Yom Kippur Eve 2005/5766

Rabbi Alex Lazarus

My grandmother, may her memory be a blessing, lived in what she would call the "small town" of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for over fifty years. While not small by Bordentown standards, compared to Boston, where she grew up, Harrisburg was only a blip on the map. There, she raised a family, living most of that time in a tiny green house on Green Street.

Up until two years ago, all of my associations with my grandmother are in that house, which she rarely left, except for a few hours on any given day. Yet, in all that time, if you asked my grandmother where her home was, the answer would always be the same. Naturally, as she was fond of saying, her home was where she was born... in Boston.

What my grandmother understood and what so many of us find out in our lives is that home is much more complicated than an address in the phone book. We live at a time of constant mobility. Other than the recent rise in gas prices, travel is relatively inexpensive and communication between people thousands of

miles away is instantaneous. I heard a statistic on the radio that American's, on average, live in 10 to 12 different homes over the course of their lives. All this moving, makes us long for a time when homes where passed down from generation to generation.

In reality, people, and Jews in particular, have always been wanderers. The Torah describes our ancestor's journeys between Mesopotamia and Canaan, Canaan and Egypt and back again. My favorite Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides, lived in four different countries over the course of his lifetime - Spain, Israel, Morocco and Egypt. How many of us can claim that today?

Whether traveling for trade, or fleeing oncoming armies, the human condition is prefaced on the ability to move and adapt to any new environment. The only thing that has changed in contemporary times is the ease that we are, not only, able to pick up and go at a moments notice, but also our ability to return to our roots if we so desire.

This freedom has its drawbacks as well. Our families and kinship groups often can be spread over many hundreds if not thousands of miles. Other than the

Nissims, are there any Temple B'nai Abraham members who have 10 or more family members within a half hour drive from Bordentown? Take my family for example. While my parents and one of my sisters live nearby me in Philadelphia, my other sister lives in New York, and my extended family is spread out in Massachusetts, Florida, Texas, Israel, and in many other places I'm not even aware.

All this moving poses particular challenges to the communities where we now live. How do we maintain continuity when so many of us are new to the area? How do we both welcome and say goodbye to close friends and neighbors? And, how do we create a sense of family, when no obvious familial ties are present?

Here in Bordentown, we are nestled at the intersection of several different highways. For me this means, no matter where I leave from in the Philadelphia area, it always takes just around forty-five minutes to get here. Looking at this from a larger communal perspective, this means that people are always coming and going from the area. I can't tell you the number of times I've mentioned

Bordentown and found that the person I'm speaking to has visited Mastoris, the local diner, or is familiar with our exit on the New Jersey turnpike.

Because of our location, we have almost always been able to maintain a fifty to sixty family membership. To do so over the course of an almost 90 year history is truly an amazing feet. At our size, a few families coming or going, has a significant impact on the overall well being of the community. Our current membership is made up of both people who have grown up in the area or lived a majority of their lives here, and people who have just arrived in the last decade or few years. Both groups are central to the life of Temple B'nai Abraham and are represented on our synagogue's board and overall communal leadership.

At Temple B'nai Abraham we believe in the concept of family. We are all proud to be part of a community that places as a priority visiting houses of mourning, supporting those that are ill, and being present in each other's lives. Our entire professional leadership consists of myself as the rabbi, Avi as the High Holiday cantor, and my sister, Aria, as a Hebrew school teacher. Therefore, we must rely on each other to tend to the basic needs of the community.

I am always amazed at the generosity that we show one another and the synagogue in general. From vacuuming the floor to taking out the trash, there is an endless list of things that need to be taken care of in order to make this community run smoothly and feel like home. I can look around the room today and am confident that almost everyone here has done at least one thing to make Temple B'nai Abraham better. I wish I could list all the people who have contributed, but number one, my memory is not that good, and number two, much of what goes on, happens when I'm not around. To all the wonderful elves, I want you to know that your actions do not go unnoticed.

