

## **My House, YOUR House, or Our House? Kol Nidre, 5778**

Life was not going smoothly for a young man named Charles. He was that rare combination of both *schlemiel* (a very clumsy person) and *schlimazel* (someone with horrible luck). He was constantly tripping himself up, often literally, and generally making a fool out of himself. His friends teased him, and expected him to fail, which led to his generally morose and downcast worldview.

One day, however, he entered a spelling bee at his school, quite by accident. Everyone he knew showed up to watch, not for moral support, but rather to see the spectacle of his inevitable collapse. To everyone's shock and amazement, however, this time Charles managed to squeak out a win and a place at a national tournament! Accompanied by his parents and his best friend, he made his way weeks later, to the nationals and all the way to the final round. Just one other competitor stood between Charles and total victory. Round after round they sparred, but in the end, only one stood victorious...and it was not Charles.

Leaving the competition dejected, Charles decided he was going to spend the rest of his life moping, as seemed fitting for someone with his rotten luck. He didn't want to go outside, and just couldn't bear the thought of more teasing. But as he lay dejected, a friend came to visit. Charles railed at how he had failed yet

again, how he'd let everyone down. His friend listened and quickly said, "That's all true, but did you notice something? The world didn't end?"

And so, Charles decided to leave his house and venture back into the world. In a playground near his house, he saw one of his oldest friend toying around with a football. As she sets it up, as though holding it for a punter, Charles sees his chance and ran up, determined to once and for all kick that ball good and hard. But at the last second, as per usual, Lucy moved the football out of the way, and Charles fell flat on his back.

And looking down at her friend, Lucy smiles warmly and says, "Welcome home, Charlie Brown."

If this brief summary of the 1969 movie, *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*, the very first movie made from Charles Schulz's brilliant comic, *Peanuts*, can teach us anything, it's about the power of home. The places we call home have special meaning in our lives. They provide us a place to heal wounds, mend fences, give and receive support and care, and they keep us safe from any and all ills that may attack us out there in the world, no matter how uncoordinated or unlucky we may be. Home is a place of rest, a place of sustenance, a place of love, a sanctuary.

Most of us are fortunate in that we have more than one place that we call "home." We have our literal residence, the place we lay our heads, but there are many more homes we occupy each day. Hopefully, we each find a professional or

volunteer home to make use of our passions and skills. We are part of ancestral homes, the places we were raised and others going back into the history of our ancestors. We talk about Land of Israel as an entire nation that is a home for Jews everywhere.

And most of us are here tonight because this community, Kol Rinah, is our spiritual home. Whether this is your first time here or you have been with us every day for many years, the reason that you are here on Kol Nidrei, embarking on twenty-five of the most spiritually loaded hours in the Jewish year, instead of being at another synagogue or at your houses or at the mall is because this community is, even if just for today, your home. It is my most fervent wish that everyone who takes a step into this community should feel like they are at home. Guests, relatives, people who found us online, friends who got a recommendation to come, all of them should enter knowing with absolute certainty that they can have a home here if they so choose.

But that brings up an interesting point: if we have a notion that there are guests and visitors, then whose Home is this place? In whose house will we dwell tonight as we pray, sing, listen, cry out and pine for the year ahead? Is it my house? Your house? God's house maybe? In whose house do we find ourselves in at this moment?

Just to be clear, I am not speaking about the physical structure in which we sit. On the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Rosh HaShanah, Rabbi Arnow spoke beautifully about how Kol Rinah is growing a new building, a new location for us to call home. What I am talking about is not made up simply of the rooms that we inhabit, but instead is the idea of a spiritual home. What I am talking about is the community we live in and call home. For each of us, Kol Rinah is this spiritual home. The idea of what that spiritual home could be for us continues to grow, evolve, and become more impactful with each passing day.

So, whose house is it?

Perhaps we should take a cue from one of the great Jewish minds, who wrote extensively on the subject. King David, to whom ספר תהילים (*Sefer Tehilim*), The Book of Psalms, is attributed, also longed during his life to build a central, Jewish spiritual home. Though the honor of building the 1st Temple in Jerusalem ultimately fell to his son, Solomon, David is the one credited throughout his life with maintaining a special connection to the Divine.

