

“Home”

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Yom Kippur Morning Sermon

September 21, 2026 - 5787

Put down your bags. We just returned from our trip. We’ve been to one of the highest points on the globe in Kangerlussuaq, Greenland, through the jungles of Costa Rica, and to the museums and memorials of Germany.

And even though we took in some beautiful sights, with everything we learned swirling around in our heads, we’re glad to be back. Dorothy’s mantra from *The Wizard of Oz* keeps running through our minds: (say it with me now) “There’s no place like home.”

But what Dorothy means by those words is that there’s a familiarity about home, a comfort that she falls back into. Even though she has travelled through incredible worlds in technicolor, the black-and-white room of her childhood lulls her back to where she always was and where her future seems certain to be.

Comforting, of course, but not mindful. Saint Augustine said:

“Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.”

What is it all for: these travels, those museums, my sermons? Why travel across the globe only to come back to the same place again?

Rabbi Shefa Gold writes: “The moment when we can step back and marvel at the twists and turns, the synchronicities and blessings that have brought us to the here and now — that is the moment of realization that every step matters. Walking with that kind of awareness, deliberately opening to the grace of each step, enables a vision of the wide perspective of our whole amazing life’s journey.”

The key is to return **Home** transformed – carrying back our experiences with the intention and purpose of embedding their lessons into our familiar landscape, our own selves. We’ve learned about **Humility**, **Wonder**, and **T’shuvah**, but it doesn’t mean anything if we don’t bring those ideas home. If we don’t embed them here.

I’d like you to do something for me: take a look at your hands. Not at your jewelry or your manicure – but at your actual hands. Consider how many things your hands have already done for you just this morning alone: Perhaps they grasped a toothbrush, gently helped you insert your contact lenses. Zipped a zipper, tied a shoe. Drove a car, held a machzor. Patted the back of a friend, wiped a tear. Your hands – you count on them for so much but beyond using lotion or nail polish, you think about them so little.

How many people, places, and things in our lives fall into this category: they are there, we rely on them, we like or even love them, but they are common, everyday experiences. Not out of

malice but simply out of busy-ness, or distraction, or entitlement, we take them for granted without giving them much time or thought very much at all. We forget to be in **Wonder** of them.

Perhaps Temple Menorah has been one of those things.

Some of you here today are first-time visitors. Others of are new members and, like me, are just getting to know this place. Many of you have been here for years or decades – maybe your grandparents or parents were here, or perhaps you are the parents or grandparents yourselves. So many of you have told me, with misty eyes, that Temple Menorah, this place, has been for your family a “second **Home**.”

But for all the times you have been here, how long has it been since you have you really looked at this Sanctuary? Really looked at everything here, really sat in **Wonder** about this place?

On this Yom Kippur day, we’re making the final stop of our journey this very sanctuary.
Temple Menorah. **Home**.

You know that Temple Menorah is eighty years old this year, but do you know its origin story? I’m grateful to our congregant and past-President Mark Reichert, who told me the story about Isaac H. and Anna Grancell. When the Grancells had the idea to create a Jewish community in the South Bay, they wrote an open letter of interest, which brought together 15 families who were ready to make it happen. The year was 1946.

I also relied on the research of South Bay historian and archivist Sam Gnerre, which taught me the details of the Grancells' next moves. They purchased a meeting room in a building on Catalina Avenue, in the former house of the Redondo Beach Odd Fellows fraternity. For 14 years, that space was home to the first Jewish community in the South Bay. Once formed, it sprang into life immediately. In the Fall of 1946, they formed a religious school with 17 students. In the next year came the creation of a Sisterhood and youth groups, as well as the adoption of the moniker Temple Menorah.

But after 14 years, Temple Menorah outgrew the Odd Fellows building. Looking to build their own space, they first purchased a three-acre site in Torrance – but when they learned that the synagogue grounds would be surrounded by a shopping center, they chose not to develop and to keep looking.

Board Member Dr. Sam Farber discovered this lot and wanted the Temple to buy it instead. To convince them, Farber threatened to buy the property and turn it into an investment himself if they didn't. It was a strategic move – the Board felt compelled to buy what was then and is today the highest geographic point in all of Redondo Beach – unable to be surrounded by other development. They sold the Torrance property for \$17,000 – making more on the sale than what buying this property cost.

