

ROSH HASHANAH SERMON by Rabbi Susan Leider
Congregation Kol Shofar - 2012

When I think of home
I think of a place where there's love overflowing
I wish I was home
I wish I was back there with the things I been knowing. . .

How many of us in this room relate to this idea of home, to this place of “love overflowing?” The words of this song, written by Charlie Smalls evoke a place of belonging, a place to which we long to return.

For some of us, the image works. When we come home, we feel that our home fits us to a T.

But for others, the following words by novelist Toni Morrison may more aptly describe their feelings about home:

Whose house is this?

Whose night keeps out
the light
In here?

Say, who owns this
house?

It's not mine.

I dreamed another;
sweeter, brighter

With a view of lakes
crossed in painted
boats;

Of fields wide as arms
open for me.

This house is strange.
Its shadows lie.

Say, tell me, why does
its lock fit my key?

These words remind us of the profound truth that home is not necessarily a wonderful place for everyone, even if it provides basic physical shelter.

Some of us don't feel at home in our own house. But yet we feel the key in the lock, it turns and opens the door for us to enter. These two images of home juxtaposed to one another impart radically different ideas of how we feel and think about our personal homes. Do you identify with either of these images? When you think of home, what do you think of?

As Jews and as members of the broader community, we can also think of the synagogue as a spiritual "home." And just as our feelings about our personal homes may vary, so too our feelings about our spiritual home run the gamut from "a place where there is love overflowing," to a feeling of "it's not mine," to the question of "Do I need a spiritual home, a synagogue, at all?"

No matter where we find ourselves on the spectrum, we are here on this Rosh Hashanah, the giant homecoming for Jewish communities throughout the world, as we flock to the synagogue. From Dallas to Paris to Cochin to Shanghai to Tiburon we feel the collective energy of our communities linked by sacred time. And we connect back to our ancestors who for a thousand plus years have come to the synagogue for this annual homecoming.

It is one of my favorite times of the year. As I look around, taking in your faces, hearing your voices and feeling your presence, I am aware of our incredible potential to discover relationships in this synagogue. A spiritual home, at its best, is about relationships. My question is: Can this Rosh

Hashanah homecoming bring us into more meaningful relationships with each other here in our spiritual home?

In the past year, contemplating the idea of Kol Shofar as my spiritual home has occupied a large part of my psyche. The reputation of this synagogue shines all the way to Southern CA and beyond and I was aware of this community well before I began to consider myself in it. As I have shared with many of you, Jeff and I immediately felt at home during our time at Kol Shofar last winter. When we returned to LA on Feb. 12, we realized how deeply we were touched by this wonderful community, moved by encounters with so many of you. I felt the “love overflowing.”

But what if Toni Morrison’s words resonate with you, if you sometimes ask, maybe even today ask, “Whose house is this?” then I ask you to consider the following: What might you want in order to feel that this house is yours? What might you do to feel that this house is yours? How can a Jewish spiritual home be meaningful and relevant in each of our lives? And for those who strongly identify with this community and feel the “love overflowing” and the sense of belonging, consider the following: What will

it take from all of us so that those who walk through these doors could feel that this is their home?

One of the most powerful Jewish metaphors for understanding a spiritual home is the humble tent. It has no doors, just simple openings that flap in the hot desert breeze. And in Jewish tradition, who do we first encounter in the tent? Avraham, the first Jew, *ישב פתח האהל כחם היום* who sat in the tent opening in the heat of the day. *וישא עיניו* And he lifted up his eyes and he saw, *והני שלשה אנשים*, three men stood there. RASHI the great medieval commentator tells us that these were not just three men, but they were actually *מלאכים* angels of God. It is a puzzling passage because the word *אנשים* actually means people. The simple meaning of the text does not bear out that they were angels at all.

When Avraham saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent opening, he hastened to bring food and drink and to welcome them. And in doing this, Avraham becomes the role model extraordinaire for the commandment of *hakhnasat orhim*, the *mitzvah* of welcoming guests. Avraham is the paradigmatic host – the one we emulate by opening up our homes and our synagogues. It is as if he has the perfect antidote to guard against what we

are reminded about in the book of Exodus. No less than 36 times, we are warned regarding empathy for the stranger **כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם** - because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. And indeed, this is what Avraham did with great empathy for the three men.

But what about those three men who chance by his tent? What if they were simple mortal men and not angels as RASHI tells us? What were they feeling and thinking on that hot desert day when their eyes fell upon Avraham? What conversations did they have amongst themselves as they approached the home of a stranger?

In the desert, they were probably hungry, thirsty and in need of shade, and certainly motivated to meet eye to eye with Avraham and to consider entering his tent.

Do you think they were at all nervous? Who was this man running to meet them? What if Avraham had turned out to be a thief or worst? What if these three men put themselves at tremendous risk by entering his tent at all?