Even still, he was King of all Israel. He was, in no uncertain ways, Master of his house. When looking poetically in Psalm 101 about how he would welcome others into his home, King David reflected:

אֲשַׁכִּילָהּ | בְּדֶרֶךְ תָּמִים מְתִי תִבּוֹא אֵלַי אֶתְהַלֵּךְ בְּתֵם-לִבִּי בְּקֶרֶב בֵּיתִי:  
 עֵינַי | בְּנֹאמְנֵי-אָרֶץ לְשֹׁבֵת עֲמֻנֵי הַלֵּךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ תָּמִים הוּא יִשְׁרְתַנִּי:  
 לֹא-יֵשֵׁב | בְּקֶרֶב בֵּיתִי עֹשֶׂה רַמְיָה דִבְרַ שְׁקָרִים לֹא-יִכּוֹן לַגִּיד עֵינַי:

*I will look closely at the way of the blameless; when shall I attain [their complete purity]? I will live without blame **within my house**... My eyes are on the trusty men of the land, to have them at my side. Those who follow the way of the blameless shall be in my service. **Those who deal deceitfully shall not live in my house**; all who speak untruth shall not stand before my eyes. [Psalms 101:2, 6-7]*

For many of us, especially those of us who have spent significant portions of our lives here, feel that same sense of ownership for Kol Rinah, much like we would for our individual houses. In that case, many of us come here and when thinking about this place, we say to ourselves, “This is My House, ביתי (*beiti*). I come here to volunteer. I raised my kids, maybe even grandkids here. I come to minyan or Shabbat or holidays, or Kol Nidrei here. I have led programs or served on committees. This is MY home.”

Oftentimes, that is a comforting notion. Some of us might walk in the doors and feel like Norm, coming into our Jewish communal “Cheers.” People see us and call to us, saying “Shabbat Shalom” or “Gut tuntif”, and we feel like we have a special little place all our own. To have a sense of ownership is essential when trying to build a place that we call home. We cannot be called to care, to give of ourselves, to take part in creating and maintaining something special if we do not feel a part of it. We must, each of us, get that warm feeling that this place is mine.

But the problem with this being My House is that can imply that it is MINE and not YOURS. As David intoned in Psalm 101, he decides who are “בְּאֵמֶן יִי אֲרִי”

the trustworthy ones in his land, those who are allowed to enter and share the space with him, and who are excluded. My House means that I get to judge who is in and who is out; it means I get to extend an invitation to some people and close the door to others.

But if this House is claimed by many of us, who gets to be the “real owner?” Who determines who is in or out? Who decides who is worth our attention and who we can ignore? When people are made to feel excluded, abnormal, uncared-for, or unwelcome, we snatch that safe space right out from under them. Through our actions, or sometimes our inaction, we undermine the very core of the people around us by delivering the message: “This is not a place for you.” And when we do that, I promise you, most people will hear us loud and clear. All too often they will internalize that message, walk outside, and not come back.

Can we really call ourselves a caring community if people who come into our walls feel excluded? Our very motto, the words inscribed under the name Kol Rinah in our emails, publications, and on the business cards I carry with me each and every day, the slogan that is designed to tell other people who we are, say “Building Inclusive Community.” Can we honestly say that this is what we are doing here if, at the same time, many of us still claim this place as more My House than it is yours?

There must be something more to our spiritual home than just “mine”. What about God? Typically, when we talk about a synagogue or spiritual community, we think of it as a House of God, בית-י (Beit Adonai). It is the place we most often feel the presence of the Divine, the place we have the chance to gather with our community and speak with God in the form of the prayers of our Tradition, the words of our lips, and the meditations of our hearts.

