

Finding Home in *Eretz Yisrael* and Mount Zion

Kol Nidre 5771, September 17, 2010

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Which is true: “Nothing ventured nothing gained” or “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread?” Which is true: “He who hesitates is lost” or “Look before you leap?” Pick one: “Out of sight out of mind” or “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Or according to comedian Steve Wright, Why is it that you have to put your two cents in, but you only get a penny for your thoughts? Someone’s making a penny out there.

Samuel Johnson observed that two things imputed to the human heart may not be logical at the same time, but both can be true.¹ We human beings are creatures of contradiction. We can hold divergent thoughts in our hearts. As Jews, the themes of exile and home can co-exist in our hearts and, in too many times in history, in our reality. Because Judaism is more than faith, but includes nationhood, culture civilization, paradoxical questions arise: Can we feel at home in Israel and live in the Diaspora? And even: can we feel at home at Mount Zion and struggle with our Judaism?

Where do we feel at home? This word captures an existential grounding that we so thirst for in our modern world. For anyone from Minnesota, which used to be the vast majority of our membership, it may be easier to feel rooted to this land of 10,000 lakes. For anyone not from Minnesota – now it seems over half our membership—any newcomer, such as anyone who has been here, let’s say 30 years, we hope Minnesota can feel like home.

Sometimes this feeling of being at home can just happen. Other times it takes a lot of effort. Clearly this is not only about our physical space. Our physical home may change location. A physical home may lose its value, be foreclosed, be an unattainable dream – how well we are aware in these past couple years.

As important and primary as physicality is – something we explore in depth next week in the fragile shelter of our *sukkah* – there are other dimensions that are more important. Physical uprootings may shake us, but if there is a deeper sense of home, we will be ok.

This is my bar mitzvah year with Mount Zion and thankfully I am no longer confused with the bar mitzvah boy.

It is clearer to me than ever before how our vision of Mount Zion as a “welcoming and vibrant Jewish spiritual home” is so necessary in our lives. I come to this personally. I grew up in many physical homes as my family moved ten times in five states and three countries by time I was ten years old. Spiritually, my parents who are both Jewish, did not connect with the Jewish community and I was not raised going to synagogue. Like many in my parents’ generation, other groups spoke to them such as the Unitarians. When I was fourteen, my teacher at school had each student stand up and state their faith. I remember the confusion I felt at that moment. The rootlessness was almost palpable. When I went to meet with the local rabbi weeks later to learn about Judaism, he invited me to join the confirmation class. My parents, always supportive, joined the synagogue with me. And in one moment, I felt connected to something that was bigger than me, than my family. I was at home in history, joined to a people who lived around the world, and throughout the ages.

¹ Quotations from Floating takes Faith, Rabbi David Wolpe, p. 48.

Though my journey home to Judaism had more to do with connecting to our people and history than to God, it is interesting that the name we use for God at such times of need - when we feel uprooted the most -- is "*Makom*," the Place. When we are in need of stability, of home, we want to feel grounded, literally connected to the earth.

In fact, if you want to translate "home" into Hebrew, I suggest that it should be the word *eretz*. Though the Hebrew word "*bayit*" is the translation of "home", *eretz* which is literally "land" suggests the grounding that home connotes.

We associate *eretz* with a particular land that has linked Jews over our entire history, *eretz Yisrael*, what Christians call "the Holy Land." Over Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Adler reflected on *Am Yisrael*, the people Israel, and I spoke of *Medinat Yisrael*, the state of Israel, tonight is about the third manifestation of the word Israel, *eretz*.

In the Torah, land is the central theme of faith, of believing that though we are wandering, we will come to the Promised Land. In fact, according to scholars, the most ancient section of Torah is the liturgy that every ancient Israelite knew by heart:

My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to Adonai, the God of our fathers, and Adonai heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. Adonai freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. God brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey, wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You Adonai, have given me.

In this recitation, there is no mention of Sinai, no mention of Torah, only land. Land was the essential gift from God that our pilgrim remembers. This liturgy was so well known that the rabbis chose this section as the basis for the Passover *haggadah*.

Throughout the ages since the days of Moses, whether we have been in or out of the land, *eretz Yisrael* has given us Jews a place in this world that is home.

The 12th century Andalusian poet Yehuda HaLevi captured this sentiment when he said, "I am in the west, but my heart is in the east."

Why is this particular piece of real estate potentially home? Is it because God named it so in the Torah? Is it because our ancestors literally have tilled its soil for over three thousand years, with some interruptions as a people but never without Jewish presence? Is it because it is the land-bridge between Asia, Africa and Europe and was desirable to everyone from Alexander to Napoleon? Or is it because there is something truly mysterious about *eretz Yisrael* in the way that the scholar Mircea Eliade described as a sixth sense inherent in a place, as real as its sight and texture, what he calls hierophany, a religious sense that emanates from certain places. It is why some sites, and not others, become holy to group after group, faith after faith.

