

HOMEWARD BOUND, or, THE EXILE WITHIN

Sermon for *Kol Nidre* 5783 / October 4, 2022

Rabbi Jonathan E. Blake

I'm sitting in the railway station in Przemyśl, on Poland's southeastern border with Ukraine. It is Monday, March 14th. Today, approximately 150 refugees will stream into Poland, every minute, as they will every hour of every day this week, and for weeks to come. Just three weeks into Russia's onslaught, the population of Warsaw has already swelled by more than 300,000, *three times* the total number of Ukrainians approved to arrive *in all of the United States*. There is not an unoccupied bed within 100 miles of the border: not in private homes, hotels, hostels, civic or religious centers.

I'm sitting in the railway station amid a sea of bodies, bodies pressed close, bodies arranged haphazardly—cross-legged on the floor, leaning on the ticket counter, lying down on benches—bodies belonging mostly to women and children, haggard and sleep-deprived, heavy of cares and light of luggage. Most have brought a single rollaboard for families of four and five and more. Kids tote brightly colored backpacks and clutch stuffed animals and reach for chips and dried fruit that someone got from

a vending machine. Women's faces glow pale in the blue light of a hundred cell phone screens, anxiously awaiting messages from across the border. All husbands and fathers and sons between the ages of 18 and 60 are conscripted men. Many have not been reachable for weeks.

There are millions of them now: refugees in Poland and neighboring countries, millions more internally displaced, having fled the territory under Putin's siege. By May 27th, the number of people forced to flee violence, conflict, human rights violations, and persecution globally exceeded 100 million for the first time on record, a grim threshold attained by the more than ten million Ukrainians who left.

This is the second time I have addressed the plight of refugees on Yom Kippur. The differences between 2016 and now are noteworthy. Six years ago, I spoke about walls and fences, words that evoked strong feelings and inflamed partisan passions. That rancor wormed its way into every corner of American life, synagogues included, and more than a few congregants at that time conveyed their disapproval of "talking politics" from the *bimah*, a characterization of my remarks that, respectfully, I do not embrace, given that the obligation to safeguard the refugee is a

mitzvah, a religious commandment, steeped in Jewish history and bolstered with the force of Jewish law in countless texts and contexts, from the Torah to the present day.

It is worth noting that this issue may not even seem controversial this time around. Solidarity with Ukrainian refugees is widespread, with good reason. Most Western countries, for starters, are aligned in their distrust and dislike of Vladimir Putin. There is also the not-small consideration that those fleeing Ukraine are mostly White women and children. They look like us. Their children look like our children. They are receiving a sympathetic embrace entirely unlike the xenophobic scrutiny to which millions of Middle Eastern and other darker-skinned refugees have been subjected.

This last point, especially, hit home on our humanitarian mission back in March, consisting of 18 rabbis traveling under the auspices of the UJA-Federation of New York.

While our trip emphasized our responsibility to assist refugees of all backgrounds—irrespective of religion, country of origin, native language, skin color, gender, or age—we could not help but catch a glimpse of ourselves in these Ukrainian refugees. Hundreds of

thousands of Ukrainians (and therefore a significant number of displaced persons) are, themselves, Jews, and many of our own family stories run through this blood-soaked part of the world: through Ukraine and Poland, Belarus and Russia, Hungary and Romania and the Czech Republic.

As we traveled by bus in the dead of night to the Polish city of Lublin—once a seat of Jewish culture and rabbinical learning—many of us remarked that, not so long ago, our not-so-distant relatives left this place and countless nearby cities, towns and villages, with little more than threadbare bags of meager belongings, fleeing state-sponsored violence, or hostile townsfolk, or conscription into the armies of the Czars where Jewish peasants would die by the thousands in the front lines, or of starvation, disease, or hypothermia.

And those who escaped were the lucky ones, for they are not counted among the millions who lie in nameless graves or who boarded one-way cattle cars to the crematoria.

