

**Not-a-Sermon:  
This is Not a Box, This is How We Create Home**

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Similar to last year's Erev Rosh Hashanah and Kol Nidre, instead of a formal sermon, I want to offer something a bit different this evening. Tomorrow morning, at McCaw Hall, we will likewise consider Torah in new and different ways. Perhaps to the joy of some, or the disappointment of others, we will offer traditional sermons on Yom Kippur.

Tonight, as we begin the High Holidays, and the year 5783, around the theme of Creating Home Together, I will lead us through a deep dive into this topic. This is not necessarily a sermon, nor truly a meditation, like we did last year. Maybe it is a multi-media teaching, but that sounds complex and heavy, when tonight is meant to be light, and a tad playful, but still thought-provoking. Perhaps this is a deconstruction, or, in fact, more of a construction. You'll see what I mean.

To begin, I want to start with this image. *(picture of a cardboard box)*

What is this? Before you answer, let's take a minute and listen to a 2006 children's book by Antionette Portis,<sup>1</sup> which, among other accolades, won the Theodore Geisel Award, a man better known as Dr. Seuss. Let's watch: *(video of Not a Box by Antionette Portis<sup>2</sup>)*

So, let me ask about this one. What is this? *(picture of a square)*

If my math is decent, this is actual a six foot by six foot square. Or to be more precise, it is four cubits by four cubits. The cubit is a biblical and rabbinic measurement of length, calculated from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow, or roughly eighteen inches. According to the great Medieval sage Maimonides, this is not just any four cubit by four cubit square. This square is the legal minimum amount of space to be considered a house.<sup>3</sup> Quite the diminutive place.

For Maimonides, in addition to size, there are ten total criteria that constitutes a house, including supportive beams, a door, a roof, that the primary occupants are humans (apologizes to our furry friends), and one that is, in Hebrew, dirat kavod. Let's leave that untranslated and return to it later.

Consider again this simple square. Maimonides says that this a house, but we know that it is so much more. A house, a home, is what we create and bring into it. One could see this square as tiny or bare. Yet inspired by the book Not a Box, let's look at it with more creativity and imagination. What could it become? What can you add? Most importantly, from this simple square, how can we create a home? Or more to the point as we welcome in the New Year on this Rosh Hashanah, what can we do to create a Jewish home together?

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<sup>1</sup> Antionette Portis, "Not a Box," HarperCollins, 2006

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svINiELjDao>

<sup>3</sup> Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Tefillin Mezuzah and Torah Scroll, 6:1

Just as there are four sides to a house, let us consider four ways to can add to this image, and create our Jewish home. Fill in from your own home, our collective home, your aspirational home. I ask you to relax a bit and let your mind and imagination be free. Perhaps let your heart take the lead.

The first and most obvious pieces to add to a bare frame are the tangible objects that speak so much about Jewish life and experience: the Shabbat candlesticks and chanukiyot on the mantle, a mezuzah on the doorframe, Jewish books on the shelves (hopefully not fully covered by dust), Hebrew toys and puzzles for the little ones, the family heirlooms passed l'dor vador, from generation to generation. These objects are powerful. They provide shape and form, visual reminders of Jewish identity and engagement. But they are merely the first layer or side in creating a home.

“As the great modernist architect Le Corbusier wrote, “The home is a machine for living. The home is not only a functional machine, it is also the center of our emotional lives and basic human needs. At home we cook, eat, bathe, sleep, and [be together]; we cry, laugh, read, educate, mourn, and celebrate.”<sup>4</sup>

For the second side of the home we are envisioning, we add not just things, but experiences, which further expand the walls around us. In the home we are creating within our minds, and the collective home we sit tonight, add the life cycle moments, both those of joy and those of sorrow. Add the holidays, both the ritual occasions and their family twists, like the maror eating contest at Passover or the off-key singing during Chanukah (both true from my childhood home). Add the recipes: their tastes, their smells, their legacy from generations past, the moments when we cook and bake with those we love. Add the friends and family who remind us that Jewish life is not just events, places, and times, but the relationships and people who breathe life into them.

