

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD
SHABBAT EVENING, 7 OCTOBER 2016

On Going Home...

I found it particularly moving when, the evening and morning of Rosh Hashanah, I walked into the hall outside of my study. Not that I don't always walk out into the hall. But what caught my eye now were all the people, some alone, some with their child and or grandchild, and some in groups three generations strong, all looking at their confirmation pictures and showing those pictures to their children and/or grandchildren. Seeing that made me realize firsthand how deeply embedded so many people here are into the history of Sinai Temple.

I know from my own experiences what they were doing. Whenever – and this isn't often, certainly – I go back to the synagogue of my childhood, Temple Isaiah Israel (now KAM-Isaiah Israel) in Hyde Park on Chicago's South Side (The synagogue is directly across the street from the home of President Obama and is still very much a functioning Reform synagogue), I do the same thing, i. e, make a pilgrimage to my confirmation picture. And whenever I've look at it, I've re-live the experience of my own confirmation, now so many years ago.

But this isn't the only place where I've done that. I've been back to HUC in Cincinnati a couple of times since ordination. There is a rogue's gallery there up on the second floor of the main building that faces Clifton Avenue. It continues pictures of all of the Cincinnati ordination classes, including mine. And the last time I was there, as the times before that, I spent more than a few minutes looking at the picture of the class of 1967, especially at that about-to-become rabbi in the picture, me (The picture was taken right before the ordination service began at Plum Street Temple), along with his/my classmates, most still living but one-quarter of whom have gone on to the *yeshivah shel ma'alah*, the Yeshivah-on-High. I know that young man well, though he looks slightly different from the picture of the same rabbi hanging outside the Sinai Temple office. That rabbi though, unlike the one outside the office here, has absolutely no idea of where in reality his career is going to take him or be about. But one thing is the same in

both pictures. The dreams and the aspirations of the both haven't changed a bit, not to this day.

In any case, in both places the pictures brought me "back home." But did they? My childhood congregation, I'm sure, functions totally differently from the way it did then (though I'm sure its proximity to the University of Chicago and its commitment to intellectualism and social action that being in Hyde Park have engendered is still alive and well). And HUC today, I know for a fact, is totally different in how it functions as a rabbinical school from the way it did fifty years ago (It's possible that the school was trying to train us to be scholars and academicians back then more than to be pulpit rabbis). So is going back to either place now going "back home"?

And then this week, for services on the 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah, an aspect of Rosh Hashanah we as a congregation here do not observe, Janet and I went back to Salem where we attended Shirat Hayam in Swampscott (Elana Rozenfeld, my *chevruta* who installed me a few weeks ago, is the cantor). That is a congregation – since I do have a membership in it – that, in addition to the fact that it is five minutes away from my home, and despite the fact that it is a Conservative and not a Reform congregation, in many ways serves now as something of a religious anchor for me. And, since I have many, many friends there, the congregation brought both of us a warm welcome cum hugs and embraces from the minute we walked in until the service ended hours later.

The service, almost totally in Hebrew, was exciting for me. And I know that for most in the vast throng of worshippers the service, with some very obvious ritual and a great feeling of *kehillah*, of community, and, more than any of that, just like here, some incredibly wonderful music, it was too.

But for most there, the service didn't derive, I'm sure, from the text of the *machzor*. The new Conservative *mahzor*, like our *machzor* and the one before it and the one before that, does a lot of paraphrasing. It is rarely just translates. So to catch the depth of what the service is *really* saying, you have to know Hebrew. Trust me, the authors of the prayers were deeply, deeply spiritual people who caught and put down some extremely powerful promulgations that encompass the depth and breadth both of Rosh Hashanah and life itself.

But I asked myself earlier this week, when I went back to Shirat Hayam, was I really going home?

KAM-Isaiah Israel, and HUC-JIR and Shirat Hayam are all different places than they were the last time I was there (and in the case of Shirat Hayam, that was only a few months ago!). They are all moving streams, and you can't walk onto the same stream twice. Disconcerting for some, it still, as I said the morning of Rosh Hashanah, is not about a past. They are about, hopefully with an eye to the future, about the present.

This is Shabbat Shuvah, named for the first word of the haftarah from the book of Hosea that we chant on this Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Here is the passage:

בְּשׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְּעֵוֹנֶיךָ: גְּקָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ
אֶל־יְהוָה אָמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ כָּל־תְּשׁוּבָה עֲוֹן וְקָח־טוֹב וְנִשְׁלָמָה פְּרִים שְׂפֹתֵינוּ:

2 *Return*, O Israel, to the Eternal One your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity. 3 Take words with yourselves and *return* to the Eternal One. Say, "You shall forgive all iniquity and teach us [the] good [way], and let us render [for] bulls [the offering of] our lips. (Hosea 13:2f)

So what is the text telling us to do? Are we simply being commanded to do it the way we did it back home, did it back in the old days?

Here's one: unlike modern rabbis who give *divrei torah* most every week, a number of centuries ago, rabbis normally didn't give sermons at all. Except twice a year. One time was on Shabbat Haggadol, the Shabbat before Pesach, when the theme of the sermon was always some aspect about Passover. The second time was on Shabbat Shuvah, this Shabbat, when the theme was always repentance, prayer and charity. That you could guess. But what you probably couldn't guess is that Shabbat Shuvah sermons – and if I remember correctly they were usually delivered on Shabbat afternoon – were interminable. Don't worry, this one won't be!

But here's the point. It's not that rabbis shouldn't give sermons every week. In fact it's not about going back home to the old days at all. It's about recognizing that even back in the old days, what we saw when we got here was often new and novel, not necessarily what we knew back in Europe. In fact, that

newness wasn't something that started here either. From wherever we were – and chances are that wherever that was we had come, sometimes centuries before, from someplace else – we now always found things different.

So the command, *Shuvah*, is not about going back home. It is about returning to the ability to be flexible, to do whatever we had to do to make ourselves and our Judaism survive, to do what we had to do to make us and our Judaism flourish.

My very-Orthodox great-grandfather, Rabbi Aaron Kosovske, a"h, went about seeking a shul on his first Shabbat in America. Not knowing much about what Chicago was about, the closest shul he could walk to was Temple Sinai, a classical Reform synagogue. Upon entering, an usher came up to him and told him to take off his hat. "We don't wear hats in this synagogue." After uttering and muttering and sputtering a few choice Yiddish responses that I won't repeat, my great-grandfather stormed out, never to set foot in that place again.

On the other hand, the last time I visited an Orthodox shul myself – and that was only a few years ago – I thought to myself, "I wonder what my great grandfather would think of *this* place." I'm convinced he would think, "*Vos ist dos, what's this?*" Here was a totally changed Orthodoxy from what he knew and practiced, I'm sure, ninety years earlier, even as it was different – much more observant I might add – than the Orthodoxy of the shuls I saw when I was a kid.

So here's the point: you can't go back home. Judaism, for all of its branches and variations, contemporary and across the centuries, has always, in some way, been about keeping up with the times. And so, now, let us go back, not to some old way, not to some old home, but to a new home, to a place of continued and continuing dynamism and changeability, that for us, and for those who come after us who will change it again, it might survive. That is what these High Holy Days suggest. May it come to pass for us, that the conclusion of these days be a sealing in the Book of Life only for the good. *Keyn y'hi ratzon*, so may it be God's will.