



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Return Again

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It's hard to believe, but this week marked four months of my leave taking from New York for this wild and wonderful state of California. In the months before my May move, I began the long process of packing and emptying my belongings from my small one bedroom apartment. While I have moved many times in my life, this one felt strangely final. I knew in my bones that this time, I was leaving New York for good.

With a copy of Marie Kondo's book *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up* in one hand, I began sifting through my belongings, lovingly holding each as I asked the essential question of her method "does this bring me joy?" When the answer was yes, I would pack them carefully to carry into my new life. When the answer was no, I would find ways to shed the endless books, clothing, and knick knacks – this pile going to friends, to a thrift store, to church. There were so many bags of my unwanted belongings that turned into bags of trash. I was surprised to find that many of them refused to disappear, broken into and strewn on the sidewalk in early morning hours by foraging passersby.

With this process of sorting and shedding, memories of my four years of life in the apartment came flooding back to me. I remembered the joy of finding the space, my first real apartment of my own. I remembered the joy of moving a partner in and making a home together. When our relationship ended suddenly, I remembered the pain of separating our belongings that at one time mingled to create a home. And then I remembered finding my way home again, with new decorations and furniture, and all of the wonderful friends and family who helped me fill it with laughter and love once again.

My Brooklyn home gradually emptied till I was left with only my memories, my cat and a few essentials. I created an altar with a chalice and a few beautiful smooth stones from Maine. I sat on the floor of the empty apartment and appreciated the grandness of the space. I admired its sturdy bones, the sunlight streaming in the windows in the morning. As I left the space, I blessed it, and thanked it for being my home. And I journeyed here, an unfamiliar but wonderful place, to make a home with you, in a new land.

I am reflecting upon home at this, the week of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. The Jewish Holidays, called the Days of Awe, stretch for ten days each September. Rosh Hashanah is the birth of the year, the beginning of the seasons and yearly cycle of the life of faith. Yom Kippur is known as the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year, a solemn day for fasting and prayer, for remembering what has been lost and found in the year gone by.

Rabbi Alan Lew was the late spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Shalom in San Francisco. His book on the High Holidays is provocatively titled *This Is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*. Rabbi Lew calls the High Holidays the starting point of the circle of Jewish life.

“If you are moving along the circumference of a circle, it might seem at first as if the starting point is getting farther and farther away, but actually it is also getting closer and closer. The calendar year is such a circle. On Rosh Hashanah, a new year begins, and every day is one day farther from the starting point, but every day is also a return, drawing closer to the completion of the cycle.”

As the tradition goes, God serves as the keeper of that unending circle of time and human destiny. Each year, God tends to God’s creation with an ongoing “Book of Life,” a text in which each person’s fate is inscribed for the year to come. On Rosh Hashanah, the book is opened for ten days until the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. For these ten days, each person can shape their destiny through their prayers and moral actions, by seeking and granting forgiveness, and by giving of themselves and their resources. These are called the days of “Teshuvah,” a Hebrew word which translated literally means “return.” The great Jewish leader Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, “Our greatest problem is not how to continue but how to return.” In one sense, Teshuvah is an invitation to return to the covenant between humankind and the divine— a return to the laws and rituals of observant Judaism. In another sense, Teshuvah is an invitation to spiritual homecoming: a time out of time to reflect upon one’s life and eventual death. It is a time to come home to the larger religious community, and to one’s deepest spiritual commitments to loved ones, neighbor and God.

For Jews, the concept of home is often a complicated one. Starting with Moses, the Bible is filled with stories of the greatest faith leaders being forced to leave their homes and lead others in search of sanctuary. So, too, the history of the Jewish diaspora is one fraught with pain and trauma of leaving home: the specter of pogroms and the terrible legacy of the Holocaust. Sadly, the painful history of religious and ethnic persecution is repeated throughout the world. We continue to see images of thousands of refugees, many from minority religious and ethnic groups fleeing their ruined Syrian homeland in search of asylum in the European Union. Budapest’s Keleti train station has become a makeshift home for Kurdish families like Mohamed’s. Mohamed, his wife and two small children were given three days to leave their home in the Syrian city of Rakkah, occupied by the Islamic state. Without enough money to reach their hoped for landing place in Germany, the family is stranded in Hungary. They don’t want to be homeless, but have had no other choice.