The former president of the rabbinical college and current director of the RRC Ethic's Center, Rabbi David Teutsch writes the following in his new book *Spiritual Community: The Power to Restore Hope, Commitment and Joy*:

"In community we find strength in what we give, receive, and share. And in a strong community, we share a great deal - life rhythms, values, and a way of living. That kind of sharing infuses life with meaning and richness not found any other way. Through community my kids have become friendly with dozens of

adults who live lives worth emulating. They are surrounded by people concerned about their welfare, people who celebrate their development and correct their misbehavior. Community also means dinner invitations, shared festival celebrations, friendships, and roots. I sought out community for shared Jewish living. Only the passage of more than thirty years has shown me how much greater and how much more diverse than I ever imagined are the gifts that community living bestows."

Creating and maintaining the type of community that Rabbi Teutsch is describing is not an easy task. It is much easier just to let members come and go as they please, never requesting or requiring anything from them. As he writes about in his book, "community would be more attractive to many people if somebody else did it for them. But it doesn't work that way. The community is mine only if I act like a member of it. The more activities I do in the community, the more interpersonal connections I share, making each activity all the more meaningful." He continues, "Through my community, I savor friendships, celebrations, insights, spiritual renewal, opportunities to be helpful to others, and I

receive support for my family and myself as well as - dare I say it - meaning for my life."

As I look around the room today, I know that Temple B'nai Abraham is such a community, a community where people can find meaning and connection well beyond any individual program that we have on our synagogue calendar.

Sadly, many American Jewish communities are not like this one. I say this especially tonight, when so many American Jews, who never attend services any other time of the year, are in services for Kol Nidre. This is not meant to chastise people who come only on the high holidays. God knows, and God does, that we need you and want you here. You are a part of us and we love you no matter how many times you come to synagogue over the course of the year. My sadness comes from all the Jewish communities who have at their core a membership that is rarely present. These communities are not families and they are not places where people generally find meaning.

In a recent book by Henry and Daniel Stolzman called *Synagogue Architecture in America: Faith, Spirit and Identity*, the authors wrote about a

peculiar challenge architects face in building synagogues in this country. How do you construct a building where the majority of the membership comes only twice a year? To do so, the architect must create a space that is appropriate for a small group of people and also can expand to meet the needs of a much larger population. Fittingly, all of the pictures of synagogues in the book are without people.

Finding a home, is only partially about the actual building. Our home here at Temple B'nai Abraham is a modest one, with wood paneling, a narrow and difficult staircase to the sanctuary, and only enough benches to seat seventy people. What makes this a home are all the personal touches that we put on the walls, the many smiling faces that great us as we enter, and the memories that float in and out of the room.

Two years ago, when my grandmother was no longer able to care for herself, we moved her into Martins Run Retirement Center just outside of Philadelphia in Media, Pennsylvania. This was a nursing care facility just like the thousands of others that dot the country. And just like most nursing homes, the

place has an institutional feel. The floors are hard and the rooms tiny, my grandmother's no bigger than my first college dormitory room.

We chose Martins Run, not only because it was nearby to where we lived, but also because I had worked there and knew the staff. As a Jewish home, the food is kosher and they have a rabbi on staff. Every Friday afternoon, they hold Shabbat services.

You cannot imagine the joy these services brought to my grandmother, someone who never attended services even on the high holidays. And, more amazing still, is that she knew the melodies and would sing along, the best she could, with the songs. These services, more than anything else, created a sense of family and community among the residents. They prayed for each other and were able to both bless and be blessed, reciting the kidush and the kadish, celebrating and mourning as one. In their former lives they had been doctors and rabbis, lawyers and teachers, housewives and business men, but here, no matter how impaired they were physically, they found their way back to the songs of their youth, and at least momentarily, felt at home.

When someone dies in Judaism, we say the following to the mourner's: "Hamakom Yinachem etchem b'toch sha'ar Avley tzion V'yurashilyim." "May God comfort you inside the gates of the mourner's of Zion and Jerusalem."

The word for God is Makom, or place. When we come together to participate in communal activities, to support one another in times of need, to celebrate in times of joy, God is more than just in the room with us. God is that room. Simply be being together, we have created the sacred and holy space.

So, despite all the challenges we have here in contemporary America, let us strive to make real community. Not just here in Bordentown, but wherever life leads us. Take the lessons you learn here and other communities that are like this one, and teach others that the meaning of community goes beyond paying dues, it is, as Rabbi Teutsch so eloquently writes about sharing, life rhythms, values, and a way of living. That kind of sharing infuses life with meaning and richness not found any other way."