We have been reading Psalm 27, the psalm for the season of repentance, each day since the beginning of Elul, and will continue to include it in our prayer services through Hoshana Rabba. Its words proclaim:

אַתָּה | שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאַת־י אֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ שְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית־י כָּל־יְמֵי תַי לְחַזֵּנוֹת בְּנֶעֱמ־י וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהֵיכָל־י:

*One thing have I asked of Adonai, that will I search for: That I may  **dwell in God’s House** all the days of my life, [in order] to behold God’s pleasantness, and to begin my days in  **God’s Temple**. [Psalms 27:4]*

It is a beautiful notion. We, as insightful, thinking beings want to delve into the mysteries of the universe and connect with the Author of all Creation. We may even change some of our behaviors here to add a sense of holiness to our lives. Perhaps we cover our heads when we may not in the world outside. We may be more careful here with our language, our jokes, or our physical actions in respect for the sanctity of this House. Having a central place in our lives and our schedules where such endeavors are encouraged is good for our health, our souls, and adds to the scope and meaning of our lives.

But this cannot only, or even primarily, be God's house. Think about everything we do together here. We come here to learn, to be social, to eat, to celebrate, to mourn, to connect, to discover, to be comforted, to create, to reflect, and to simply exist collectively as our most centered selves. Here, we share with one another some of our most powerful moments; could we really do that in a place that was not our own, a place that primarily belonged to the Creator of the World, and not to those of us who live in that world?! Yes, we conceive the whole world as God's, along with the earth all who dwell on it,<sup>1</sup> but there are still places that are more like a home for us, which we own in some small part.

Therefore, Kol Rinah must not be any one of our spiritual homes (ביתי), and it must not be ONLY God's House (בית-י). Rather this place that we love is OUR House, בחינו (*bateinu*). In fact, the traditional name for a synagogue is not a place of prayer (בית תפילה), a place of sanctuary or safety (בית בטחון), or a place of holiness (בית קדושה), but rather a בית כנסת (*beit k'nesset*), a "place for gathering." It is literally designed as a place where people, all people, can come together and comfortably share both their space and their inmost selves.

And what does Our House look like? Song of Songs, the ancient love poem found within our Tanach, paints an image of the ideal shared home:

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 24:1

הַנָּדָה יָפָה רַעֲיָתִי הַנָּדָה יָפָה עֵינָיוּ יוֹנִים:  
הַנָּדָה יָפָה דוֹדִי אֶף נָעִים אֶף־עֲרֻשָׁנוּ רַעֲנָנָה:  
קְרוֹת בְּתֵיבֵנוּ אֲרָזִים רַחֲטָנוּ [רַהֲטָנוּ] בְּרוֹתִים:

*Ah, you are fair, my darling, Ah, you are fair, With your dove-like eyes!  
You, my beloved, are handsome, beautiful too! Our bed rests in the shade.  
Cedars are the beams of our house, Cypresses the rafters.*

[Song of Songs 1:15-17]

I deeply wish to make Our House like this house. The cedar and cypress trees represent strength and endurance in Tanach. They convey an image of a place that is solid, that is safe, that will be an unwavering part of our lives. What makes the community strong is not some ineffable quality, or the power of our worship, or the programs we offer, or the learning we do. What makes Our House a strong house is precisely the fact that we share it freely with one another, that everyone who comes in our doorways becomes a shareholder in an incredible project, one that helps shape the meaning and tenor of our lives.

When we share a home with others, we not only do we breathe the same air and dwell within the same walls, but we share ourselves with them as well. Each day, we are creating a home together just by building bonds with one another, and the only way we can succeed together is by treating one another with love.

This is more than just avoiding hurting one another's feelings. To share a home is an active process, and everyone who comes here needs to participate in order for this home to truly be ours. I spend the vast majority of my waking hours here. I am frequently here long before the building has officially opened and even

more often, sometimes after running home to tuck my children into bed, having not seen their faces all day, I come back here to work well into the night and, sometimes, into the next day.

