

**Yom Kippour 5772****8 October 2011****Homecoming****[before the prayers for the departed relatives]****Rabbi Robert Golub**

“Vayehi erev Vayehi voker, yom rishon - Et il y eut soir, et il y eut matin: -premier jour.”

So it is in our tradition. Our days begin in the evening and conclude with the evening. And thus, in such a scheme, we are now in the middle of the day, with but a handful of hours left to our fast and our prayers. For this full day period of Yom Kippour, we have been examining our lives, our stops and our starts, our intentions and our actions, our good and our bad, trying to uncover and repent for our errors and missteps and find forgiveness in God's eyes. Soon we will reach the completion of this day of atonement and when we do, we will have come also to the end of the entire ten-day period that is known in our tradition as “Aseret Yemey Teshuvah” (Les Dix Jours de Penitence). Ten days ago, on Rosh Hashanah, we began a process of introspection. Now, at this moment, we are just a few hours from the completion of this process. But now, before this end arrives and tomorrow begins, let us take a good look at what we have been engaged in these past ten days.

As the name implies, we have been involved in penitence, we have been engaged in Teshuvah. I don't know about you, but I have always been bothered by the term “penitence”. For me, the word conjures up images of a crazy old man standing on his soap box, bellowing at the top of his lungs “Repent Ye Sinners, for the world is about to end!” And then, here we go and refer to these Ten Days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippour as “Dix Jours de Penitence”. Could Judaism be as equally ridiculous sounding?!

On the surface, it would appear that the one term is merely the translation of the other: Penitence and Teshuvah. Yet, on closer examination, there is a world of difference between them. Penitence means “Regret d'avoir offensé Dieu, accompagné de l'intention de ne plus recommencer; contrition, le nom qui vient du verbe “repentir.” Repentir, comme verbe, veut dire “Manifester du remords d'avoir commis une faute” et vient du latin repœnitere, du latin pœnitere, ca veut dire être mécontent.” Thus returning to our image of the old man on the soap box, when

he bellows at us to repent, he is calling on us to feel sorry for what we have done or would have wanted to do.

To be sure, feeling regretful or dissatisfied is part of the act of Teshuvah, but unlike the French word penitence, Teshuvah goes far beyond this point. Penitence, as has been defined, refers primarily to a state of mind, a certain feeling, an emotion or attitude. To repent means “Manifester du remords d'avoir commis une faute.” But what about action. Again, with Penitence, the only action is passive: “Subir avec amertume les conséquences d'une action”. But Teshuvah is an action, an active action that refers to the fact that one is changing not only one's mind or heart, but also one's behavior as well. And it is precisely this call to change one's behavior that lies at the root of the Hebrew word “Teshuvah”.

Teshuvah comes from the root Shuv, which means very simply to turn back, to return. Teshuvah refers first and foremost to an action, the act of turning back to one's original point, turning around to one's intended path. Of course, one cannot simply act with one's body without first acting with one's mind and heart. One does need to feel sorry for one's actions, one does need to recognize the error of one's ways, the fact that one has strayed from the path and gone away from one's true destination. In this way, Teshuvah does resemble Penitence. But the Jewish concept goes one step further, the crucial step beyond mere penitence, to imply not merely a change of mind but of behavior as well. Just as sin, “Het” in Hebrew means “to miss the mark, to go astray” as an arrow aimed at a target can go astray, so too Teshuvah means “turning back to the mark, returning to the target”. Not only must the head change directions, but the body as well.

Teshuvah therefore means a returning, a coming back to one's true place. How apt such a concept is, of coming back to one's intended path! How fitting such an idea is, of returning to one's true home! And how appropriate it is of associating this day, Yom Kippour, ce Jour du Grand Pardon, this conclusion to the Dix Jours de Penitence with such a return, for indeed, Yom Kippour is a real homecoming (“retour” ou “retour a la maison?”). It is a homecoming on several different levels, a return home of various different kinds.

When one looks out over the congregation here in our services, it is impossible not to be struck by the sheer numbers of people who are here in the sanctuary. There is no other day of the year in which one sees so graphic a presentation of the congregation, the community of Jews, in all its strengths. Here are our men and our women. Here are our young and our old. Here are our parents and children, our grandparents and our toddlers, the babes in arms and those already bent with age. Behold, here is a homecoming, a returning to one's congregation, a coming home to one's community. This is Yom Kippour with teshuvah in the most graphic way. The rest of the year, we may not think about our congregation. The rest of the year, we may not have much to do with our community. The announcements and emails may get deleted without being read. The calls to meetings and services and other activities may go unheeded. Some of us may not even be members and may stay aloof and apart 364 days of the year. But come Yom Kippur, and

it is time for a Jew to return home, it is time for a Jew to come back to his community. No matter what we may do during the rest of the year, no matter how far we may stray, we are always welcome when we return to our home in the synagogue, we always have our rightful place when we come back to our home in the sanctuary.

