

Welcome Home: Finding Life's Meaning Together

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5777

Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana

“Welcome Home.”

These were the words that greeted our daughter a few weeks ago, as she formally began her college career. “Welcome Home.” The keynote address of her Convocation Ceremony at Lewis & Clark was given by Dr. Kimberly Brodtkin, Associate Professor of Humanities¹. In that speech, Dr. Brodtkin acknowledged the strangeness of this greeting to a group of incoming Freshmen, newly coping with the reality of leaving their family and entering in to a strange new place. Welcome Home. “. . . perhaps,” she noted “you feel tied to somewhere else that defines you more fully.” And yet, here they were being welcomed home. To someone else’s home. And we parents, sitting in the bleachers wanting to hold on to our now young adults just a little longer, worrying about all the little details and the larger existential reality of a more empty nest, we breathed a small sigh of relief. They will be ok. Welcome home.

Home is a complicated reality. Not everyone’s house is a home. Home is an idealized place of comfort and security – “a place where we are loved and accepted, a place that is ours,” in the words of Dr. Brodtkin. On the other hand, as she pointed out, home requires work. It requires commitment from everyone who calls it home to make it a home. It takes effort to live together in some form of harmony, to make the elements of home take place. Food, chores, dog walking – someone has to do it. Kids assume it happens by magic. Parents know how much work it takes to make the magic happen. Hopefully, with maturity, everyone who wants to call a house a home takes some part of the responsibilities. “Doing that,” Dr. Brodtkin said “means taking ownership. Homes require an investment.”

I was thinking about those words not just as a parent who this Fall has sent two children off to college. I was thinking about what it is like to have a home redefined and hoping that we have given our children enough confidence and courage so that they can be independent of us. Soon enough they will be making their own home. I was hoping that we had pushed and challenged our daughters so that they are prepared for all the ways they will be pushed and challenged by the intellectual and social environment in their new home. I listened to those words of Convocation hoping that we had given them a strong sense of home so that they could thrive in another home.

¹ Excerpts from the Lewis & Clark Convocation Address August 2016, “Welcome Home” used with permission from the author.

But at the same time, I was thinking about the ways in which a synagogue, our synagogue, can also be home.

Because for all the comfort and comforting and comfortable ways we associate with home, and all the challenging and challenges we find in our homes, our synagogue does not always feel like home. Sometimes it can seem like a place that fulfills discrete needs. When we want our children to learn, the synagogue educates them. When we need to mourn a loved one, the synagogue provides a space and a kaddish prayer. These are important needs. We are a house of prayer, of learning, of gathering.

But we can be much more than a place to fulfill a need. We are home. We are your home. Welcome home.

Because there is one other thing that homes provide – they are a place of meaning. Homes are where we discover what is most important to us. Homes are where we find who is most important to us. Homes are where we come to understand who we are and even how to love ourselves. Homes can be challenging, but they are worth the challenge.

Synagogues can be that home. They can be, this community can be, a place of meaning.

I want to show you how. But first, a word about meaning.

Human beings strive for meaning, above all else. We want to make sense of the world. We want to understand our place in it. If we have suffering, and we all have known some suffering, we want to understand what it is for. How do we make sense of life?

Oh, THAT little question: What is the meaning of life!

Thinking on these themes, of home and meaning, I reflected back on a thin book I read close to 40 years ago.

Have you had the experience when it seems G-d, (or however you envision the creative source in the universe to be) is putting something in front of you hoping you will notice. And when you don't G-d makes sure you pay attention by repeating it over and over again until you finally get it? For the past several months one small book kept showing up around me in odd places. Repeatedly. I saw it on a book shelf – the only item facing out. I saw it on top of a small stack of books in a doctor's office. I found an old and somewhat tattered hardback in our living room – my son had chosen to read his grandmother's copy. It was even on the shelf in my office. This happened at a difficult time for me, where circumstances had me feeling stretched and pulled in multiple directions to the point where it seemed the purpose of life was just to get through the day. I knew there was more. So I picked up the title that had been placed before me over and over again.

Viktor Frankl's 1959 book "Man's Search for Meaning."

The now not so politically correct title, "Man's Search for Meaning" is a telling of Frankl's experiences as a Holocaust survivor living through the Nazi Concentration camps. It is also an explanation of his psychological theories and practice developed, in part, through that era of horror. Unlike the practitioners of earlier Viennese schools of psychotherapy, Frankl's practice puts meaning at the center. His experience in the concentration camps helped him formulate his theory, called Logotherapy after the Greek term *Logos* or "meaning." While Freud focused on the human will to pleasure, and Adler on the will to power, Frankl spoke of the "will to meaning" as "the primary motivational force in man."

