

Rosh Hashanah 5781: In the Pews and On Our Couch

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom

Well, I didn't see this one coming.

What a year 2020 has been.

Ever since I became a rabbi, I have loved the full sanctuary of Rosh Hashanah.

Every year, I look out and see you in your familiar places. Maybe you like the aisle, or maybe you like the back; maybe you want your seat in front, or maybe you want to be anywhere but; maybe you sit by a loved one's plaque, or maybe you look for your family or friends. I love when someone comes in, and I know who you are looking for and where they are sitting, and I see the smiles on your faces when you find each other. And then I look for those who are here for the very first time, finding their seat, finding their page, hoping most of all to find meaning.

I want you to know that I miss you. If a rabbi gives a sermon in an empty sanctuary, is the sermon actually given? And yet, in this case, it is. Because instead of sitting in Temple's pews this year, you have invited Temple into your homes. How grateful I am that you have opted in, in these unusual, unprecedented times.

One of the side effects of this pandemic is that clergy of all different religions from around the world have been communicating much more than usual, circulating ideas, lending support, and not infrequently, sharing humour. There's been a great meme making the rounds, and it goes like this: "Pastors: I'm going to 26 meetings a week to figure out how to have in-person church. People: We're watching church on the couch, wearing pajamas and drinking coffee, and we can mute you. We're good." I'm speaking to you now from our sanctuary. It felt important that it not be entirely empty on this day. Like most of us, though, I've been staying close to home. Most of the time, I'm sitting in a small room off the dining room and teaching and counselling, leading services and watching webinars, attending meetings and multitasking, with unreliable wifi, and children and pets running past. Unlike in the meme, I don't work in my pajamas. But coffee? I'm on my third big tin of Tim Horton's.

These months have been a huge challenge to synagogue life, as we have learned to connect in new ways; and there will be challenges with our eventual return. Me, the rabbi who encourages you to sit close together and share your stories and sing, will

have to tell you to spread out and stay quiet. I've always believed God has a sense of humour; I just never thought it had such an edge. There have been times, over these months, when I have felt like we were constantly facing problems without solutions; problems both logistical and existential, and everything in between. There have been times when I have come close to despair.

I take great comfort, though, from a quirky Jewish text, dating back almost two thousand years: "Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight..." the text begins, and it goes on to list items ranging from the rainbow after the flood, to the manna the Israelites ate in the desert.ⁱ Rabbi Dani Segal uses this text to imagine God, rushing to get creation finished before the very first Shabbat.ⁱⁱ In this twilight moment, God made certain things, which would be useful at specific moments in the future. Why? Because, Rabbi Segal teaches, God knew two things. One: Things will always go wrong. Two: *When* things go wrong, there will be something to help us; we will already have what we need. We just need to open our eyes and see.

The Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah are all about vision. Hagar, wandering in the desert with her son Ishmael, parched and about to die, lifts her eyes and sees a well. She calls the place *Adonai Roi*, the place that God has seen her. Abraham takes his son Isaac to be sacrificed; he first sees the place that God has told him; he tells Isaac that God will see to the sacrifice; but then God stops him, and Abraham lifts his eyes and sees a ram waiting to be sacrificed in Isaac's place. That ram, by the way, was one of the ten things that God created at twilight, in anticipation of just this moment. The episode ends with Abraham calling the place *Adonai Yireh*, meaning, "God will see."

And so, we have seen our way to solutions. This morning's service has come to you via one cantorial soloist; one audio editor; one video editor; one live videographer and live-streamer; two audio engineers; three videographers; three organists in three different cities; and eight choral singers recorded in pairs; all of these brought together by our dedicated and talented music director, Rona Nadler. All so you and I could hear the prayers this morning and take a deep breath and feel in our heart of hearts that yes, it is Rosh Hashanah.

But right now, we are not in the recording studio. We are in real time, me in an empty sanctuary and you on your couch. And I want to ask us, in this very strange moment: What might we see, when we lift our eyes – not on God's mountain, but from our couch? What vision might inspire us? What do we see from home?

A story:

Once, there was a man named Azyk, the son of Reb Yekl of Cracow. One night, Azyk dreamt of a great treasure hidden under the Warsaw bridge. Early the next morning, Azyk woke up, and went to Warsaw. When he approached the bridge, a watchman asked him: “What are you doing here?” “I had a dream,” replied Azyk, “that there is a treasure hidden here, and I came to find it.” “That’s funny,” the watchman said, “I dreamt of a great treasure last night too, only this one was hidden in the oven of a house of a man named Azyk, the son of Reb Yekl of Cracow.” Astonished, Azyk turned right around and went home, and sure enough, when he opened his oven door, he found a great treasure inside.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are treasures to be found at home. In the words of Rabbi Alan Lew, the treasure “is hidden in the oven, in the kitchen, in the most frequently used room in the house. It is hidden in plain sight... All one has to do is go to the most obvious, least exotic place in the house and simply open the door.”^{iv}

Now, don’t get me wrong – when we reopen our doors at Temple, I’m counting on you to come back. The synagogue is a *Beit Kneset*, a House of *Gathering*. And how we long to gather; what great things we can do, when we gather. But the synagogue is also a *Beit Kneset*, a *House of Gathering*, a place inspired by the Jewish home. These two places – Temple and home – we need them both. We learn from them both.