How wonderful it is to see, on this day, the faces of our neighbors and friends, those whom we have just recently seen and those whom we have missed for some time. A year has intervened and, during it, we have all gone our separate ways. But now, here we are, sitting and standing next to one another, rubbing shoulders with our fellow members, our fellow Jews. During the American Revolution, the call was “Give me liberty or give me death!” But almost 2000 years before, in the Talmud, the Jew’s call was “Ee Chavruta, ee Meetuta” – give me community or give me death!” On this day that we pray to be written and sealed in the Book of Life, we return to our synagogue and once again have our community.

There is another kind of homecoming operating on this day of Teshuvah, a Teshuvah, a return, if you will, to our tradition. On this day, like no other, we return to our Judaism, the ways of our ancestors, the heritage of our people. We pray from a “machzor” un livre de priers whose prayers and religious poetry are hundreds upon hundreds of years old. How many generations of Jews have spoken the same words, have whispered the same syllables, have chanted the same blessings, have sung the same haunting melodies? “This book of prayers,” goes the poem, “old and stained with tears, I take into my hand and unto the God of my fathers who from ages past has been their Rock and Refuge, I call in my distress. In ancient words, seared with the pain of generations, I pour out my woe.” We read from the Torah, verses attributed to the hand of Moshe Rabbenu [Moïse, Notre Maître] himself, from over 3,000 years ago. We bow, we sway back and forth, we wear our tallit [chale de priere], we cover our heads – in these hours of Yom Kippour, we rejoin the chain of Jewish tradition, resembling if for no other time, the Jews of ages past. We have come back to our tradition, we have come home to our heritage. For these 25 hours of Yom Kippour, the injunctions and admonitions to fast, to afflict our bodies, to examine our souls – these statutes and commandments of yesterday are ours as well. There is no alienation from our people on this day, no separation of disjuncture cutting us off altogether from the living tree of Judaism. No matter what we do during the rest of the year, no matter how far we may go from Jewish sources and abandon Jewish law, on this day, we have come home, standing with Jews everywhere, with Jews of all time. On this day, we are truly at one with our people, we have truly come home.

We have returned to our congregation. We have returned to our tradition. But as we sit here, preparing ourselves for the moment of memory, the “Yizkor” service, we are aware how much this day is also a homecoming to our family, those with us now and those who have gone [from this world] before. The rest of the year, each of us in the family may go off in his own direction. We may be living in different neighborhoods of the same city, in different cities of the same region, in different regions or different countries all together. Our children may be attending

university in another area, our parents may be retired and have left for warmer weather. Normally the link that binds one generation to another is the telephone, courtesy of Orange, SFR and Bouygues. But at least on this day, if there has been a way, they have come home to us and we to them.

But today is a homecoming even for those families who live together and who are not separated by distance. One doesn't need to move away physically to feel separate and apart from the rest of the family. How often it is we can all live in the same home and still not really see or be with one another? During the day, each of us has his own activities that keep us busy and apart, our job, our store, our school, our responsibilities at home. The sun rises and we are out the door, dashing off in this direction or that. Comes the end of the day, and the running continues. There are meetings to attend and tennis to play; there is shopping to do and stories online to read. For most of us, the idea of sitting down together as a family for dinner and spending the time discussing with one another what is happening in our lives, this great institution of family life has, for most of us, become a thing of the past. "No time to eat" we say, "I'm running out, I'll grab a bite later, I'll heat it in the microwave when I get home" – how often do we hear these refrains. And even when we are all there in the same house at the same time, we can be very far apart physically and emotionally. One is in one room watching television, another in another room playing computer games, another is reading the newspaper and a fourth is speaking on the telephone. We may speak of family togetherness, but how frequently are we truly together?! Even when our families have been spared the pain of family conflict – of parents and children at odds, of brothers and sisters at war, of husbands and wives who don't talk to one another – even for those of us spared of such pain, family togetherness is generally more the exception than the rule.

But today, this Day of Atonement, this Day of Teshuvah, this day of homecoming, we are here as a family, as many of us as can be assembled in our place. Fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives – on this day, we have come home to our families. With them, we ate our last meal last night before the start of the fast, with them we will break bread to mark the end of the last later this evening. If, at no other time of the year, then at least now, with all of our dear ones we have returned!

