



## Kol Nidre 5776: Home

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What does it mean to come home?

Rabbi Larry Kushner remembers his first time coming home from university. He and three other students were driving from Cincinnati to Detroit, in the days long before cell phones. He describes the scene as they pull into the driveway of his parents' home, his mother dressed in a shirt that he bought her for her birthday and which she only wore that one time; his father sitting in an uncomfortable chair to have a better view of the driveway. Kushner himself, seeing them in a new light, figuring out where to call home.

“We spend our lives,” he writes, about the push and pull of that moment,

...trying to get far away from our parents and to keep our children close. But since everyone is both a child and a parent of the next generation, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that we have a problem here. Lots of parents wanting to keep their kids close. Lots of kids trying to get away. Lots of kids wishing they could go home, but not being able to stand it when they get there. Lots of parents eager for their kids to go to school, but not being able to stand it once they're gone.

It's crazy. Like dogs, they love to jump into the car and as soon as they're in the car, they love to jump out of the car. Comedian Gary Shandling says he just leaves both car doors open. They jump in. They jump out. It can do on for hours. We have it worse. We do it with our parents for our whole lives.<sup>1</sup>

For me, twenty years ago as a student at McGill, that was what I felt every time I took the train from Montreal to my family in Toronto, and back to Montreal. Coming into Toronto, the King Eddie hotel was my sign that I was back in the city where I grew up, that place with all the memories of home. And coming into Montreal, the Farine Five Roses sign was my beacon, telling me I was just around the bend from being back in the city I had chosen, back in the place I was making my home. Each place had its own

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Kushner, “Homecoming,” in *Invisible Lines of Connection: Sacred Stories of the Ordinary*, p.52.



anxieties; each place had its own comforts. In each place, I could be homesick for the other. Each place felt like home.

We come home to synagogue on Kol Nidre, like salmon swimming upstream. The service is grand and familiar all at once; the sweep of it carries us. Over a thousand years ago, an ancient Machzor explained how the prayer should be sung:

The first time the cantor chants Kol Nidre in a very low voice, like a person who is amazed at entering the palace of the king to ask for a favor, and is afraid of coming close to the king... The second time, the cantor ought to raise his voice a little higher than the first time. The third time the cantor ought to raise his voice higher and higher, like a man who is at home and accustomed to being a member of the king's household.<sup>2</sup>

What we want is to come home to the palace, confident that we will be heard. There is a strange tension to this service. For many, the melody is so familiar – Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk once said that even just the tune on a violin could turn someone to repentance (and he never heard Dennis Brott on the cello).<sup>3</sup> But the words, annulling all our commitments, all our vows... we can find meaning in them, but there is a paradox. We can only annul our commitments in the place we feel a connection. We navigate the unknown in the place where we want to feel known. Whether you were born Jewish or not, whether you grew up at Temple or not, when we enter this sanctuary we are held by those who came here before us; we uphold it for those who will come after. Even as we let go of our vows, our presence shows our promise to keep this sacred home.

What does it mean to be at home? It can't mean always being comfortable (or we would have gotten new pews before new boilers), but it should, it seems to me, be a place that we can bring our whole selves, at all ages and stages of life.

Dr. Atul Gawande explores this question in his recent book, *Being Mortal*. His focus is on aging and the end of life, and his argument is that, by prioritizing safety and protection for our elders, we forget about the fact that they, like all of us, want to live lives full of

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<sup>2</sup> Machzor Vitry, 9<sup>th</sup> century. <http://www.bj.org/Articles/examining-the-mystery-of-kol-nidre/>.

<sup>3</sup> Told by Jonathan Slater, "Release Beyond Words: Kol Nidre Even on a Violin," in *All These Vows: Kol Nidre*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman, p.205.



worth and meaning. In this way, the book really is a reflection on what it takes to be at home in ourselves; it's about what matters all along.