So, to say that our feelings were complicated, here, on the border between Poland and Ukraine, would be an understatement. The national anthem of Ukraine trumpets, “We are the proud

descendants of the Cossacks,” name-checking the people usually invoked in Jewish memory for having carried out violent pogroms against Jews.

But if you think that the situation is complicated for me, a third-generation American, imagine how it must be for Evgeny Pavlovskiy, a Shoah survivor we met in Warsaw.

95 years old, frail and infirm, Evgeny was content to live alone in his apartment in the Kyiv area, just two houses away from the entrance to Babyn Yar, where the Nazis murdered 33,000 Jews over two days in 1941. When his son and family made *aliyah*, moving to Israel earlier in the winter, Evgeny decided to remain in his home. Even as Russian troops, tanks and artillery amassed on the border, he simply could not believe that Putin would attack his country.

“My father did not want to leave Ukraine no matter how hard I pressed,” said his son Mykhailo, who now goes by Moshe. “By the time I finally persuaded him, no one was around to help.” As war broke out, Evgeny made three solo attempts to flee Russian shelling and artillery. His harrowing journey to Poland, a drive that in normal circumstances would have taken eight hours, lasted

three days. Along the way he watched his peers die in sub-freezing temperatures while waiting in line for seven hours just to buy a rail ticket across the border.

Meanwhile, his son Moshe was making his own journey back from Israel to meet him in Poland. We caught up with them the day they reunited. They shared their story with tears in their eyes: the son's, from sheer relief, the father's, from exhaustion and heartbreak.

The next morning, we sent them off to the airport. And although we smiled and dispensed Purim candy and cheered and sang "*Am Yisrael Chai*," inside, my heart was breaking too, because even in his new home, even in *Eretz Yisrael*, the Jewish homeland, Evgeny Pavlovskiy will live out the rest of his days in exile.

From his story we understand more fully what it means to be a Jew: to have a home, to go into exile from that home, and even when returning home, to carry exile with us.

It has always been like this. With *Lech-Lecha*, "Go forth," God sent Abraham and Sarah to a new home, Canaan. Three times in as many generations their family fled famine and became exiles in

the land of Egypt. For a time they prospered, but before long, a Pharaoh arose who “knew not Joseph,” and their adoptive home became a place of genocide and slavery.

Deliverance came after centuries of suffering. We were told it was time for exile to end, time to go home. We left for a Promised Land, guarded across the Sea by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; guided through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, every step of the way longing for home.

But many of us, the Torah tells us, felt more at home in Egypt than in the Promised Land. Some even begged, pleaded, insisted on going back. Three tribes of our people elected to raise cattle on the other side of the Jordan rather than try their fortunes in *Eretz Yisrael*.

An article that appeared ten years ago in *Smithsonian Magazine* observes that human beings organize space this way: “Home is home, and everything else is not-home.”¹

¹ *The Definition of Home*, by Verlyn Klinkenborg, as cited at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-definition-of-home-60692392/>.

Even though most of us know what it feels like to pack up, leave home, make a new home—the average person moves over eleven times in a lifetime—we still “have an amazing ability to feel nostalgia even for those places that held hardship, bitterness, and heartache,” an observation that Kelly shared in a summer *D’var Torah* delivered here at WRT. She was referring to Mariam and Achta, the two refugee sisters WRT helped to resettle after they fled genocide in their home country, the Central African Republic. Kelly has served as a lead volunteer coordinating our refugee resettlement efforts for more than five years. Even here, in their safe, new home, Mariam and Achta still feel the pull of the home they left behind.