Each one of us in this room has been in a situation somewhat like the one faced by the three men. Can you recall a time in your life when you had to decide whether or not to enter? When you were on the threshold of the unknown? Did you risk? Or did you play it safe, staying in your comfort zone, avoiding the possibility of rejection from others?

When I think about these questions, I remember the blessing and the challenge of moving to a new city, something I have done several times as an adult. At times I felt like I was wandering in the desert looking for an opening in the tent, with someone like Avraham waiting to greet me. In the words of the theme song from Cheers, I was longing for a place “where everybody knows your name.”

I will never forget one particular occasion when my children were beginning the year at a new school. The parent orientation was looming in my calendar. I wanted to support my kids and to enter into a new community, but I really dreaded going. I didn't relish the idea of walking into a room packed with people and the prospect of no one greeting me. And, I didn't feel motivated to take the risk by approaching people I didn't know in order to strike up a conversation. I came up to the check in table, got my name

tag sticker, put it on and walked in the door. And indeed, there were 100+ people there. I walked around to the information tables, trying to look busy and engaged. But when I left the room that night, not a single person had approached me, greeted me or made an effort to draw me into conversation. In the throes of transition myself, I had been unable to find the opening in the tent. I definitely didn't feel the "love overflowing" and felt the chagrin of my key in the lock, knowing this was my children's school, my new home, but that it didn't feel like mine. It wasn't just the idea that I might not come to know the parents of my children's peers. It was a deeper existential fear. Would I ever fit in? Where would I belong? What would happen if I couldn't connect with anyone?

I believe that this is what each one of us risks by entering into a synagogue. We no longer live in shtetls, in small Jewish communities where everyone knows each other, linked by strong family connections. But when we walk into the synagogue, we see people who know each other, people who know what they are doing. They have found the opening to the tent.

But if you feel like an outsider, what can you do? I know what I did when I felt like an outsider, when I was a newcomer to a town where it felt like everyone knew each other. I identified with Avraham's courage. As I struggled with being alone in a new place, I also found the energy and the strength to emulate Avraham. That year, when no one invited us to a Passover seder, we hosted two seders. We invited all kinds of people in need of hakhnasat orḥim and we LOVED doing it. We felt the loneliness fade away and the joy of community take its place. Hosting brings us out of a place of focusing on ourselves. It broadens our world.

The story of Avraham and the three men offers radical hope. The insider and the outsider come together in a beautiful synergistic moment. The host had to risk and the potential guests had to risk. Avraham did the right thing by standing at the opening of the tent to welcome anyone who would come along. And the three men did the right thing by taking a chance on the opening in the tent. They could have passed out of fear or disinterest. But they didn't.

This story offers real hope of what 21st century spiritual communities could look like. The tent, manned by Abraham is a paradigm for a synagogue

where its members are not sequestered in the cool interior of the building, but rather eagerly stationed in the sunlight by the doors to make people feel comfortable and welcome when they enter. We need to understand that the three men were “outsiders” who took no small risk themselves.

What would happen if the synagogue “insider” could come to identify so closely with the “outsider” so as to carry that awareness, that empathy with him always? And what if the “outsider” could see, literally see the possibility of her being in a place with “love overflowing?” What would our synagogues look like then? What will it take from all of us so that those who walk through these doors could feel that this could be their home?

As we help each other move from being outsider to insider, let us be guided by these three principles:

As we help each other move from being outsider to insider, let us be guided by these three principles:

- 1) **Stand in the other person’s shoes** – and that goes for both the newcomer and the regular. Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of our Ancestors

reminds us אל תדין הברך עד שתגיע למקומו - do not judge a person until you have stood in his place. Let go of the stereotypes that you might hold regarding the other. To the newcomer, understand that for many who seem so comfortable in shul (including myself) we had to make our way to that sense of ease and comfort. And to the regular, remember to welcome others as they make their way into the collective life of the synagogue.

- 2) **Honor each person's autonomy.** Know that the only person whose behavior you can control is your own (and sometimes even that is difficult). To those who love coming here, extend that love to the newcomer. People will only come when here as they find personal and communal meaning here. And to the newcomer, know that you are entering the home of a centuries-old tradition. Like Shakespeare or the opera, your understanding and appreciation will grow commensurate with your investment in learning and doing.
- 3) **Be real** – what we do here is it is not about services, it is not about programs. It is essentially about the relationships. Sincere interest in each other helps erase the boundaries between insider and outsider.

In stretching ourselves spiritually, we make it possible for this community to be an antidote to being adrift in the world, to facing each day alone.

Community is the lifeline to forming life-long relationships without which we cannot thrive. I unabashedly hope that for each of us Kol Shofar comes to be a place where the key slides easily into the lock, where you recognize home and know "a place where there's love overflowing. . ." Shanah Tovah. . .