

EIGHTH DAY OF PASSOVER  
APRIL 11, 2015  
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Last summer I attended an educational seminar in Jerusalem with representatives from across the globe. We were sitting around a table attempting to get to know one another, when the moderator asked the following question: “Where is home?” I had to think about that for a minute and I responded by saying I need to give multiple answers. When people ask me where my home is, on the one hand, I always say Toronto. I was born there as were my parents, I have four great grandparents on my father’s side and one on my mother’s side buried there, and a large portion of my family still remains in the city. I was raised there, went to elementary, high school, and college there, met and married my wife there, and have always seen it as home.

On the other hand, I have now spent 39 years in Chicago: 12 on the south side in Hyde Park and 27 years here in Highland Park. Chicago has been very much a home for me. Our girls were born here, raised here, and schooled here through high school. Chicago is not only the place where we work, both Bryna and I have lived the major portion of our lives in this city and feel much at home either in the city or the suburbs.

On the third hand, I remarked, the only home I own, is an apartment in Jerusalem. I currently live in the Congregation’s house. Therefore, the only place where I am a home owner is Jerusalem. When I am in the apartment, with our clothes, furnishings, dishes and silverware in use, it, too, feels very much like home.

I have thought about that answer many times and I still think I would respond the same way if asked the question. It represents my past, present, and future. All of these homes have an enormous impact upon my life and on how I conduct my activities. In many ways, it mirrors the Passover experience which we celebrated at our Sedarim last week. We start the tale of the Exodus from Egypt in our Haggadah with the words: “We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt.” In the middle of the Haggadah we recite the very meaningful statement: “In every generation each individual is bound to regard himself as if he had gone personally forth from Egypt.” And we conclude the experience at the Seder with the words: “Next year in Jerusalem.” Past, present and future: we were slaves at one time in history, we still have crises in Jewish life, and we pray for redemption in Jerusalem. The past, present and future define us in so many ways, and so does what we call our home.

So I ask you: Where is home for you? In a book entitled *Israel – A Spiritual Travel Guide* Lawrence Hoffman writes: “The desire to return home runs deep in the human spirit. John Denver sold a million records singing ‘Country road , take me home to the place I belong.’ Home is where the heart is; it is the place where they have to let you in; it is the single spot on earth where you can stop running because you are ‘home free.’”

One can say that the entire Torah is all about finding a home. In the Book of Genesis Terach, Abraham's father, has a home, but Abraham is not at home in it. He goes on a journey to find a new one. Joseph is sold into bondage to a land not his own, and when he dies, he insists that his brothers bring his bones back home to the land of Canaan.

Moses is always in search of a home. He is forced to leave home as a baby, never is comfortable in his adopted home, the Egyptian palace, finds a new home in Midian with Jethro, and from there travels to Egypt and, eventually traverses the desert. He leads the people to their new home, but all he can do is look out across the Jordan at the home he seeks but will never inhabit. In fact, the rest of the Bible is also about finding a home. The children of Israel conquer the land of Canaan, but never feel secure there. They lose it and go into exile, and then recover it once more.

In a TED talk, a travel writer, Pico Iyer, discusses the concept of home and where we come from. He says that for more and more of us, since we are global citizens "home really has really less to do with a piece of soil, than you could say, with a piece of soul." Home, he suggests, is not found in any physical construction, "It is not just the place where you happen to be born. It's the place you become yourself." "My home," he states, "would have to be whatever I carried around inside me." In other words, home is where the heart is. It is being with people you love, people who care about you. It is a place where you can feel comfortable being yourself, where you don't have to put on airs and be the person you are not.

Who are those people with whom we feel "at home" and most comfortable? In many ways, it is our family, sometimes close friends, and always people who care about us. It is "the place I belong." We desire to be true to ourselves and to ourselves be true.

No holiday conveys that message more clearly than Pesach. We sit around the table, in most cases, with family and friends, and if we invite in a few strangers, we incorporate them into our family. We can be who we are, learn about our individual and collective past, stress that "feeling at home" means that we should be thankful for the gifts that we have, appreciate the freedom which is ours, and still feel uncomfortable enough that others are not granted the very same status.