Home and not-home. We have Mariam and Achta yearning for Africa, Israelites yearning for Egypt, and Evgeny Pavlovskiy yearning for Ukraine. We have 16th Century Jews recently arrived in Italy and Turkey and Morocco and even *Eretz Yisrael*, longing for Spain and Portugal. What are the stories of Sholem Aleichem, the great Jewish writer and immigrant American who was born near Kyiv, and who died in New York City, and whose most memorable character, Tevye the Dairyman, is immortalized in *Fiddler on the Roof*, if not the definitive testament of our longing for a vanished world, for a home that was now not-home? A

home that took so much, that inflicted such trauma, and yet was always home, even generations after we left. (If you have never set foot in Eastern Europe but still have a taste for pickled herring, or your heart still swells to the sound of the *chazzan davenning Kol Nidre*, then you understand what I mean.)

In Warsaw, we met Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, who until recently served as the Chief Rabbi of Moscow. Faced with the choice of supporting the Russian invasion “or else,” he chose to make *Aliyah* to Israel, with Poland a temporary stop on his escape route. “[O]ver the centuries,” he teaches, “rabbis used to sign their names on documents, not as a ‘rabbi of’ a certain city, but rather ‘as a temporary dweller’ of that city.”² We understand why.

This, then, is what I have learned from from witnessing these stories of heartbreak and courage, of danger and possibility, of home and not-home:

First, that we should see ourselves in the face of every exile: in the refugee and the deportee, the migrant and the immigrant, the one fleeing violence and hardship and the one seeking new

² Pinchas Goldschmidt, “My First Yom Kippur in Exile,” *The New York Times*, published October 2, 2022, online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/02/opinion/moscow-rabbi-yom-kippur.html>.

opportunity, in the Jew and and the Gentile, in those who look and dress and talk like us and those who look and dress and talk differently.

“For you know the heart of the stranger,” the Torah reminds us, “having been strangers in the land of Egypt.” There is no Jewish history without exile, no Jewish mission without empathy, no Jewish identity without awareness of our people’s eternal dance between home and not-home.

Judaism does not look kindly on the mistreatment of the human being in exile. To cite a recent example: the cynical exploitation of foreign migrants, relocating them without their consent from the US Southern Border to Martha’s Vineyard, or Washington, DC, or Chicago, runs counter to everything our religious tradition teaches about how to treat other human beings. Judaism does not support playing games with human lives, least of all to score points or stoke partisan grievances.

The other lesson I learned from my encounter on the border, the border between Poland and Ukraine, between home and not-home, is this: That we are *all* in exile; that we are *all* searching for home.

Put another way: I am asking us to see ourselves in the face of the refugee, to empathize with the exile; but I am also asking to look within and see the refugee *in each of us*, to empathize with our inner condition of exile.

For each of us is in exile, each of us searching for home.

As I think back on the last two-and-a-half years, as I take in and do what I can to make sense of all the stories you have shared, our WRT family, a common theme emerges, one summarized by a single word that countless members of our community have expressed: *disconnection*.

Some of us report feeling disconnected from our places of work, our friends, our parents or children, our loved ones, our families. Many feel disconnected from a sense of purpose, from a sense of agency, from the confidence to move forward in life. And many of you have shared feeling disconnected from this synagogue, from this community, from WRT—this place we may still call “home,” but, lately, we’re less sure.

The Jewish tradition has a name for this feeling: it's called *Galut* which means exile in Hebrew. Exile is not only a geographical condition; it's also a spiritual condition.

The 18th Century Rabbi Menachem Nachum Twersky, better known as the *Me'or Einayim*, came from Chernobyl, which we all know is in Ukraine. He taught that even after the Exodus from Egypt, when we went forth from *Galut*, from exile, something of *Galut*, something of exile, remained within us.

What we lost in exile, he explained, was our connection to the awareness of God, and, even now, something of that spiritual exile, that disconnection from our holy Source, remains within us. Instead of feeling love for the Divine Source of life and blessing, we have shifted our love to material things and baser desires which may stimulate but ultimately not fulfill.³ Instead of feeling awe at the mystery and majesty of human life and the vast and awesome cosmos, we bow down before power and prestige. Instead of responding with fear and horror at the inhumane treatment of all that is fragile and vulnerable in God's creation, we recoil only at what injures our self-interest. We are in exile, *on*

³ See *Me'or Einayim*, *Parashat Shemot*, s.v., והנה אחר יציאת מצרים.

the inside, each of us alienated from the Source of life and goodness.

