

"Homecoming"
דרשה (sermon) for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5768
September 14, 2007

All translations my own.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. In today's *derasha* (sermon) I'm going to try to save all of us a little time by briefly describing a picture, and I hope many of you will remember the finer details. It's a famous Norman Rockwell painting, originally from the Saturday Evening Post, but later used in a 1942 poster encouraging people to purchase war bonds. The painting is of a young soldier coming home from war, and the celebration it set off in his home and neighboring homes.

In the picture, a young man stands with his back to us, looking up toward the door of an attached red brick house. He is in olive green military garb with a cap on his head and a small bag in his left hand. His mother stands at the door, wearing a red house dress and an apron. Her arms are thrown wide open as dad standing right behind her. Leading the charge toward the young man is a small dog, its tail stuck up into the air, followed by a brother, who it seems has leapt from the second or third step. Around the corner of the house, her back to the wall and hiding is a young girl in a green dress over a white blouse. Filling out the picture are a handyman putting shingles on the awning above the staircase. He looks behind himself to see the young lad and smiles. A neighboring child looks back gleefully from the tree he has climbed as some adults peer out of nearby windows.

"Hasten the Homecoming" reads the top of the war poster. You can almost hear the shouts of the young boy's name. "He's home, He's home!" You can imagine the young man's face, which you cannot see. Probably overwhelmed not only by the welcome, but by being back from war. Thoughts racing through his head probably faster than he can even think them. A homecoming . . . what a welcome dream. While they had for many years dreamed of this day, they could never be sure that it would come. But it had.

The image, of course, resonates today as much as it did 65 years ago, as we all pray for a safe homecoming for United States soldiers who today find themselves in harm's way. Today, however, I would like to talk about a homecoming of a different kind. One envisioned at the time of the Haftorah, and one which each of us has the opportunity to make a reality today.

The Haftorah tells of a time when the people of Israel were no longer in their homeland. They had forsaken God and taken to worshiping idols. They had become a people filled with graft, who lied and cheated, and oppressed the widow and the poor. In God's wrath, God destroyed their Temple and dispersed the people to far-away lands. Our Haftorah sees their mother, the matriarch Rachel, crying over their fate:

כֹּה אָמַר ה' קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תַמְרוּרִים רָחֵל מְבַכָּה עַל בְּנֵיהָ מְאַנָּה לְהַנְחֵם עַל בְּנֵיהָ כִּי
אֵינָנוּ :

Thus says the Lord, a voice is heard in Ramah, weeping, bitter crying, Rachel cries for her children, she refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are gone. (Jeremiah 31:14)

And then, the Haftorah presents God consoling Rachel, for though they have been exiled from the land, the children will return:

כֹּה אָמַר ה' מִנְעֵי קוֹלְךָ מִבְּכֵי וְעֵינֶיךָ מִדְּמְעָה כִּי יֵשׁ שָׂכָר לְפַעֲלֹתַי נְאֻם ה' וְשָׁבוּ מֵאֶרֶץ אוֹיְבֵי. וְיֵשׁ תִּקְוָה לְאַחֲרֵיתָי נְאֻם ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם.

Thus says the Lord, restrain your voice from crying and your eyes from tears, for there is reward for your pain, declares the Lord, and they shall return from the land of their enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and children will return to their borders.

Jeremiah 31:15-16

What a powerful image! Our matriarch Rachel lamenting her children who had left the nest - who lost sight of God, and thereby lost their home. Yet God tells her that her children would eventually return. God hears Israel declaring its regret, and God foretells that the people will turn back toward God - וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם *and children will return to their borders*.

Rosh Hashanah is a day for תְּשׁוּבָה (*teshuvah*). Although תְּשׁוּבָה is often translated "repentance," it literally means "return," and comes from the same Hebrew root as the first word in the phrase וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם (*veshavu banim ligvulam*). And so, today is a day when we work toward our own return, our own homecoming. And so, as the soldier in the Rockwell painting, we look up in awe at the outstretched arms of our matriarch Rachel eagerly anticipating her opportunity to welcome us, as our brothers and sisters run toward our embrace. Today is a day for us to work toward the realization of God's words to Rachel, וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם *and children will return to their borders*.

