

**Rosh Hashanah Eve Sermon 5781:
Return
By Rabbi Michael Schwab
(Draft written for speaking)**

“Dear Mom,

If Dad will permit it I would like to come home. I know there’s little chance he will. I’m not going to kid myself. I remember he said once, if I ever ran off, I might as well keep going. All I can say is that I felt like leaving home was something I *had* to do. I wanted to find out more about life and about me, and the best way for us (life and me) to live with each other.

You won’t be able to reach me by mail, because I don’t know where I will be next. But in a few days I hope to be passing our place. If there’s any chance Dad will have me back, please ask him to tie a white cloth to the apple tree in the south pasture. I’ll be going by on the train. If there’s no cloth on the tree, I’ll just quietly, and without any hard feelings toward Dad, keep going. Love, David”.

The next day, the truck on which David had hitched a ride pulled into a small town in Iowa and David mailed the letter with a knot in his stomach.

The coming days brought new acquaintances and adventures as David hitchhiked with cars, vans, trucks and freight trains, all the time edging closer to his home in Maryland. Finally, as he ascended the passenger train that would be the last leg of his journey homeward, the knot returned and firmly lodged itself in his core. He could hardly bring himself to imagine the apple tree in the pasture of his childhood home, for fear it would be bereft of the white cloth, even in his imagination.

As he sat down next to the window that would deliver his fate, an elderly gentleman sat in the seat beside him. As day turned to night, and once again back to day, the travel companions shared their stories. As David regaled him with tales of the West Coast, Canada and even Mexico, he realized that in just a short while the train tracks would take a gentle bend to the right, and there would be the farm on which he grew up, with its south facing pasture, and the old apple tree on which as a child he would climb. He couldn't look. He was too afraid the cloth would not be there - too afraid he would find, staring back at him, just another tree, just another field, and so he quickly turned away from the window.

Desperately, he nudged his travel companion beside him. "Mister, will you do me a favor? Around this bend on the right, you'll see an apple tree. I wonder if you'll tell me if you see a white cloth tied to one of its branches?" So the old man gazed out the window and then turned to David. "Son," the man said in a voice slow with wonder, "Not only do I see a white cloth on that tree, but I see one tied on every *single* branch!"

The anecdote that I just shared is based on a story called "Somebody's Son" by Richard Pindell. It powerfully captures both our need to leave the nest and our ever-present desire to return home. David's plight also highlights the inescapable fact that our past actions, and mistakes, sometimes make the return trip seem almost impossible. Yet the response of his father fills us with hope, and sends us the message that forgiveness and reconciliation are indeed achievable, even under difficult circumstances.

There is a wonderful midrash in which our rabbis tell their own version of this story. It is about a prince who runs away from the palace without his father's blessing. In this story it is the father, the king, who reaches out and sends a messenger to his son to ask

him to come home. The boy's reply is, "How can I return when I am so full of shame?" The king immediately sends another message which states, "Can a son ever be too ashamed to return to his father? And is it not to a father that you will return?"

How perfect! How beautiful! Essentially this *is* the message of our high holidays, *teshuva*, return. Return to ourselves, return to harmony with our loved ones, return to our values, return to God. Return implies that where you are going, you belong. It is your home, where you will ultimately always be welcome. Return often requires self reflection, self examination and, well, *Teshuva*, whose root is return and whose meaning is repentance. Like David in our opening story who was able to write that letter to his parents, own up to his actions and express his sincere desire to reconcile. Or the prince in the midrash, who admitted to his shame for the errors he made. But as both David and the prince's father demonstrated, our ideal in Judaism is that when we do *teshuvah*, God and our fellow human beings will welcome us home and give us a chance to begin anew.

Whenever I think of reconciliation, *teshuvah* and returning home I think of the Jacob story. To secure his birthright Jacob tricked his blind father by pretending to be Esau, his brother. Esau became enraged and Jacob was forced to flee leaving everything behind. Yet after much life learning and building a family, he decided to return home. Unsure of his reception he sent conciliatory messages and gifts to Esau and prepared to face his wrath. Instead of anger, Jacob was met with a hug and the final scene of this family is Jacob and Esau standing side by side burying their beloved father, together.

The grand project of the *Yamim Noraim* – the High Holidays -- is to herald our return home, to help us decide to restore our souls and re-align our relationships with others. We do that through *teshuvah* which requires self-examination, admitting to our mistakes, and taking responsibility for our actions. And it also requires a forgiving heart and the ability to see beyond the mistakes of the past. Thus, when sincere teshuvah meets a forgiving heart: our tradition tells us that God will tie a white cloth on every branch of the tree and we will receive the warm embrace of a father welcoming home his returning son. Shanah Tovah, may it be a year of reconciliation, repair and return. Amen.