

“THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME”
An Erev Rosh Hashanah sermon by Rabbi M. Thomas Heyn
at Temple Israel of Greater Miami – 5776 – Sept 2015

Welcome! We are here, at the end of one year and at the beginning of a New Year. It's a beautiful and happy occasion. We made it another year. Being here together kind of feels like we've come home. And there really is no place...

And here we are at the beginning of these ten Days of Awe. Not only is this a happy occasion, but it's a serious one as well. A time for reflection, introspection and earnest efforts to think about the things we've done over the past year, and the things we've said, and vow to change for the better in the coming year.

Beginnings and endings. George Burns once said that “The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending, and have the two as close together as possible.”

I can keep my remarks brief and to the point, but when it comes to tying together the beginning and the ending of these Days of Awe, there is one theme that connects them with all the days in between.

Most people know Leonard Cohen's rendition of “*Halleluyah*” but only some of you may know another song of his that has a religious theme, “Who By Fire.” It was released a little over 40 years ago: (sung) “And who by fire, who by water / Who in the sunshine, who in the night time...”

It's based on a prayer in our HHD liturgy, known as the *Unetaneh tokef*, which you'll hear tomorrow morning and again on Yom Kippur. “Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day – the great shofar is sounded...On RH it is written and on YK it is sealed...who shall live and who shall die....”

At the end it says that *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah* can bring pardon, forgiveness and salvation.

Tonight I'm going to talk about the first of these words – *teshuvah*.

Teshuvah has traditionally been translated as “repentance.” So you have this somber sense, you come here to beat your chest, and apologize to God for all the things you've done wrong. But *teshuvah* really has a different meaning. It means “returning,” “to return.” It could be meant in the sense of returning to the way things used to be, or returning to your better self, to the way things could be.

So there's this really interesting convergence of past, where we were at one time, and the future - where we might hope to be. And that's a theme that we see throughout human history, going back to when Homer wrote the *Odyssey* about Odysseus's return home from his journey after the Trojan War in the 12th century BCE. But we can go back even further to the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites left slavery behind and embarked on a journey to return home to the Promised Land. So there's the sense of having once been someplace, and the promise of an ideal future that we associate with that place. So, that's what *teshuvah* means: a return, as it were, to the way things could be; the way things should be.

The other words, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*, we'll talk about in the days to come. And we'll talk about current events. But tonight I want to talk about what *teshuvah* feels like to me. It's the feeling of "returning home." What does that feel like to you? It might be helpful to think about the movie we've probably all seen, in which this idea was a central theme: "there's no place...(like home.)"

I don't have to retell the story of "The Wizard of Oz" because you know how Dorothy dreams of going somewhere, to a far-off land that she once heard of in a lullaby, and she goes, and through all that she encounters along the way, she learns that there really is no place like home. It's about going somewhere and coming back transformed. In the words of T.S. Elliot: "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

It's no wonder that the song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" was written by a Jewish songwriter and a Jewish lyricist, and that it contains a deeply-inspired message that still resonates to this day, and is relevant to the idea of *teshuvah*.

We are witnessing today a mass exodus from Syria and other Middle Eastern and North African countries. It was about 80 years ago that there was a similar mass exodus from Europe, and the hope for a safe refuge found expression in this most poignant song.

The lyrics were written by Yip Harburg, the youngest of four children born to Russian Jewish immigrants. His real name was Isidore Hochberg and he grew up in a Yiddish speaking Jewish home in New York. The music was written by Harold Arlen, a cantor's son. His real name was Hyman Arluck and his parents were from Lithuania.

Together, Hochberg and Arluck wrote "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," which is ranked as the number one on the "Songs of the Century" list compiled by the Recording Industry Association of America and the National Endowment for the Arts. It is also ranked as the greatest movie song of all time by The American Film Institute. And it was sung by Pink at the Academy Awards ceremony last year in honor of the film's 75th anniversary of the film. Our kids know it best from a recording of the cool Hawaiian guy with the ukelele.

In writing the song, these two Jewish men reached deep into their immigrant Jewish experience - framed by the pogroms of the past and the Holocaust which was about to happen - and wrote an unforgettable melody set to near prophetic words about hope, Jewish survival; returning home.

It's not really about wizards and Oz, but about refugees seeking asylum and those rounded up in Europe who couldn't escape beyond the rainbow. Now, looking back, the lyrics that speak of flying away, above the chimney tops, have a different meaning than they had at the beginning of 1939.

Now, looking back, that land that the Jews heard of "once in a lullaby" was not America, but Israel. The remarkable thing would be that less than ten years after this song was published, the exile was over and the State of Israel was reborn. Perhaps the "dreams that you dare to dream really do come

true."

We return to this sense of "coming home" and what that means because, on the one hand, Israel is that place. Alas, that dream has yet to be fulfilled that we might live there in peace, yet our hope is not lost, as expressed in Israel's national anthem. So we're closer but we're not quite there, because "coming home" is a process, a never-ending cycle, a constant arriving, and leaving, and returning. Though sometimes, we don't make it home.

We need only think of Steven Sotloff, who was brutally murdered by ISIS extremists a little over a year ago. As a 31-year-old freelance journalist, he was abducted during a reporting trip to Syria. While he was being held captive, he was able to sneak out two letters to his parents, which they received in June 2014. Passages from those letters were read aloud at his memorial service last year.

"Everyone has two lives. The second one begins when you realize you only have one." "Hug each other every day," "live your life to the fullest and...Do what makes you happy," he wrote. "Be where you are happy."

As you probably know, his parents dedicated a memorial garden to him yesterday in Pinecrest Gardens. They chose that location because they used to take him there as a child when it was the Parrot Jungle. That was a place where they were happy together.

In the book of Genesis, Jacob spoke about the place where he awoke from his dream, after seeing the angels ascending and descending on the ladder, and he said "*Ma norah hamakom hazeh* - "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Hamakom hazeh – this place, this House of God, is a most awesome place, a sacred place, a place that can connect us to our past and to our hoped for future. Some of you have come here for the first time, some of you have been here many times. Some for a lifetime or for a generation or more. Some of your parents were here, even grandparents or great-grandparents. So there's something really special about connecting to a place, either where we came from, or where were returning to, and how there is something idealized and sacred about the place and the journey itself. For it is during this journey to this place where we have arrived tonight that we are transformed.

We are the fortunate ones who have returned home. To our spiritual home. Have we come back any wiser? any kinder? Are we more loving?

That place we long for is the place we are headed. We are on our way, and we can support one another along the way. But perhaps, in a way, we are already here, arriving where we started and knowing it for the first time. We are so fortunate to be here. I pray that in the coming year, the dreams you dare to dream really do come true.

On the eve of the first day of Rosh Hashanah, I want to wish you a happy and healthy and sweet New Year. Let us make this the year of returning. Welcome home! And together let us say...*Amen!*