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Sermon for Rosh Hashanah Morning

I'm wondering: How many people here have moved in the last year? Or maybe in the last few years? Well, I'm sure that I have you beat – because I have moved six times in the last seven years! From college in Ithaca to Cincinnati, to New York City, to Israel and back to New York again, and then from there, to here, to Boca Raton. And in all these all moves, I must say, never once was it easy. Not one time did it ever go as planned. You have to get the boxes and assemble them which can lead to paper cuts and gashes. You can never find the packing tape when you need it and when you do, the tape is stuck to itself and you can't get it going. Then once you start packing the boxes, you cram in as much stuff as possible so that there are less boxes to move – but when you go to lift them, you practically pull your back out. And this is all before the movers even come. Once they arrive, there's the usual chaos that leaves you filled with fear yet some hope that all of your belongings will actually make it to your destination in one piece.

So you can only imagine the dread I felt a little over two months ago, when Brad called and told me that we'd been given sixty days notice to move out. Our landlords had decided to move back into our place. The thought of moving made me sentimental. This was our first real house together. This was the place where Brad carried me over the threshold when we got back from our honeymoon. This was the place where we celebrated holidays with our families. The place where the youth group came over to bond. And the place where nearly every one of our friends came to visit us between the months of December and April. Now, it was just a rental so I knew that we wouldn't be there forever. But now that I had to leave, I was sad. I was also panicking, because when I did the math, I realized that sixty days was the beginning of September – meaning right before the High Holy Days. And certainly, no rabbi chooses to move at this time of year. This was a challenge, but I realized that we were fortunate. We were in a position where we could go out and find a new place to call home. I decided to look at this situation as an opportunity.

I took this task very seriously. I wanted to find the perfect place. Now I admit, I've been called a homebody before. I love being at home, whether it's relaxing, being with friends and family, or even working. And I think it's important to make your home a place where you want to be. It should be comfortable. It should be a place you want to come home to. Our tradition teaches that our home should be a *mikdash me'at*, which means, our home should be like a mini sanctuary.

The *mikdash* was the name for the Temple in Jerusalem. It comes from the root *Kuf-Dalet-Shin*, meaning holy - you know, like *Kiddush and kadosh*. So, the *mikdash* was the holiest place in all of Israel. When it was destroyed, we decided to build new temples, such as the one that we're in today. These were supposed to be places where we could come to pray, to learn, and congregate as a community. We do this in our sanctuary. But we need to know that this is not the *only* place where we can be holy. We have the power to create personal sanctuaries. We can do this by taking our homes and transforming them into holy places. We must do this because as the world around us gets more stressful, the more we need a place of refuge. The more we need our homes.

However, a few weeks ago, I stood beneath the chuppah to officiate at my brother's wedding. I talked about how the chuppah is symbolic of the home. With just four poles, it's quite fragile. Those of us living in South Florida are more acutely aware of the fragility of homes than most others. We know that with a fierce storm and violent gusts of wind, our roofs can literally be blown off of the tops of our houses. Our windows can be shattered and all of the material possessions that are precious to us, can be destroyed without a moment's notice. And today, there is another threat to the security of our homes: the economy. We do not feel as stable as we did even a year or two ago. For many of us, making payments on mortgages and covering housing expenses has become nearly impossible. It leaves us feeling uncertain, wondering if we will be forced to sell short or downsize. For some there is the fright that it could be even worse.

Will we have to be a burden and move in with our parents or children? Is it possible that we could end up on the streets? With worries such as these, how can we ever make ourselves feel safe in our own homes?

This isn't something that can be fixed by getting a security alarm or hurricane shutters. Nor can it be improved through reconstruction or redecorating. For years, it seems like people were obsessed with aesthetics. With entire television stations such as HGTV (Home and Garden Television), and programs such as Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, we were constantly thinking of ways to improve the physical appearance of our homes. We got ideas of how to remodel, landscape, and spruce up our look. We also came up with ways to reorganize and de-clutter. There's nothing wrong with this. It's okay to want to make our homes beautiful and charming. In fact, in Judaism there's a value called *hiddur mitzvah*. It means that when we're fulfilling a commandment, we should enhance the mitzvah and try to make it more beautiful. In a few weeks we'll build our sukkah here at the Temple. We'll have the children bring fruits and gourds and paper chains to decorate it. The Torah doesn't say that we have to do this, but we do it because we want this space to be welcoming. So if this is what we do with a temporary hut, how much more important is it that we do this with our homes? Home improvements of this sort make us feel good and make our homes inviting – but ultimately, it's not the physical beauty that makes a home secure. It is the spirit of our homes that matters.