Gawande describes the life work of Keren Brown Wilson, one of the originators of the concept of assisted living. Wilson recalls what her own mother wanted in her old age: “she wanted a small place with a little kitchen and a bathroom. It would have her favorite things in it, including her cat, her unfinished projects, her Vicks VapoRub, a coffee-pot, and cigarettes...”<sup>4</sup>

Gawande notes, “The key word in her mind was *home*. Home is the one place where your own priorities hold sway.”<sup>5</sup> Home is about agency, he says; the ability to make your own choices, to be the author of your own story. Yom Kippur reminds us that that is not just the task of those nearing death, for none of us knows when we will die – this day, dressed in white, without food or water or sex, is meant to remind us of our mortality. And “[t]he battle of being mortal,” he writes, “is the battle to maintain the integrity of one’s life.”<sup>6</sup>

But home means more than agency. Gawande tells the wonderful story of Dr. Bill Thomas, the medical director of a nursing home in upstate New York. Thomas quickly identified what he called the Three Plagues of nursing home existence: boredom, loneliness, and helplessness. He noticed that the sounds were of residents moaning, TV’s playing, announcements over the PA. And then he decided to shake things up – by bringing in two dogs, four cats, and a hundred birds. “You’ve got to be out of your mind!” an administrator said when he heard. “Have you ever lived in a house that has two dogs and four cats and one hundred birds?” To which Thomas said, “No, but wouldn’t it be worth trying?”<sup>7</sup> Reflecting on the experience afterward, he wrote: “People who we had believed weren’t able to speak started speaking. People who had been completely withdrawn and non-ambulatory started coming to the nurses’ station and saying, “I’ll take the dog for a walk.”<sup>8</sup> All this, because of a connection to other living beings –a connection gave them a reason to open their mouths, and a reason to move their legs. It made them feel at home.

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, pp.88-89.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.89.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp.140-41.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.118.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.122.



As we confront the refugee crisis which I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, we are acutely aware of how important it is simply to have shelter: a roof over your head; clothes on your back; food in your belly. But we know, all of us, that a home is different than mere shelter. That's part of why, when that refugee family comes, they will need more than just the externals; they will need help making new connections, rediscovering their ability to determine the direction of their lives. They will need help making a new home.

But coming back to us, in this place, and on this night: how many of us sit here, and truly feel at home? How much do you know about what brought the person sitting beside you, behind you, on the other side of the room? Like our president, I don't take it for granted that you come. Franz Rosenzweig, the Jewish philosopher, famously went to Kol Nidre in 1913, imagining it would be his last time in a synagogue, because he found no relevance in his Jewish past. Some of you may come in feeling like him, this year. Every year, Kol Nidre is the first service for some, and whether they come back will be determined by what happens here tonight – a good sermon, perhaps (no pressure), but also whether anyone says hello, whether anyone helps them feel at home. As many people as there are here, there are stories tonight. Let me share just one of them with you.

Andrea Forgacs is a new member of our congregation. She told me her story in response to two simple questions: What brings you here? And, where are you from? Born in Budapest, she left at the age of six in 1978 for a childhood spanning Hungary, the United States, and France. Her grandparents on both sides were Holocaust survivors; her mother was raised Orthodox to parents who had lost both their families, and were understandably ambivalent about faith. Her father didn't know he was Jewish until he was thirteen, when he came home from school with an anti-Semitic joke and his parents sat him down. She herself grew up celebrating Christian holidays, with a fear of being found out.

She met her husband, a French atheist from a Catholic family, while travelling in Cambodia, and they made their lives together first in the States, then in France, and for the past four years, here in Montreal. They have three children, two of whom took part in our Torah school program last year at Ecole Boussoniere. As their son comes closer to bar mitzvah age, Andrea told me, she realised she wants him to have this rite of passage, and her husband is on board. She also realised how much she herself wants to



learn, for her past but also for her future, and for the ups and downs of daily life. “I feel like I have to pay homage to my ancestors,” she said, “and carry my Judaism forward.” Along with a number of other women and men this year, she plans to become an adult bat mitzvah. This will be the place where she writes part of her story; this will be the place she and her family can connect – not just because we will welcome her interfaith family, and not just because we offer education for her kids – the synagogue equivalent of simple shelter. But because it feels like home.