After raising funds to begin construction, they broke ground in February 1960. Mark Reichert witnessed the whole thing: his family celebrated his first daughter's baby naming at the old location in 1959; the second daughter was named here in 1961.

At that time, what was called Temple Menorah Congregation and Community Center consisted of the now Social Hall, which doubled as the sanctuary and as a basketball court and gymnasium.

Seven or eight years later, Temple Menorah hired a professional fundraiser to build this sanctuary. Dedicated in 1969, it was called the Grancell Sanctuary in honor of the husband and wife who wrote that first letter decades before. A then-member of the congregation, a cabinet maker, worked with his sons to build the Ark (the one that is now in the Garden Room), and these two lecterns to my left and right – and donated them to the congregation.

I know that some of you in this sanctuary remember the opening of our sanctuary. It must have been a day of **Humility** and **Wonder**.

Bring your own sense of **Wonder** with you as I continue the tour, not of some exotic locale on the globe but of **Home**. As familiar as the fingers on your hands, many of you have seen the panels hanging on this wall for years. Have you ever wondered where they come from? What they mean?

I don't know many details about the panel project, but I know that it was headed by Nina Meyer – the same woman who is memorialized on the High Holy Day covers on our Torah scrolls. Sue

Fogelson shared with me that Nina was friends with her mother; she had a home in Manhattan Beach and was a longtime member here; she passed away about 38 years ago. Both Mark and Sue conjecture that Nine-A had a committee of Sisterhood women to help with the sewing, but it's also possible that she took on the entire project herself.

Maybe for the first time ever while sitting in our sanctuary, really study those 11 beautiful panels. Shall I tell you what they say?

The first panel, which depicts the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, cites the Mishnah, Tractate Peah, the Chapter 1, verse 1:

It says,

אלו דברים שאין להם שיעור

which means, “These are the things that have no fixed limit or measure.”

Or, “These are the things that have no definite quantity.”

Then, Tractate Peah goes on to say:

אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פרותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא

These things that Humankind eats these fruits (or tastes these rewards) in this world, their principle, or honor, remains for them in the World to Come.

Another way to translate that is: “Their fruit we eat now; their essence remains for us in the life to come.”

Those are the words that appear on the first panel – reiterating the Knowledge that is rooted in the Tree behind it.

All the next panels depict what the Mishnah tells us are those immeasurable deeds.

The second panel, with the gray tablets of the Ten Commandments in the background, states: “Kivud Av va'Eim – Honoring father and mother.”

The third says: “Ug'milut chasidim – Performing acts of kindness, righteous deeds.” I am going to guess that the three Jewish stars probably allude to the saying, “Al Shlosa Devarim HaOlam Omed” – “On three things the world stands,” the third being the very same g'milut chasidim.

These verses from the Mishnah on the three panels were picked up as a foundational text of the Morning Prayer, first codified in the very first siddur written by Rav Avram around 865 CE. That prayer picks up this pattern from the Mishnah and lists other mitzvot to fulfill in order to reach the World to Come. The rest of that list is depicted in the next panels.

The beige background with the pink letters says, “V'hashkamat beit ha-midrash shacharit v'arvit - To attend the house of study in the morning and evening.”

The brown dwelling with yellow sunbeams above it says, “V’hachnasat orchim - To welcome or be hospitable to the stranger.”

The next one, with the intertwined lines and circles, depicts the map of the sefirot – which we will talk about a bit later. It says, “U’vikkur cholim - To visit the sick.”

Next to that, with the long vertical drape that could be a chuppah or a veil, is the obligation “V’hachnasat kallah - To attend to the bride.”

And the next one, with the sweep of fabric that resembles a burial shroud is, “Ul’vayat ha-met - To attend to the dead.”

The third from the left says: “V’iyyun tefillah – To concentrate on prayer, or to pray with sincerity.”

On the next, the white letters surrounded by doves says, “V’ahavaat Shalom bein Adam la-chavero - To make peace between a person and their fellow.”

And the last of the panels, corresponding with the last line of the prayer, reads: “V’talmud Torah k’neged kulam - And the study of Torah is equal to them all.”

Look back at your hands. Can you detect a little wrinkle, a detail of your knuckle, a little hinge that you never noticed before? Now look back at those panels: the colors, the letters, the

craftsmanship, the messages. Add **Humility** and **Wonder** to the mix. And allow yourself to see your **Home** in a whole new way.

