Talmud without an external agenda, without needing to think about how to make the text relevant to others. I studied Torah for its own sake (li'shema) and in so doing I fell in love anew with Torah itself.

In Israel I also arranged for several weekly Chavrutas (study-partners). One of my study partners was one of the world's leading scholars in Sefardi Halakha and rabbinic responsa. Each time we learned together he would make me read extremely challenging texts out loud and explain them as I was going through them. I had a similar experience with one of the main English editors of the translated works of Rebbi Nachman of Breslov. Here too, I was asked to study out loud in the presence of an expert. Making my way through these texts, with humility, and sometimes with trepidation, reminded me how much I have yet to learn, how I still longed to dwell again in God's palace of Torah, and how much I had missed being at home with Torah.

I must admit that during this time I kept thinking about several people in my life.

At times I thought about my grandfather, Nono Meir of blessed memory, who in his mid-thirties hired a rabbi to come to his home every evening to teach him how to lead services at his Beit Knesset, his synagogue.

At other times, I thought of families and individuals in our shul who became observant or converted to Judaism at a later point in their life. Still, at other times, I thought of a few members of our shul who are in their 80s and 90s, and who make great efforts each day or each week, to attend Torah classes at our shul.

To me these individuals and families suddenly became heroes to emulate and leaders I wanted to follow. Most of all, they (and many of them are here tonight), became fellow travelers on my new journey home, my return to God's palace of Torah.

In truth, this lesson applies to each one of us individually as well.

Tonight, some of us may feel like we are not yet at home in our religious observance or in our commitment to Torah study.

How many of us have studied the same Torah again and again over the past few years, without ever discovering something new at all?

Even worse, how many of us have completely neglected our Torah study over the past few years?

In a similar vein, how many of us are a bit too comfortable in our observance of mitzvot? How many of us have not deepened our commitment to prayer, or kashrut, or Shabbat, or Torah study over the past few years?

Sometimes it is important to feel not at home. In fact, in spiritual matters, if you're not constantly making your way home, out of the awareness that you are not yet home, then sadly

you're probably also constantly getting further away from home. As I mentioned earlier, only those who realize that they are not yet home, will maintain hope to still make it back home.

I gained one more critical insight during my time in Israel. A Jew should never feel completely at home unless they are living in the Jewish homeland. In fact, even Jews living in Israel, should never feel completely at home there either. Let me explain.

During my sabbatical, our family was fortunate to be in Israel for the celebrations of Israel 69<sup>th</sup> Yom Haatzmaut (Day of Independence) as well as the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Six Day War, marking our people's return to the old city of Jerusalem. These unique festivities provided ample opportunities to affirm our family's profound connection to our national homeland.

A few experiences stand out in particular.

During Yom Haatzmaut, Frayda and I got to attend celebrations at one of our sons' schools. Towards the end of a moving ceremony, the school's principal invited children in the school who made Aliyah to Israel, who immigrated to Israel in recent years, to lead the school in the singing of Hatikvah. A group of French, Italian, and American children, among several other nationalities, slowly gathered at the front of the stage. Our eyes welled with tears and a sense of pride filled us as we witnessed this unique gathering of the exiles before our very eyes. It was at that moment that we noticed that our son had also joined the group. In his heart and mind, he too made Aliyah, albeit for only six months. For him it was clear that we had come home.

Months later, on the very last day of the sabbatical, just moments before we headed out of Jerusalem, we took our children to Jerusalem's promenade on Armon Hanatziv, a lookout point overseeing the entire city to bid farewell to a place that quickly became our home over such a short period of time. After sharing some of our fondest memories with each other, we got back into the car and drove away from Jerusalem. With our backs to the city, we could not help but feel a sense of betrayal in our heart. Our eyes once again welled up and tears began flowing down our faces. Deep in our hearts we knew that we were leaving home.

My experience in Israel reminded me that every Jew living abroad should never feel truly at home in the diaspora. It deepened my conviction that despite the deep pride that we share in our community here, we must always also feel that our true home is being built elsewhere, in the land of Israel.

At the same time, my experience in Israel, also taught me a lesson that may seem to be in conflict with this one.

In Israel, I met several very inspiring, up and coming, young Israeli leaders who did not feel fully at home in Israel. Whether they represented a social movement, a religious or secular movement, or whether they came from Israel's political right or political left, each of these individuals shared a feeling that Israel has not yet become the homeland that Jews had dreamt about for two thousand years.

This shared longing to be at home as well as their shared loving critique of Israel fueled their activist fire. Though these individuals did not share ideological commitments in any way, it was clearly apparent that they shared a commitment to make Israel our people's true home and a home that will be true to Israel's deepest aspirations and values.

My experience in Israel reminded me that every Jew living in Israel should never feel truly at home in Israel either. In truth, despite the deep pride that we share in the founding of the modern state of Israel and its marvelous achievements thus far, or perhaps precisely because of this sense of love and pride, we must constantly strive to truly make Israel our people's home. Zionism's full aspirations can only be fulfilled by those who sense that we have not yet fully returned home. Zionism's full vision can only be achieved by those who realize that we have not yet fully made it our home.

Though our family has no plans in the immediate or near future to make Aliyah, and to be perfectly clear, our time in Israel very much reinforced our sense of purpose for our work here in Berkeley, I still pray that I continue to never feel fully at home here in Berkeley and that should I ever merit to make Aliyah to Israel, that I am blessed never to fully feel at home there either.

Friends, tonight I ask each of you to also reassess your commitment to Israel.

We are living in unique times. This year we celebrate seventy years since the founding of the State of Israel. At this time, do we dare not consider making Aliyah (at least those of us who can)? Do we dare not make Israel one of the primary causes of our activism and our tzedaka or first on our list when we consider traveling abroad? Do we dare forget that in the diaspora we are never fully at home? Do we dare to forget our home in Zion and Jerusalem...?

Since the beginning of the month of Elul we have recited together psalm 27. One of its verses often tugs at my heart:

*Achat shalti me'et Adonay, otta avakesh* – One thing I ask of the Lord, only this do I seek  
*Shivti beveit Adonay kol yemey chayay* – to live in the House of the Lord all the days of my life,

*Lachazot b'naom Adonay u'levaker b'heichalo* – to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and worship in His Temple.

Tonight I share this prayer with you.

This year, I pray that we truly feel at home in our relationships with each other, fully feel at home in our relationship with Torah and Mitzvot, and truly feel at home in our relationship with Israel our true homeland.

Most of all, may we truly feel at home with God and may we merit to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and worship in His holy Home.

*Achat shalty...*