We need to strengthen the spirit of our homes, and we can do this by making sure that our homes are built on principles. You know, I was talking to a colleague of mine whose congregation doesn't have their own building yet. They rent a space but it is used for other things during the week so they have to take everything with them when they leave. I was curious about what they did with the Torah. She told me that every week a different family takes the Torah home with them. I thought this sounded like a lot of responsibility. "Don't they feel so much pressure having a Torah in their house?" I asked. But she said that the families love having it there. In some ways it makes them feel as though God is in their midst, with them, protecting them. This makes them more careful with their words and the way that they treat each other. I'm not suggesting that we all go out and get a Torah to keep in our homes. We don't need to do that. We just need to be more aware of our own actions and whether or not we are bringing the Torah to life in our own homes.

We already have a reminder. I'd guess that almost everyone here has a mezuzah on the doorpost of your house. I love the one that I have. It's from Israel and I spent weeks picking it out. I compared the shapes, the sizes, the colors, until I found the perfect one. But having a mezuzah is about more than having a beautiful piece of Judaica to admire when we walk in and out of our houses. It's to remind us of our commitment to live according to the commandments and to build our homes around them. Of course this means celebrating Jewish holidays at home: such as Shabbat and Passover. These holidays bring history and tradition into our homes. But it's also about how we live our daily lives inside of our homes. In order to protect our homes, we must live according Jewish ethics and values.

Yet, living in this way is not as easy. Our homes are often the places where we experience the most strife. Why is it that two minutes after we walk through the door, passing right by that mezuzah, we find ourselves yelling and arguing? It seems that we expect the people we live with to be able to read our minds and when they don't do what we want – such as take out the garbage, or fold the laundry, or pay the telephone bill, we get angry and start a fight without even waiting for an explanation. There are other times when the opposite happens. We come home and are so distracted that we ignore the people we haven't seen all day. We stop communicating. If we live alone, we often come home and shutdown. We need to change our ways and become more patient and open and honest with ourselves and each other. These are Jewish values that we need to bring in because this lack of respect is tearing away at the foundation of our homes.

Why do we act this way in our homes? I think the reason is that our homes are private. They are confined spaces. There is one way we are expected to act in public: kind and polite, no matter how frustrated or angry we get. We have to be "on" all of the time. But when we're in our own home, we can do whatever we want and say whatever we want. This can be good because it gives us the space to

unwind. Our homes are places where we can be our true selves. They are places where we should feel accepted and can share our innermost thoughts and feelings.

Yet, there are times when we take advantage of this safety. Many of us find that we are harder on ourselves inside our homes than out of them. We are also harder on each other. Let's say we've had a bad day. We get through it but all of our emotions have been building up. So when we get home, we lash out at our spouses, children, parents, pets, and even friends who happen to call at the wrong time. We verbally attack and criticize each other. Maybe it's because we think that the people closest to us can take it. They have to love us. But this behavior is cruel. It can be dangerous too - such as when this abuse becomes emotional and physical. We are quick to dismiss the idea that domestic abuse takes place in Jewish homes, but it does. In fact, it occurs at the same rate that it does in the general population. We cannot tolerate this. Violence anywhere is unacceptable, especially in our homes which are supposed to be our safe places...which need to be our safe places. In our homes, we must be more aware of the words we use and the way we act.

This is the only way that we can heal the fractures that exist in our homes. Certainly, we all in some way or another have brokenness in our homes. I actually come from what is typically described as a broken home. When I was four years old, my parents got divorced. But they made sacrifices and decided that they would live close to one another and create a joint custody schedule. We spent part of the week with my mom and the other part with my dad. I credit them because they both were able to build homes where my brother and I always felt safe and secure. Since we were only with each parent part of the week, they both made an effort to make sure that the time we spent at home together was quality time. We didn't waste moments. At my mom's house, we would have dinners where the TV was off and we would tell stories and discuss the day. At my dad's house, we would do homework together and play family games of basketball. And the thing I remember about my parents is that they never argued or spoke harshly about each another in our presence, instead they used words that let us know that we were loved. And each, in his and her own way, created a home built on strong Jewish values. I think about the way in which they put aside their pain and pride, and I am grateful. They took what could have been the least stable environment and made it the most secure. Though my parents were divorced, each home was a special place – each home was a *mikdash me'at*.

In the Book of Exodus, God says, "*VeAsu Li Mikdash VeShachanti BeTocham* – They shall make me a sanctuary and I shall dwell among them." As we enter the year 5770, this is our charge. We must make our homes places where everyone who lives in them feels safe and secure, because the most treasured part of a home is the people who live in it. Our homes need to be places of connection and places where love, respect, and patience can be found. Because when we are able to live in this way, our homes will become our sanctuaries. They will be places of wholeness and places of holiness. So that no matter what happens with our economy or what changes come with the wind, our homes will be places where God's presence is found. And then our homes will truly be: shelters against the storm, havens of peace, and strongholds of faith and love. Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be God's will.