And while you're marveling, take a look to the right of the panels, to the magnificent stained-glass window with the light of Yom Kippur morning streaming through. "Oh, I've looked at that before, Rabbi," you're saying in your head. But do you know its story? Did you know that the reason that window exists is because the plain glass window that was there before started to leak because the wood around it was rotting away?

Seeing that rotting wood, Mark Reichert had an idea. He thought that location in the sanctuary was ideal for a stained-glass window, and he wondered how he could help. Mark had taken only two semesters of classes through Torrance Adult Ed, one learning how to use stained glass, the other to use the equipment. Then, he began to sketch. **Humility**.

Mark's friend, Dr. Diana Wolff, a professor in the education department at Dominguez Hills, was in the hospital. While visiting her there, Mark showed her his drawings of the window panels. Quite moved by the idea, Dr. Wolff donated \$30,000 for the materials needed for Mark to construct the windows. She dedicated them in honor of her parents. Their story is on the wood and brass plaque to the left of the window.

Friends, our own Mark Reichard made that entire stained-glass window. He created 15 panels of stained glass in his own garage. He utilized all the symbols of our tradition that you recognize, the Magen David, the dove, especially resonant today, the shofar. And of course, the Menorah.

He told me that making the Hebrew letters was especially challenging. Mark gave a friend 100 bucks to lend him a special tool for a few months. That tool allowed him to cut out each complicated Hebrew letter individually.

Each panel was its own work of art, but Mark had to figure out a way to tie it all together. Using the motif of the ribbon – like a thread tying together the generations – Mark created a masterpiece of interconnectedness – with the words of Oseh Shalom binding us all together as one. Just look at how the light streams through.

There is **Wonder** in our very own Home. "Don't look beyond the stars," writes Rabbi Arthur Green. "There's no need to stretch your neck. God is right here, filling all of existence with endless bounty. Look around you. Look within."

We have one more stop on our journey through our Sanctuary – this one may be the most important of all. The history of our bimah is fascinating. In his original design of the sanctuary, the architect had shown the entire back wall as as one huge piece of glass, all in one color. to be defined later. But one huge panel of glass was too expensive; the sectioned panels became the more affordable solution. The huge wooden menorah majestically filled up the massive back wall, but after the building was finished, they had no idea how to tie in the Aron. If the Ark had simply stood on the floor, it would have been utterly dwarfed by the gigantic Menorah.

So, they solicited competitive proposals from multiple artists – to create a background, a framework for the Aron. The winning artist came up with a brilliant solution: Notice how our Ark has no support beneath it. It is cantilevered off the Menorah itself - perfectly prominent and beautifully tied in with the other elements.

But now let's talk my favorite part of our beautiful Sanctuary – the magnificent background of the Ark itself. Whether this is your first time here or you have spent decades in this space, I am sure that you have gazed upon these Hebrew letters – this alphabet soup above the Torah.

When I entered this sanctuary for the first time, I thought immediately of the story of the little boy who is in shul with his grandfather. Maybe you've heard this one: The little boy doesn't know the prayers, doesn't know how to daven, just started Hebrew School. He rises for the Amidah and recites the Hebrew alphabet over and over again. When his grandfather asks him what he's doing, he replies, "I don't know what words to say, but I do know the letters. I'm telling them to God, and God will know how to put the letters in the right order."

Now, this might surprise you, but our Bimah is actually NOT an example of letters in a random array. They are all words! Most of the words identify the ten Sefirot - the "emanations" – the attributes of God according to Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism. Remember that panel over here, with the circles and lines interconnecting? That is the map of the Sefirot.

“The Sefirot are the bridge across the abyss, the connective tissue between the infinite God and the finite world,” Jewish scholar David Ariel explains. “They are the link that makes it possible to preserve God’s absolute unity while preserving the relationship between God and man.”

What better background for the Aron HaKodesh than a collection of the characteristics that link us to God, and link God to us?

Let me show you where the Sefirot are placed:

On the very top right corner, you will see three overlapping letters. They say **Keter, or Crown**, which tops the map of the Sefirot as well as lies on our Bimah right next to the first tablet of the Ten Commandments.