I would like to suggest today two ways that we can fulfill God's promise to Rachel. Two ways that we can return to our borders. Two ways that we can return, as it were, to our ancestral home. First, we'll talk about the physical, tangible return to our borders, and then, we'll talk about the spiritual side of return.

וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם *and children will return to their borders* in its most literal and physical sense refers to return to the land of Israel, an opportunity that is more possible for us today than it had been for literally a hundred generations before us. Today, the land of Israel is but a ten-hour plane ride away. Although many of us may not be ready to make aliyah, many more of us can, and should make a commitment to visiting the State of Israel and reconnecting with our ancestral borders. Just about anyone you speak to who went to Israel will tell you it was one of the most spectacular, meaningful, and fun experiences they have ever had. There are great tours for beginners, and many exciting new places for people who have been to Israel many times. Each one of us can fulfill the words of our Haftorah וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם by returning to the land. Visiting Israel is vitally important to our brothers and sisters who very much rely on us and our tourism dollars to make their dream - our dream - a reality. Israel is our safe-haven, the place where we are always welcome, come what may. Israel is also our spiritual center. Yet, alarmingly, as generations pass, this connection with our homeland is being lost. Recently, a study of non-Orthodox Jews showed that as the generations pass, there is an ever-decreasing connection to the State of Israel. For example, in a survey of non-Orthodox Jews, "less than half of those under the age of 35 believe Israel's destruction would be a personal tragedy, compared to 78 percent of those over 65, and only a little more than half (54%) of those under 35 said they felt

comfortable with the idea of a Jewish state, compared to 81% of those over 65."¹ Somehow, as the generations go on, the destruction of a state which is the home of millions of Jews is less of a personal tragedy. With antisemitism in an upsurge around the world, and Jihadists looking to kill as many Jews as they can, somehow fewer young people are comfortable with the existence of the Jewish state. Now, more than ever, it is important for our own safety, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel that we rekindle our connection to the land of Israel and that we forge that connection in our children and grandchildren. And so, I ask each of you to set a priority to find yourself in the Land of Israel. Make that your next family vacation, or add an extra family vacation to your calendar for that purpose. As it happens, it will probably be one of the most wonderful experiences you can have, but it definitely will be one of the most important things you can do not only for the State of Israel, but for the people Israel.

Personally, I make it my goal to go to Israel once a year, and I have fulfilled that goal the last four years running. Perhaps you can make that commitment. Or perhaps you can commit to every other year, or every third year. But it is very important that each of us make Israel a commitment on our vacation calendar.

I'd also like to make another suggestion. In the Torah, there is a law known as מעשר שני (*ma'aser sheni*), a "second tithe," which was observed in two out of every three agricultural years.² Unlike מעשר ראשון (*ma'aser rishon*), the "first tithe" of ten percent given to the Levites, each person got to keep the מעשר שני for themselves. The only restriction was that you had to take the crops, or the monetary value of the crops, and enjoy them in Jerusalem. Many people set aside 10% of their income for charity, symbolically reflecting the first tithe which went to the Levite. I would like to suggest that we start taking a second tithe, a percentage of our income that we put aside for trips to Israel. If you haven't gone to Israel yet, make this the year that you get acquainted with your homeland. If you have been before, make sure to get back as soon as you can. Turn your regular vacation into a wonderful spiritual journey as well. See to it that in a real, tangible, physical way, you live out the verse of our Haftarah, וְשָׁבוּ בְּנֵי לְגִבּוֹלָם *and children will return to their borders.*"

The idea of returning to our borders, I think, can take on a spiritual sense much as it can take on a physical sense. Much like lines on a map define a country, it is our Jewish roots that define us as people. Today, you decided to be in synagogue. You did so because you realize that this is where you belong. And so, to all of you, I say: welcome home. Welcome back to your roots. For most of you, Jewish life has been a part of you and a part of your family for generations. For some of you, you became Jewish because somewhere in your heart you realized that this has always been where you belong. Either way, your being here today can be part of that age-old prophecy - וְשָׁבוּ בְּנֵי לְגִבּוֹלָם - welcome home.