Two sides in, and what was once four simple lines of simple square has grown and deepened, and we still add more, filling the walls and filling our souls. For the third side of our Jewish home, lean into the creativity that enriches your mind and heart. We add our values, the Jewish and human values that inspire and motivate us. Rabbi Elie Munk, who created many homes across Europe as he fled Nazi advances, taught that a home “is the place where human souls blossom and flourish, where [we] contribute [what we truly are], in order to build... life and forge... [from] it.”<sup>5</sup> Let us enrich our Jewish homes and communities with tzedakah / righteous giving, with tzedek / justice, with hospitality, learning, compassion, and so many more values. Let our values cause our souls to bloom and our world to heal. Let these values not be an after-thought of our Jewish lives and choices but the cornerstones of our homes and our shared path forward.

Finally, the fourth side of the home. We turn to the Chasidic sage, the Slonimer Rebbe, who remind us that we must also “renew our spiritual home.” He adds, “The mission statement of the [Jewish people] is ‘Vayehi or – let there be light.’”<sup>6</sup> We will also explore this concept and verse more tomorrow morning at McCaw Hall. We have added beautiful items, profound memories, and

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<sup>4</sup> Esther Sperber AIA, “The Jewish Home – Sacred Privacy Within Community,” <https://studio-st.com/writings-lectures/the-future-of-the-jewish-home/>

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Katz, “Building a Jewish Home,” <https://torah.org/torah-portion/hamaayan-5761-vayetzei/>

<sup>6</sup> Faustine Sigal, “Hanucca: what is home? From Beit to Beito,” <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/49242.9?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

cherished values, but we are in a spiritual home as well, filled with spiritual radiance. Earlier, I referenced one of Maimonides' criteria for a home to be "dirat kavod," literally "a house of respect." But this term means so much more, as our Jewish home offers so much more. Kavod is honor, splendor, an amazing richness that we lack so often in our daily routines.

What is so unique about being here at Beth Am, in a spiritual community, is that we can delve into the meaning and purpose of our being, our intentions, our existence, truly brightening our lives and the world with brilliant light. Add this to our Jewish homes, or at least open yourself to these bigger questions that we rarely consider honestly. In our chaotic overburdened world, where there are so few places to engage in richness and the depth of life, maybe this is the place where we can create "dirat kavod." Maybe this is the special quality of home that we can find nowhere else. Maybe...

We call our houses, synagogues, and places of learning "mikdash me'at," a small temple, and the Talmud teaches that God will dwell in the holy spaces that we create.<sup>7</sup>

*(picture of a square)* This is not a square. Frankly, this is not a house. This is a place of divine creation. This is an open canvas for us to create, build, innovate, and design a home... our home.

With a little visual inspiration as well as the beautiful music of our own beloved Murl Sanders and Shawn Weaver, over the next few minutes, let's dream, and create together.

Consider the four sides of a house that we have explored together tonight through these four questions:

- What objects adorn your Jewish home?
- What experiences and memories enrich your Jewish home?
- What values guide your Jewish home?
- What deeper meaning and purpose can your Jewish home offer?

First with video, and then with music, let our minds and aspirations soar as we fill that four cubit by four cubit square with all sorts of divine creation. *(video of Animated Box<sup>8</sup>, followed by a slide with the above Four Questions, while Murl and Shawn play underneath)*

On Rosh Hashanah, which celebrates the creation of the world, we begin this new year by creating our Jewish home together. This will be our quest at Temple Beth Am this whole next year. Add to it. Enrich it. Innovate within it. Learn from it. Welcome into it. Bless it with your presence. Share your soul, heart, and mind. Deepen what we create together.

This is not a house. This is a sacred home that I am so honored to share with you.

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<sup>7</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Megilah 29a

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16cXHH2aOt4>