Directly under Keter is the word **Chochmah, meaning Wisdom** and under that, **Binah, meaning Understanding**. On our Bimah, as well as on the map of the Sefirot, Wisdom and Understanding - attributes of intellect - come directly under the head or crown.

On the top left, next to the second of the tablets, we read the word **Chesed, meaning Lovingkindness** – is placed on equal level as Keter – implying that all the Wisdom we might gain is empty without using it to bring Chesed into the world.

And on the bottom left is **Tiferet, meaning beauty, harmony, glory**.

Maybe you're feeling a bit like we're doing a Word Search. We are! And now it's time to highlight the words that go across the middle.

Next to the Bet of Binah, we find the word **Netzach, meaning Victory or Endurance**. Next to Netzach is **Hod, meaning splendor**, and next to Hod is **Yesod, meaning foundation**.

On the bottom right, we read the word **Malchut. Meaning majesty** – what Kabbalah identifies as the vessel for carrying forward all the attributes that are above it.

Now, I mentioned that there are ten Sefirot, and so far, I have identified nine on our bimah. Let me go back to the middle left here, where we read the word **Din, which means Judge or Judgment**. This is an unexpected find because Kabbalah's explanation of the Ten Sefirot uses the word Gevurah instead. Gevurah means Strength but also implies Judgment and Discipline. Our Bimah includes Din instead of Gevurah – maybe because of a space constraint, maybe because that particular word had a special meaning to the artist?

Or maybe this little anecdote will shed some light: When the massive, lettered panel first appeared on site, the first Cantor of Temple Menorah, Cantor AvShalom Cohen, found some errors in the Hebrew. They had to be fixed before it was installed. Because the piece is made of fiberglass, they were able to cut out the sections with the errors. Was Gevurah there first but somehow had to become Din?

Let me complicate this further: Scholars of the Ten Sefirot will also notice that there is another word on the Kabbalistic map between Chochmah (Wisdom) and Binah (understanding). That word is Da'at, meaning Knowing or Knowledge, which doesn't appear on our Bimah at all. Maybe, like Gevurah, it had to be trimmed before installation?

Now, I'm no art historian, but I had another thought:

Da'at is spelled Dalet – Ayin – Taf. This word, Din, is spelled Dalet - Yud – Nun Sofit. Is it possible that this Din was originally Da'at – that the word Da'at was actually there, but that cutting off the outer edge, turning the Taf into a Nun (and changing the Ayin to a Yud) is what fixed the Gevruah problem?

I don't know. The truth is lost to history, but it's pretty fun to **Wonder!** And **Wonder** is what it is all about.

There are a few words that I haven't pointed out yet: On the right side of the Ark, right next to the Ner Tamid, it says, "Y'ehi Or" – Let there be light. And on the other side of the Ner Tamid, it responds, "Vayehi Or" – and there was light!

Friends, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches us that:

It takes three things to attain a sense of significant being:

God

A Soul

And a Moment

And the three are always here.

The three are always here.

It's fantastic to travel – to traverse the globe discovering its treasures – both natural and man-made. But we forget that miracles just as magnificent lie in the hinges in our hands, in the faces of our friends, and in the spaces we call **Home**. Heschel said, “Never once in my life did I ask God for success or wisdom or power or fame. I asked for **wonder**, and He gave it to me.”

Heschel gave it to us, and now I give it to you. In the form of one more little nugget to hold in your hand.

Look at the very top of the massive Menorah behind me. You see the three arms of the candelabra on each side with one in the middle. But now re-look at the piece in the middle. It's not the tops of three candles – it's the Hebrew letter SHIN. SHIN is the same letter you see on your mezuzot– standing for Shaddai – the first name in the Torah that God uses to name Godself. But Shaddai is also interpreted as an acronym – for Shomer Delatot Yisrael – the Guardian of the Doorways of Israel.

And of course, SHIN is the first letter of Shalom – peace – the greatest gift that Humanity has received and the greatest gift that we all have to give. Every time you walk into our sanctuary,

your second **Home**, look up to see it: the symbol of God and the sign of peace comes into view as the emblem of - and explanation for - everything we do here.

Unpack your bags. But don't put away your **Humility**, **T'shuvah**, and **Wonder**.

There are reminders of them all around us – here and everywhere - if we just take the time to see them. Welcome **Home**.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah

May we all be sealed for Goodness in the Year to Come