Two thousand years ago, when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the synagogue rose in prominence – but so too did the home. The sacrificial system was replaced by prayers – but also by the kitchen table. Family psychologist Dr. Wendy Mogel points out that, “[o]ne traditional Jewish expression for *home* is the same as the word for a house of worship: *mikdash me’at*, or “little holy place.” [It] has the potential to be the holiest spot on the planet.”^v

The obvious move right now would be to take you from your couch into the kitchen; to talk about the connection between Jews and food; even, if I felt particularly daring, to talk about keeping kosher. I could give that sermon. But the truth is, when the time comes for my children to eulogize me, they will not wax poetic about my cooking. And, more importantly, I don’t think that’s the sermon that any of us need this year. Yes, some people have been doing brilliant things with sourdough starters or baking challah every week. But others have been making do with frozen pizzas while juggling work and school, or haven’t bothered cooking because of how alone

they've felt, or have had to scrape the back of their cupboards for any kind of food.

Being home is about more than food. This year, being home is positively heroic; we are protecting others as well as ourselves. But being home is also about more than a place to shelter. If your home is a safe place, as we pray all homes should be, being home is about putting your feet up and your guard down. And I wonder whether sometimes, the synagogue is too much a place where, despite our best efforts, you feel you have to put your guard up, and your game face on. So, what have these months shown us, these months when we have seen into each other's homes? Believe me, I understand the impulse (and sometimes the need) to put on a background or turn off your video.

But look at what we have seen.

We have seen pets and children pass by the screen, in moments both beautiful and awkward. We have seen our real lives, with all their permeable boundaries. Our messiness shows. Our loneliness shows. Our desire for connection shows too. I see people online who have learned to be computer literate, or despite technical difficulties, persevered; some of you may not even have computers, but are using the tablets Temple lent you, or phoning in to follow along.

People are coming to services or classes for the very first time, all from the comfort of their homes. People who are in New Brunswick and Scotland, Cleveland and Ottawa and New York, have found their way to us from home. Being home lets us reach each other differently, but it also lets us see each other differently.

Being home lets us see *ourselves* differently. Being home might even let us see God differently, in a way that is less intimidating and more intimate.

Priest and poet Ruth Wells is onto something when she writes:

God snuck home.

No longer bound by the expectations of a 'consecrated' building

She's concentrated her efforts on breaking out.

Now in the comfort of a well-worn dining table she shares some bread, with some friends.

And she laughs.

And she weeps.

In the sacred space of home.^{vi}

I wrote this sermon in the sacred space of home – just as you are listening from home. I wrote it at what used to be my Bubbe and Zaide’s kitchen table, classic 1950s with white linoleum and gold flecks. At this table, we played gin rummy and had cookies and tea, and what I learned at that table as a child still infuses my every word.

My grandparents were also synagogue-goers. They were synagogue-goers their whole lives, when times were easy and when times were hard. They did so because they knew then what we know now: They knew that, whatever the circumstances, synagogues will always find ways to connect us. And they knew that, combined with life at home, the synagogue helps make us our best selves. We sit in those pews and we sit a little straighter, we behave a little better, we act like the people we know we can be.

Rav Kook teaches:

“Blessed shall you be in the city” – that your home shall be close to the synagogue. [Why? Because there] are people whose behaviour at home is far from their behaviour in the synagogue. In the synagogue they observe all the smallest details of the law, but not so at home. Their homes are far from the synagogue, and the synagogue has no influence on their life at home. This is the blessing that your home should be close to the synagogue – that the spirit of the synagogue will saturate your home as well.^{vii}

Beit Knesset – the place where we gather. The place where we learn our traditions and live our most important values. The place where we can welcome the stranger, and where our voices join together. The place where different generations connect, where a new wedding couple can be called to the *bima* after a couple celebrating a marriage of fifty years. The place where we celebrate our babies and *bnei mitzvah* and say *kaddish* for our dead, the place where we are invested on each other’s loves and losses; where we are part of each other’s lives.

When we return to the synagogue, I want us to bring the grandeur and connection of Temple – and also the intimacy and immediacy of home. I want the spirit of the synagogue to saturate our homes, and the spirit of our homes to saturate our synagogue. Some of how we do this will be logistical – hybrid services and classes, for instance, where people can come into Temple or stay home on the other side of

the screen. We will have practical choices: pews or couch. But some is existential: bringing the best of both worlds together, to renew our Jewish lives. For our Judaism has always been about integration; being true both to our tradition and to ourselves. Being the same person in the pews and on our couch.

2020 is still with us, but 5780 is done.

From this sanctuary, from our homes, we welcome 5781.

ⁱ Mishnah Avot 5:6.

ⁱⁱ This teaching comes from Rabbi Dani Segal, "Reinventing Ourselves: New Paths for Connection and Communication through Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash, and Hasidut," HartmanSummer@Home, July 15, 2020. Rabbi Segal's session and sources can be found at <https://summer.hartman.org.il/agenda/session/275525>.

ⁱⁱⁱ A version of this story, from the Parables of Rebbe Nahman, was shared by Rabbi Segal in his session. The version in the sermon is closer to that shared by Rabbi Alan Lew in his book, *Be Still and Get Going* (New York, 2005), pp.2-4.

^{iv} Lew, p.5.

^v Wendy Mogel, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* (New York, 2001).

^{vi} <https://twitter.com/Ruthmw/status/1256317999792832512>, @Ruthmw, Twitter, May 1, 2020.

^{vii} Megeed Yerahim, cited in Aharon Yaakov Greenberg, ed., and Rabbi Dr. Shmuel Himelstein, trans., *Torah Gems - Itturei Torah* (Tel Aviv, 1998) v.3, p.291.