For those of us who have felt disconnected from WRT during these difficult years, first, I want to apologize on this Kol Nidre. *Al cheit she'chatanu l'fanecha*: For the times we failed to meet you where you were, to check in during the darkest hours. For the times we didn't call, the times we made assumptions, the times we tried and failed. I ask for your forgiveness and acknowledge our desire to connect with you once again, in *teshuvah*—the process of return, renewal, and healing.

Second, I invite you to join me, my clergy colleagues, our professional staff, and your fellow congregants—this entire holy community—On a spiritual journey, beginning tonight. I am asking us to do what we can to venture out of our exile.

Here at WRT, we have planned a year of connecting and reconnecting, of learning and spiritual exploration, of music and prayer, of celebration and social action, of finding our way back as a community, and finding our way forward.

We are also finding a way back to the Promised Land, literally, as we prepare for our first congregational trip to Israel since 2019, which will take place a year from this December. Enrollment will open later this fall. Whether or not you've been to Israel, I hope you will open yourselves to this experience as a kind of homecoming.

In the meantime, I am directly asking that this week's visit to WRT will not be your last until next year. If you don't yet know all of the clergy, we can't wait to meet you. If you don't know your fellow congregants, please take the initiative to leave Yom Kippur with one new cell phone number or email. If you feel at all disconnected from this place, the people up here, or the people out there, let's connect, and find our way home together.

But even as we begin our journey back to *this* home, I am asking us to explore the exile *within us*, to see how our own internal alienation may be holding us back from finding our truest home: the home within, that central and centered place, where we no longer feel estranged from our higher selves, our higher purpose and our higher Power.

Maybe we are feeling alienated from, or even by, a family member, coworker, or friend. Before lashing out, look within. Ask yourself: how much of this situation do I need to own? How much have I withdrawn into myself instead of connecting? How willing am I to re-engage, or to be re-engaged?

Or maybe we feel disconnected because we hurt so much. The good news is, we're not alone. As a friend once taught me: "It's hard to be a person." If that's how you feel, would you consider adopting a daily gratitude practice? Make an inventory of the good, what our tradition calls "*hakarat ha-tov*." Acknowledge three things to be grateful for each morning before you register your first complaint of the day.

Introspection before projection. Gratitude before grouching. A few attitudinal shifts that might help us address the exile within.

For even as we have learned that, as we left Egypt, we took a piece of exile with us, we have also learned that in every place we were exiled, the Divine Presence went with us. The Rabbis often refer to God as *Ha-Makom*, meaning "The Place" or "The Omnipresent." Wherever God is, there is home.

God went down with us, the Talmud says, to Egypt and Babylonia, to Rome and Greece and France and Germany, to Poland and Russia and Ukraine, to all the places of our banishment, all the places we remember as both home and not-home.

And when the Torah promises that, some day, all the exiles will come home, it does not say that God will send back the Jewish people on their own, but rather that “the Holy One of Blessing will return *together* with us from all our various states of exile.”⁴

As we come home on this night of promises and possibilities, join me in praying for the more than 100 million human beings in exile tonight, running from violence and persecution, searching for home.

And join me, no less, in turning inward, acknowledging the exile deep within the heart of human experience, the exile who does not remember how to connect, the exile who has felt abandoned by friends and community, even by family, even by this temple, the exile who still yearns for home, who still searches for home, who still remembers home, and who summons the courage to take a first, halting step to return.

⁴ Quoting and paraphrasing Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 29a.

Ha-Makom, the One who meets us in exile and who is our Home in every age: grant us—each of us alone, and all of us together—a way back home.