Whatever reason resonates, it is a historic fact that *eretz Yisrael* has tugged on the Jewish heart for millennia. Yet, we have wrestled with this fact. The themes of land and exile run deep throughout our texts in complex, intertwined ways. "By the waters of

Babylon, there we sat and wept,” as we read in Psalm 137 but we know that most Israelites never returned from Babylon in the first exile. Hundreds of years later, the Talmud states on the one hand: “A person should ever strive to live in the *eretz Yisrael*... (One) who lives outside the Land is regarded as one who has no God... as though he worshiped idols.” On the other hand, in the very same tractate, life outside of Israel is given better press and potential: “Whoever lives in Babylon is accounted as though he lived in *eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel.”² The recognition of positive and full Jewish life outside of Israel was already understood. The tension between homeland and exile was already sown.

Reform Judaism officially rejected connection to *eretz Yisrael* in its rational heyday, with our Mount Zion forbears calling St. Paul our Jerusalem, this synagogue, our Temple. Yet the tug of connection to *eretz Yisrael* never disappeared. Even as we made our home in St. Paul, we felt in some ways at home in *eretz Yisrael*, some 9,000 miles away. This has not always been clearly defined. How can we both be at home here and there? Do we feel in any way in Diaspora or fully at home outside *eretz Yisrael*? However we resolve these questions, the potential of home is a gift freely offered. It is up to us to decide what to do with this gift of a homeland. It is our blessing to have more than one home.

In the movie, *Love and Death*, there is a scene about how we can take connection to land to an absurdity. Woody Allen narrates: “And my own father, a handsome and generous man, In addition to our summer and winter estate, he owned a valuable piece of land. True, it was a small piece. (It was a piece of sod that could hold it in his hands.) But he carried it with him wherever he went. “Dimitri Pietrovich!” said a neighbor, “I would like to buy your land.” “This land is not for sale. Some day, I hope to build on it.” He was an idiot. But I loved him.

Israelis too wrestle with what it means to be home. The late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai often touches themes of exile and home in his works, raising the issue of being in exile while living in *eretz Yisrael*. He wrote this stanza in 1967 recalling Yehuda Halevy’s statement of his heart being in the east while he was in the west:

This year I traveled far away
To see the tranquility of my city.
A baby is calmed by rocking,
a city is calmed by distance
I lived in longing. I played the game
Of Yehuda Halevy's four strict squares:
My heart. Myself. East. West.

Amichai’s poetry follows Jewish history of often not being at home anywhere, of being a wandering nation among nations. Yes, the idea of the wandering Jew is primarily a Christian theological construct to prove the supersession of Christianity – an idea that has been rejected by most Christians and also an idea put into disarray with the founding of *medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel. Exile and wandering are still concepts we Jews seem to dwell upon. For instance, we read the Torah, the five books of Moses, over the course of an entire year which means that week after week, month after month, we never actually enter the land so promised in all its chapters. We spend the entire year wandering in the wilderness of Exodus through Deuteronomy, awaiting that

² Ketubot 111a.

moment of entering the land but just as we finish Deuteronomy with Moses' death -- the feet of the Israelites on the Jordan river facing Jericho, we roll the scroll back to the beginning.

Then when we return to Genesis, the creation of the first human being, we are back to universal history and the beautiful teaching in an 8th c. midrash that the first person was formed of the soil from the four corners of the earth, the black, yellow, red, and white sands to teach us that none can say my heritage is greater than yours.³ Or we could add, my land greater than yours, my home greater than yours.

This is not about hierarchy or what is better. It is about what is good, about the human need for narrative that is anchored in a sense of having a home.

For us, we have the potential of two homes waiting to give us meaning and connection in our transient world, *eretz Yisrael* and right here at Mount Zion.

This is about choices. These homes may not feel natural yet. It may feel strange right now for some of you to simply say yes *eretz Yisrael* is in some way home for me. If you are new to Mount Zion or feel your connections here are tenuous, it can feel false to say this is a part of your Jewish home, yet. It took years before my active choices as a 14 year old felt like an authentic part of me.

Finding home is not passive. It requires our caring, our openness to history and tradition, and reaching out to the people surrounding us. It requires actively engaging in the ideas, rituals, and most importantly the relationships waiting to be made. If you so choose, if you struggle to connect to the homes of *eretz Yisrael* and Mount Zion, the rewards are great.

I pray that over time it will not feel like so much effort. Similar choices over time become habits, something we can count upon. In fact, if we only focus only on choices this is a symptom of spiritual homelessness. It is a sign that we are not yet rooted, not yet at home. Full choices suggest no anchor. "Human beings are in some ways like bees," says Professor Jonathan Haidt, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia, in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*. "We evolved to live in intensely social groups, and we don't do as well when freed from hives."

Happiness is, of course, a complex concept and difficult to measure, but it is tied up in the concept of feeling grounded, being at home. In Robert Frost's definition, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in."

Friends, we have a home in *eretz Yisrael* – it is not always an easy one, and there are tensions in our relationship to it from a distance, but it is ours. And, we also have a home in Mount Zion, a vibrant community, where we will take you in. As the Hafetz Hayim says, "The trip is never too hard if you are going home."

Make Mount Zion more of your home this year. And however you wrestle with your relationship to *eretz Yisrael*, it stands, as it has for millennia, as a home to draw meaning and rootedness from in the East even as we stand here in the West. And this need not be a contradiction.

³ From Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer and Yalkut Shimoni.