This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own *will to meaning*².

Frankl suggests that those who wander around asking "What is the Meaning of Life?" are somewhat akin to the novice asking the chess master "what is the best move in chess?" The obvious answer is: it depends. What is the situation of the game? Who is the opponent? Who are you?

A better question, a fundamental question, maybe the only question, is to ask "What is the Meaning of MY Life?" Only you can find the answer. Life calls out to you to find that answer. What gives your life meaning?

In the Concentration Camps, Frankl had lost everything including his home, his wife, his profession and his dignity. He stood shivering and cold and alone in the heartless night. He was known not by this title or even his name, but by the number tattooed on his arm. How did he survive in that brutal environment when the loss of will meant the loss of life? Frankl tells stories of how the vision of his wife, the love he held for her throughout the pain, gave him meaning. He did not know she had already died. He did not ask himself. His love for her survived and gave his life meaning. Frankl wrote of his life's work, an unpublished manuscript whose only copy was torn from him and destroyed as he entered the camp. His goal was to recreate that manuscript by memory and he jotted down notes on any tiny scrap of paper he could find. Creativity, a feeling that he had something to say to the world, became a goal which gave his suffering meaning. Quoting Nietzsche, Frankl declares: "He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*."

² Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning, an Introduction to Logotherapy*, Beacon Press, Boston, revised edition 1962, p. 99. Originally published in 1946 in Germany under the title *Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager*. Beacon Press translation originally published in 1959.

I held the copy of “Man’s Search for Meaning” in my hand over the summer and read it through several times. It is my mother’s copy. My mother who also endured the depravity of Auschwitz. What did she think when she read Frankl’s book? I can guess from the paragraphs she underlined. Paragraphs about creativity. Did she survive by finding meaning in the art she would one day create – art which reminds the world through her unique abstract expression, that evil lurks in the world but that it can be overcome by hope and refusal to hate? I can’t know – the meaning of her life is her own. I do know that today, 71 years after liberation from the camps, an appreciation of the beauty in the world is what animates her life. Beauty gives her life meaning.

Last night we heard from Rabbi Joseph about the power of hope. In a world that is often so very dark, hope animates us to action and gives meaning to our lives.

What gives your life meaning? What is so core to you, so central to the essence of who you are that the thought of it could get you through the most difficult of times? To what would you devote your life? What would you be willing to die for? More significantly, what are you willing to live for? What is the meaning of your life?

Religious institutions, for us – synagogues – remind us, provoke us, demand of us to ask that question. Religion, as I often say, begins by asking: What does G-d want of me? What does Life want of me? It is another way of asking the same question. What is my meaning? Synagogues, this synagogue, gives you the time and the opportunity to explore that question. It is not therapy, it is discovery. As your Rabbi, I cannot tell you the meaning of your life. But I would love to have the conversation with you as you find that meaning for yourself.

Synagogues create an open space to explore and meditate on higher values. Synagogues value learning and our vast history of Jewish knowledge opens a pathway into that understanding. Synagogues offer beauty and wonder and depth and time.

And there is awe in that ability to separate from the everyday and enter a time of peace, of reflection. For it is in those quiet moments that we can encounter ourselves and our meaning – away from the noise of the world and its demands on us. I call it holiness. And I am not alone. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to *holiness in time*. It is a day on which we are called upon to

share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world³.

Here, in that quiet, we ask you to search yourself for your meaning. But quiet is not enough, self-discovery is not enough. It must have action. Our search for meaning animates us to act on that meaning. Perhaps you are driven to help those in need, to solve our city's most pressing problems of hunger and homelessness. It is what gives your life meaning. We want to help with that meaning. We want to create community here to work together with others who are similarly animated. Because Judaism is not about isolated self-enlightenment, it is self-awareness joined with action. Doing, is the Jewish creed. Doing together, building community, is the Jewish way.