¹ Jerusalem Post, 9/6/07,
<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1188392546355>

² Note: The Jewish agricultural year had a 7 year cycle. In years 1, 2, 4, and 5 מעשר שני was taken, whereas years 3 and 6 had a separate tithe given to the the poor known as מעשר עני "the poor tithe."

Year after year, I hear people talking about how "Jewish holidays are about family." If you think about it, that is only partially true. The fact is, you could get together with your family any old day. And you can observe all the rituals of the holiday without a single family member being around. So, why are "Jewish holidays about family?" Because during the holidays, we remember that our Jewish rituals define our family. Having a holiday meal with wine and challah, coming to synagogue with our family, celebrating a seder or sitting together in a sukkah, these rituals define our family, not only the family as it exists right now, but our families going back through the generations. The holidays are our return home - וְשָׁבוּ בְּנֵי לְגִבּוֹלָם.

But now, we have a choice. Have we come home for a visit, or are we here to stay? Is today just a once-in-a-while thing, a brief visit to nostalgia, or a return to our true identity. Have Rachel's children returned to their borders for good?

Do you remember the famous scene from "Hello, Dolly," when Dolly returns to Harmonia Gardens where she realizes "It's so nice to be back home where I belong," where the band is "playin' one of my old favorite songs from way back when." Well, today you are back home where you belong. And the band'll be playing some of your favorites, whether it's Avinu Malkenu or Hayom, Hayom Hayom, or your Yom Tov meal back home with family. Isn't it nice to be back home where you belong?

Here, at Temple Israel, we are like the family radiating with joy to welcome back the soldier in the Rockwell painting. It's wonderful to welcome you all, to share this holiday with you. Our matriarch Rachel looks on with eager anticipation - did her children come here for a visit, or in the future will they be closer to their heritage. Like the waiters in "Hello, Dolly," there is only one prayer on Rachel's lips, "Promise you'll never go away again."

Judaism is part of your home. It is part of what defines you - your past, your present, and your future. You can make your life a realization of the words of the Haftarah וְשָׁבוּ בְּנֵי לְגִבּוֹלָם by returning to your borders. Rachel cries out to her children: "Welcome home. Please stay. Don't make this a visit. Let this be a homecoming"

For each one of us, today is a homecoming of sorts. That is the very meaning of the word תְּשׁוּבָה (*teshuvah*), return. Each of us has strayed from where we should be. We are in some ways all lacking in our ritual observance and in the way we treat others in this world. We each stray from our own borders. For some of us, Yom Kippur 2006 was the last time we were home. Some of us make it our business to make it to synagogue once a week on Shabbat, but perhaps we don't take time to pray every day. Maybe we experience our Judaism in synagogue, but haven't brought Judaism into our homes as much as we could - lighting candles on Friday night, or keeping a kosher home, or building a sukkah. Perhaps we feel very Jewish in synagogue, but forget those values when we're in the business world. Maybe we watch what we say, but we don't watch what we eat. Perhaps we're careful to eat kosher, but not as careful that we speak kosher, as it were. Today, we are all eagerly looking to return to our borders, to have Judaism become a greater guiding force in our lives.

Thousands of years ago, our Haftarah gave us the image of Rachel - מבכה על בניה מאנה - *crying for her children, she refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are gone*. Today, as you sit here in this synagogue, you could be her consolation, just as God said: וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם . . . יש תקנה לאחריתך . . . *there is hope for your future . . . children will return to their borders*. Your absence may have been for but a few brief days since last Shabbat, or may span a year or two. Either way, like the mother in the Rockwell painting, Rachel's arms, the arms of Temple Israel and the arms of the Jewish people, are thrown wide open, singing in joyful chorus: "It's so nice to have you back where you belong." On this Rosh Hashanah, as we prepare to blow the shofar, it is my privilege to say to you, "Welcome home," and to add my own personal prayer: "Promise you'll never go away again."