Our homecoming, however, extends beyond the dear one of this lifetime. Our return to our families extends, as we know, to those who are no longer of this world, we have passed on to the next stage of existence. A parent who has died, a spouse who is no more, a grandparent or sibling or other relative who has passed away, a child, God forbid, who has been taken – their memories are always with us. But what opportunities do we have to express our remembrance, our link with them? What occasions are we afforded just to commune with our dear ones who are no more and to be one with them across time and space? We are told, following a death, to get on with our lives, to be with the living, to look forward and not dwell on the past. But today, all those convenient sayings and well-meaning words have no place. Today it is Yom Kippour, our

day of homecoming to our families past and present. When we read the Memorial prayers, the Yizkor, when we recite the mourners' kaddish, when we conjure up the faces of our beloved departed and meditate on their lives with us, we are one with them who are no more. We have returned to our dear ones and they to us.

There is one more homecoming on this day, one more kind of returning that we do. It is the return to God, the coming back to the Source of our being. On Yom Kippur, we are brought before our Creator, we are examined and judged, inscribed and sealed in the Book of life by our Maker. Before Him, we are stripped bare of all pretense. The rest of the year, we may imagine ourselves as independent beings, makers of our own destiny, responsible for our own fate. The rest of the year, we can speak of our freedom, our rights, "our own thing". But on this day, we come back to our true dependence our real creatureliness. We have not created ourselves, we were created. Our existence is not independent or guaranteed, it is wholly conditional to the will of Him who shaped and formed us. And to Him must we give an accounting yearly, admitting our sins, uncovering our transgressions, making known our errors, making conscious our misdeeds. On this day, our fate is placed squarely in the hands of our God, we bring our souls before Him as we return to the true source of our being. Under the rod of our Shepherd, we His sheep do pass, to be examined and to be judged. How easy it is to forget about Him, how simple it is to ignore His presence, how quick are we to turn a deaf ear or unseeing eye to His demands. But on this Day of Atonement, this day of homecoming, we are all of a sudden cast before Him and His presence and His demands, and we are required to respond, we are required to state who we are, where we are, where we have been and where we are going.

But in this difficult moment of self-scrutiny, of self examination before God, we are reunited with Him. We return as the prodigal son to the outstretched arms of a patient father. The Rabbis tell the following parable. A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a distance of a hundred days journey. His friends said to him, Return to your father. He said, I cannot. Then his father sent to him saying, Return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way. So God says, Return to me and I will return to you. On Yom Kippour, we return to God, taking the first step, and He returns to us, the rest of the way.

Yom Kippour marks the conclusion of the Ten Days of Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Returning Home. During this period, and particularly on this day, we have come home to our congregation and our tradition, our families and our God. On this day, we are truly one, mirroring God's oneness, one with each other, one with our past and present, one with our Creator and Father. For one day, there are no divisions between us and our community, us and our heritage, us and our loved ones, us and our Maker. For these 25 hours, we have come home.

Yom Kippour is known in the Bible as Shabbat Shabbaton, le Sabbath des Sabbaths, the holy Sabbath of reset. Surely it is not by mistake that Yom Kippour, this day of homecoming, is associated with the Sabbath. According to Jewish Law, the two days are related, with the

prohibition of labor and the requirement of rest that apply to the one applying to the other too. And while one day is dedicated to fasting and the other to feasting, both acts, that of penitence and that of celebration, are aimed precisely at the same goal, the goal of redemption, as we learn, “Rabbi Eliezar said, if Israel repents, they will be redeemed” [Talmud, Sanhedrin 97b] while R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: “If Israel were to keep two Sabbaths according to the laws thereof, they would be redeemed immediately.” [Talmud, Shabbat 118b]. Redemption is thus the goal of both Yom Kippour and Sabbath, for the atonement sought by the former is nothing other than the at-one-ment, the spirit of inner and outer peace proclaimed by the latter.

We have considered Yom Kippour as the great day of homecoming. But in truth, the opportunity for such homecoming, for at least a foretaste of such redemption is possible not just one day of the year, but once every week. And if we have gained any special meaning for our lives on this one day of Yom Kippour, then how can we allow ourselves to be cut off from access to this feeling of closeness available on every Sabbath. If we have been moved by the feeling we have experienced with those around, with our past and with our faith, then how can we deny ourselves, deny our souls, this opportunity to know this closeness again, week in and week out. This is our right, this is our responsibility, this is our true goal, the true reason for our being, to be at one with the world, one with our ourselves, one with our God, totally at one, today and throughout the year.

As we rise for the Yizkor Memorial service, as we turn to contemplate the memories of our loved ones who are no more, we pray that this Day of Atonement, this day of Homecoming, bring peace and comfort, support and uplifting to all of us and the whole House of Israel, now and throughout the coming year, and let us say AMEN.