To find one’s synagogue home, if I can borrow from Pesach, would be *dayenu*; it would be enough. But Yom Kippur goes beyond Kol Nidre, it goes beyond that moment where melody and history and story call us home. Tomorrow morning, we will read Nitzavim, the passage in Deuteronomy which proclaims:

You stand here together this day, before your Eternal God – the heads of your tribes, your elders and officers, everyone in Israel, men, women, and children, and the strangers in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water – to enter into the sworn covenant which your Eternal God makes with you this day... And it is not with you alone that I make this sworn covenant: I make it with those who are standing here with us today before our God, and with all those who are not with us here today.<sup>9</sup>

Yom Kippur is not just our coming home to Temple; Yom Kippur calls us together as a broader community, a community shaped by covenant. In those days, that broader community was a gathering of the people of Israel, as they prepared to enter their land. They – like others before and since – were trying to build their home.

This year, I think we have to ask: what does it mean to be Canadian, to call this country home?

I was speaking to a friend a few days ago, and she said, “You know, the amount of things that you can actually *say* from the pulpit about the election will take no more than a minute.” And she’s right, of course; the last thing I want to do on Yom Kippur is make you feel alienated from your synagogue home because our politics don’t align.

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<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 29:9-14.



But what does it mean to be at home here? That is a very Jewish question to ask. This year, in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools, I've been thinking a lot about the fact that you and I are not, in fact, the first people to call this land home. I've been thinking a lot about those two qualities that Gawande identifies with home – having the agency to write your own story, and living meaningful connections – and thinking about the legacy of stolen agency, and broken promises. I've been thinking about what it means to say, as John Ralston Saul has written, “We are the treaty people” – that each and every one of us who comes to this country, whenever we came and wherever we are from, is part of the treaties this country was built on, dating back to 1609.<sup>10</sup> “Canada,” Saul cites, “is a test case for a grand notion – the notion that dissimilar peoples can share land, resources, power and dreams while respecting and sustaining their differences... The story of Canada is the story of many such peoples, trying and failing and trying again to live together in peace and harmony.”<sup>11</sup> *Al chet she-chatanu* – there are so many ways we have failed. And there is so much that we can yet do together.

We will hear more of this story at our symposium on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on October 18, the day before the election. I raise it tonight not to say that it is the only issue, but to remind us that there are many issues which shape our relationship to our country, to our “home and native land.” The task of reconciliation is one such issue. The response to refugees is another. Home does not require that we all agree. But our Jewish teaching, our traditions and values, demand that we be engaged in the society in which we live; they compel us to lift our voices and roll up our sleeves for what we believe to be right. It is for this reason that we are hosting the candidates’ debate this Sunday – we believe that being part of the conversation matters.

Part of really being at home as Canadian Jews means having the freedom to care about many issues, to be moved by multiple loyalties; as professor Norma Joseph wrote in the CJA last summer, “We need not see everything in oppositional terms... In this sense, dual loyalties are fine, even healthy, in a multicultural world. They cement our position as active citizens, working for the fuller humanity of all without denying our unique

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<sup>10</sup> John Ralston Saul, *The Comeback*, p.17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp.164-65, citing the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.



heritage.”<sup>12</sup> As we cast our votes this fall, may we do so recognizing the complexity of the issues, but also with confidence in our role and our responsibility as citizens, helping to build our shared home. We stand here together this day.

What does it mean to be at home? Let me close with these words from Ojibway author Richard Wagamese, whose generosity of spirit gives me confidence in sharing his insights this night. His is an expansive understanding of home. In describing our country, he writes:

I have learned that to love this country means to love its people. All of them... We are part of the great, grand circle of humanity, and we need each other.

It wouldn't be Canada with one voice less.<sup>13</sup>

Our voices make this country home. Our stories make this Temple home. May we welcome others; may we feel welcome ourselves. What a gift; what a blessing; welcome home.

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<sup>12</sup> Normal Joseph, “Azrieli Helped Us Understand Multiple Loyalties, *The Canadian Jewish News*, July 22, 2014. <http://www.cjnews.com/columnists/azrieli-helped-us-understand-multiple-loyalties>.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Wagamese, *One Native Life*, p.192.