Painfully, this seems to run counter to the current state of Western civilization. We have been living in an era of discontent which is fueled, not by outrage at injustice, but by commercialism. We live in a world of commerce that insists that we can buy our way to happiness. The lack of the next gadget or beauty product or life-style enhancement product is all that is keeping us from being happy. We are told over and over, in ways that are becoming both more vulgar and more ubiquitous, that we are inadequate. We are informed of a problem we didn't know we had, and the miracle product that will solve that problem so we can get back to being happy. But the wheel continues to turn and a new ad, which now tracks us on every device, pops up and demands our attention to a problem we didn't know we had. And it never ends. No wonder there is deep unhappiness. A discontent that seems to cut through all socio-economic lines. Beyond survival, the search for happiness is a never-ending quest. No matter how worthy we are, we cannot buy the happiness we seek.

Because it is not the search for happiness that motivates us, it is the search for meaning. Happiness turns us inward, obsessed with ourselves. It is an emotional cannibalism, eating away at any sense of self-worth. Meaning, however, has us reach outward, stretching, nourishing our souls. Meaning animates and connects us to others. Commercialism insists that we are alone in our inadequacies. The search for meaning helps us realize that we fulfill our purpose together with those around. We are not alone.

In their book "The Abundant Community"⁴ authors John McKnight and Peter Block demonstrate how the search for happiness has led us to be lonelier than ever. But community, they find, is an abundant and rich resource available to counter that isolation. Community provides the

³ Heschel, Abraham J. *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*. Crossroad: NY, 1983, 2006, p. 59

⁴ McKnight, John, and Peter Block. *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*. Chicago: American Planning Association, 2010

compassion and caring we seek, the sense of being known and cared about. The ability to act on our passions. Community is Home.

And community is abundant. It is rich in the gifts of each individual. Everyone brings something of themselves – a knowledge, a passion, a perspective of wisdom. You are appreciated. You are necessary. You are a part of our home. Welcome Home.

You know it. The synagogue knows it, too. We get that. You have heard us talk about “Engagement” the commitment to making our synagogue community relevant and motivating for each of us. One year ago, Rabbi Joseph announced the creation of the Hinenu Initiative as a way to connect each and every one of us. For the past year congregants have gathered to work with our clergy on ways to make our large and diverse synagogue more of a community. An abundant community. More of a home. Welcome home. I am grateful and hopeful for the ways they are working to make our synagogue our home. The plans are extensive, connecting us by neighborhoods, by demographics, by interest groups, making us feel welcome and connected. Making us Ambassadors for our synagogue. Comforting us in times of bereavement. Let’s start by thanking our volunteers. If you are a part of the Hinenu Initiative, please stand. These volunteers are identifying ways to find the limitless energy, enthusiasm, compassion and call to action which permeates and animates our community. Thank you. And they need your energy, your gifts of talent, to make our synagogue our home. While there are many plans in place, this morning I am going to tell you about just one.

I have often found that the best way to build a connection with someone is to share a meal. What could be more Jewish! And even better to invite someone into our home for that meal – or to be a guest in theirs. That sharing builds a bond of appreciation and commitment. We are known. There is no inadequacy. We simply are together. And, I believe, that if we make that shared connection over a Shabbat meal, we are entering into that “holiness of time” Heschel spoke of. We can find holiness here in our beautiful sanctuary, we can also find holiness together in our homes. We are still part of our synagogue community.

So, what would happen if you were invited to a Shabbat meal in someone’s home? What would happen if you were joined by several other families? What would happen if you chose to host a Shabbat dinner and had guidance from your clergy about how to create a beautiful welcoming entrance to Shabbat with others in our congregation?

What would happen if we all did it? Together. On the same night. All 875+ families in our rich and full and meaningful congregation, sharing a Shabbat in each other’s homes. We are going to find out. Ushers are coming down the aisle right now with information on Hinenu and CBI’s Share Shabbat. On Friday night, February 3, we are cancelling services, except for a brief minyan for those saying Kaddish. On that Share Shabbat you will be either a host or a guest. The

ushers are giving you an opportunity to choose. And on that Shabbat we will see what it means to be an abundant community.

This is only the beginning. One day, one Shabbat, which can lead to many more. More connections. More sharing. More meaning. The synagogue, this community, this congregation is committed to the richness of a Jewish tradition thousands of years old and deeply relevant to today. We value far more that what we buy, we value who we are. We value your search for meaning and commit to sharing that meaning and acting on it. This is what it means to be part of a community. This is what it means to be part of a synagogue. This is what it means to create a home. But it cannot be done alone. Homes require an investment, participation from everyone. The magic happens best when everyone does their part to make the whole. We are providing the means. Share the gift of yourself. Find your meaning. Make this your home.

Welcome home.