But this place is not only mine! It cannot be just mine. For Kol Rinah to be a sanctuary, it must be ours. For Kol Rinah to be a place of real worship, we must not only stand in awe of the Holy Blessed One, but also stand in awe of the beauty of our fellow human beings. For Kol Rinah to truly be Our House, we must be certain that we give everyone who comes into our community the opportunity to be an equal partner in the project of creating our spiritual home. It is each of our job to make sure everyone who comes here feels welcome:

Even if you are not praying in the way I prefer to pray,

Even if you are a child who is too young to know what an inside voice is,  
or who just needs to play, or is just being silly,

Even if you don't know "the way we've always done things,"

Even if you've never celebrated a particular holiday, lifecycle event,  
milestone or occasion, and might need some help or an explanation,

Even if your Jewish upbringing and customs are not identical to mine,

Even if you aren't Jewish,

Even if you bother me,

Even if your sexual orientation, gender identity, or pathway through life  
are not in line with how I view the world,

Even if your skin tone is different than mine,

Even if you dress differently than me,

Even if you are differently-abled,

Even if you are not at the same stage in life as me,

Even if you don't fit the mold of what I see as "a normal Jewish person,"

Even if I've been here for more years or come more regularly than you,

Tomorrow, during Yom Kippur, we will once again read the Unetaneh  
Tokef, in which we hear the angels calling out to us -הנה יום הדין- "Today is the Day  
of Judgement!" Indeed, this day, we draw near to our last and best chance to do  
*teshuvah*, to turn from our misdeeds and mistakes, the ways in which we hurt  
others and ourselves, and to return to a space that is safe for us- for each of us and  
for all of us together.

If we cannot look honestly at ourselves and change the way we view and  
treat other people now, when will we?

Already, we can look ahead to tomorrow evening, when we will stand here  
for Ne'ilah as the gates of opportunity close on our chance to turn over a new leaf  
this year. We each have a chance to look at our own actions and reactions, but  
none of us are the arbiters of how others live their lives or of how they behave.

You will get upset by things other people do. You will disagree. You will think they are doing something wrong. You cannot control them any more than you can control the wind, or the quaking of the earth, or the heat of the fire. All you can do is listen to the קול דממה דקה, that still, small voice, from deep inside you that impels you to do good, to treat others as your equal. The voice that asks you “Why are you here?” and drives you to find your best self. The voice that reminds you incessantly that all people are created from the same cosmic clay, containing that same magnificent spark of The Holy Blessed One, none better than any other.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his life in comics, Charlie Brown faced obstacles, stumbles, embarrassments, yet after each, is welcomed home with open arms. May Our House, filled with all people who come to share our space in love and in prayer, be a strong house, but more than this, may it be a place of rest, a place of sustenance, a place of love, a sanctuary for everyone all people who make Our House their house.

At the end of each of the thirteen summers I spent at Camp Interlaken JCC up in Eagle River, WI, we would have a campfire on the very last night. And the last song we would sing was called “Bless This House,” by the incredible songwriter, Steven Sher. Hearing it still makes me cry. What we were trying to say to one another in the last fleeting moments of our shared summer was that camp

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<sup>2</sup> Based on I Kings 19:11-13

was our special place, the place where we belonged, the place where we could come and be safe, the place where we made our memories, and the place where we could simply be the most honest versions of ourselves. It is a feeling I have carried throughout my entire life, one that has made me feel, in spite of my failures and doubts, my worried and painful times, my Charlie Brown moments, that I am a person who is wonderful, who is worth getting to know, who is special. But more than that, when I remember singing this song together with my friends as we prepared to leave our summer home and feeling that everyone around me was equally incredible, and that this place we shared was magical, that it was spectacular, and, most of all, that it was ours.

And so, as we move into this Yom Kippur, I offer you these same words of blessing, that this house may indeed be Our House:

*Bless this House, for we are all together  
 Bless us all, we may not meet again.  
 Think of all the happiness we've found here;  
 Take it home and share it with a friend.*

*Come along, sing a song,  
 And you'll never say goodbye,  
 And you'll see, and agree,  
 Friendships won need never die.<sup>3</sup>*

*G'mar Chatima tova; Welcome home.*

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<sup>3</sup> "Bless This House," by Steven Sher.