While we have heard stories of inhospitality from the Hungarian government, Hungarian Jews and Interfaith allies, including Unitarians, are working to change this story. Zoltan Radnoti, chairman of the Mazsihisz Rabbinical Council in Hungary is one of them. “As Eastern European Jews, we carry the knowledge of how it feels to flee our homes,” he said in an interview this month. Radnoti joins the chief rabbi of France and Britain in urging their government and others to offer compassion and empathy from their religious values.

In a remarkable poem called simply “Home,” the young Somali-British poet Warsan Shire writes:

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark

you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well.

no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear
saying - leave,
run away from me now
i don't know what i've become
but i know that anywhere
is safer than here

So it is for so many people across the world and in our own communities, for whom displacement, trauma and separation are woven into the fabric of home. War and persecution, poverty and environmental destruction. Fires, floods or evictions. Betrayals or ruptures in our relationships, divorce or separation, loss or abuse.

Home can become a place to mourn and lament, and yet we are always seeking it, always rebuilding. There is a universal human yearning to recover that sense of home, to return to our deepest sense of security and wellbeing. Rabbi Lew writes: "We spend most of our lives in this strange dance—pushing forward to get back home."

"Return again, return to the home of your soul," says the hymn by Rabbi Schlomo Carlbach. "Return to who you are, return to where you are, return to what you are, born and reborn again."

When we are separated from home, the pain can be overwhelming. What we often lose first is our sense of trust in fundamental human goodness. For some that trust may be embodied in a parent, for some it may exist in a physical place, for some, it may live in God or the universe. The work of Teshuvah can be an invitation to return to the world as your home, a place of fundamental goodness and kindness. This return first begins with a return to ourselves, "the home of our souls."

Rabbi Nachman of Braslav, an 18th century Ukrainian religious leader of tremendous influence once said of this first step of Teshuvah: "You have to search until you find some point of good in yourself to restore your inner vitality and attain joy."

So many of us think that deep inside there is something truly wrong with us, something bad or unlovable. Something unforgivable. But affirming the good in ourselves can be freeing—a path to healing and deeper joy. Our liberal faith has a view of human nature that is inherently good—we believe in "original blessing" and not "original sin." When we dedicate a child, when we bury our loved ones, we name that each one of us was born good, worthy and whole. Each of us forgets this, and needs to remember. Many of us spend most of our lives trying to get back to this simple but powerful truth.

It is often easier not to forgive, to harbor hate and resentment, to distance ourselves from those who we perceive as fundamentally different from ourselves. It is so easy to feel helpless and distance ourselves from human cruelty.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter Reverend Mpho Tutu have written a remarkable book, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. Both have sat with people who have committed the deepest atrocities against other human beings, and discovered within each a humanity, a goodness, a spark of life. Archbishop Tutu affirms: "Our nature is goodness. Yes, we do much that is bad, but our essential nature is good. If it were not, then we would not be shocked and dismayed when we harm one another. Forgiveness is the way that we return what has been taken from us and restore the love and kindness that has been lost."

The poet Marge Piercy writes:

Forgive the dead year. Forgive yourself.
What will be wants to push through your fingers.
The light you seek hides in your belly.
The light you crave longs to stream from your eyes.
You are the moon that will wax in new goodness

At the turn of the seasons, as summer's last breaths are swept away with the bustle of fall, I wish for you a pause in the clear fall sunlight to remember your own inherent goodness. Start from this place. Might you then begin to see goodness in others, those closest to you and even those from whom you are estranged.

Might you then begin to see the good in the world, despite its brokenness. May this place be a home for all who seek, more than a building but a place to heal, a place to find sanctuary, a place to love, to forgive and be forgiven. Shana tova, may all of us be inscribed in the book of life for a good year to come.

Welcome HOME.