The story is told of a post-war refugee family which was transferred from place-to-place in search of settlement. On one occasion, the family was standing in a train station surrounded by their tattered suitcases, boxes and bags, when a bystander approached the family's six-year old daughter and remarked: "You poor darling, moving about so much with no place to call home." The little girl looked up in surprise: "You are mistaken, I do have a home, I just don't have a house to put it into." It's not the house that makes the home, it is the people in it. It is the feeling we have being among those who care about us that makes a house a home. It is much more than a physical space. In the recent edition of *Conservative Judaism*, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson writes, "Everywhere we are, is home. Home is where our feet are. Home is where our loved ones dwell."

For the Jewish people, there is another concept of home. It represents the land of which we dreamed and prayed for so many years. In less than two weeks, we will commemorate the 67<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our people returning home, going back to its ancient homeland and, once more, establishing a society and a culture of its own. Returning home has not been easy. It has been filled with crises and wars; terrorist actions and tough political and economic realities. A week before Israeli Independence Day, we commemorate Yom HaShoah, the day on which we recognize the result of being homeless. If the choice is between homelessness and possessing a homeland, I know where my vote and your vote would stand.

In truth, now that we have a home, we need to ask ourselves why we are not there. Should we feel more “at home” in America or should we be “at home” in the State of Israel? As a person who lives with one foot planted on either side of the Atlantic, and with family in both places, I constantly ask myself that question. I like to see my life patterned after the words of Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav who stated: “Wherever I go, I am going to Jerusalem.”

Following the terrorist actions in Paris in January, this dilemma has played out in Jewish life. After the horrible events at the Hyper Cacher supermarket, the Prime Minister of the State of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, told the Jews of France they should come home to Israel. French Jews were challenged. Can they feel “at home” in a society where anti-Semitism has reared its ugly head, where it is not safe to wear a kippah on the streets of Paris? Should they move en masse to Israel where at least they will be protected by their own people? Within France there are a number of points of view. Some have picked up and moved to Israel. Others have purchased property in Israel should they either feel the urge or the necessity to move. Still others feel that moving out of France will give the anti-Semites victory and, remaining French and Jewish is the answer.

This concept of being “at home” is now being questioned throughout the European continent. In Denmark, Sweden, France, Hungary, and in other countries, Jews have been singled out for hatred and bias. Where is their place? Where can they feel at home? What is the Jewish future on the European continent? The answers are being played out in front of our very own eyes. Aliyah is up from France. In 2014 it rose 119%. Yet, Paris is the fourth largest Jewish city outside of Israel and France has 550 active synagogues, 105 Mikvaot, 10 Jewish radio stations, 405 kosher restaurants, and close to 300 Jewish schools. Do they just close down all the synagogues, schools, educational and cultural Jewish sites and move lock, stock and barrel to Israel? Or, do they attempt to fight the battle and show those who hate us they are there to stay?

Sometimes being “at home” is not only where the heart is, it is also feeling physically secure. This dilemma confronts Jews in Europe, Argentina, Ukraine, and in other countries as well.

And, there is another place called home as well. This one is not physical, it is spiritual, and it is the end of a journey. When we die, we again go to a home, an eternal one, as Judaism imagines it. Rabbi Hoffman suggests that the master metaphor of a home “is a Jewish gift to the world. Life is the process of heading home to G-d. Along the way, we have a taste of being with G-d - the experience of earthly homes where we know we are welcome, where no one hunts us down, where we welcome others the way Abraham did the strangers who had arrived at his tent in the heat of the noonday sun.” Today, on the last day of Pesach, we remember our own individual past, present and future as we recall those who meant so much to us. Reciting Yizkor allows to recognize that their journey has ended and they are “home with G-d.”

Yes, home is a physical place, it is where the heart is, it is the promise of a homeland, and it is the end of a journey. On this journey called life, I pray that we may be privileged to experience the warm feelings of home all the days of our lives.