

Beth Chayim Chadashim, LA
Erev RH 5763
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“I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blown your house down”

My family moved to a house in the suburbs when I was 15 months old - in 1953 - when suburbs were just becoming suburbs instead of rural villages outside of big cities. We didn’t call them suburbs - my mother used to say we had moved to the country, but she grew up on the south side of Chicago. My father, who grew up in small town, Iowa, knew better than to call where we were living “the country,” even though back in those days there were still corn fields 10 minutes from where we were living. Now there are huge GAPs in those cornfields - GAP clothing stores I mean, along with Nieman-Marcus, and Crate & Barrels . . . and you get the picture.

My father called where we lived “the village,” I think. There were two old farm houses on our block and all the rest - including the one we moved into - were brand new ones being built for the baby boom families. Between the houses were newly planted shrubbery - no picket fences, no wooden fences, no brick walls, just shrubbery. I spent a good part of my childhood, as I recall, playing in that shrubbery - cutting through to get to my friends who lived on either side, planting tulips in between bushes when I thought to be a gardener, hiding in them - the ones at the far end of the property were thick enough that you could pretend to be lost in the woods and yet be safely in your own backyard where your mother could see you if she looked out the window (which she often did). The shrubbery was nice looking in summer and provided some shade and some privacy between houses, but in winter it shed its leaves and you could easily see into the yards and windows of the houses next door. It didn’t really matter - it’s not like any of us had anything to hide, nor did we worry about danger from our neighbors.

Those early suburbs were not “gated communities” - who needed gates? we’d already managed to isolate ourselves from any so called “scary people” just by moving out of the city. Some of you have heard already that Tracy and I are buying a house - something we were not inclined to do before now. Coming up on our 17th anniversary, I guess we’ve decided it’s time to settle down. What I want to tell you about the house we’re buying (two houses, really, it’s a duplex) is that it has a lot of shrubbery around it. Shrubby tall enough to provide privacy even to the upstairs apartment. Shrubby in LA, though, is different from shrubby in suburban Chicago - this stuff doesn’t lose its leaves - in fact one whole side is actually evergreens.

The real difference though, between our new shrubbery and the shrubbery I grew up with is what's behind it. Our new house is surrounded not just with lush greenery but also by an iron wall that's about 15 feet tall. The driveway is protected by a lovely wrought iron gate that opens with a remote control. The windows have bars - relatively attractive, but bars nonetheless. And even though the front doors are open to the street, I can't help but think that Tracy and I are moving into our own little gated community. And I can't help but think that when our house was first built in 1928, iron was not a major element in the design. I've thought a lot recently about the expression, "good fences make good neighbors." Who here, besides Harriet Perl, knows where this phrase can be found? Yes, a poem by Robert Frost called, "The Mending Wall." And poor Mr. Frost, he so often gets credited with being an advocate of that phrase when in fact it is the antagonist of his narrative poem who uses it. The first person narrator protagonist of the poem takes quite a different view, saying:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.

As you may know, Israel is currently undertaking - though very slowly as it turns out - the building of a fence between the Palestinian cities and towns of the West Bank and Israel, in the hopes of keeping homicidal terrorists out of Israel. Israeli social historian Paul Liptz, who visited with us at BCC in July, said the fence is the least bad of the proposed defenses at the moment. A project that people of differing political views can sort of agree on. Only it turns out that's in theory. The project itself is slow to get off the ground for a number of reasons, not the least of which is how expensive it is to construct (especially with high tech surveillance equipment built in), and how uncertain the Israeli experts are about where it should be constructed. It turns out that the Gaza Strip is easier to fence, in which may be why the terrorists have been entering from the West Bank and not Gaza. *{info on Israel and the wall comes primarily from three articles: "HOW DESPAIR IS TRANSFORMING ISRAEL "The Wall by Yossi Klein Halevi, Post date 06.26.02 Issue date 07.08.02 [The NewRepublic] "Do good fences really make good neighbors?"}*

In Robert Frost's poem, there is no mention of a gate in their stone fence. Although gaps appear every once in awhile (and not the retail kind that grew up in the cornfields of my youth). Listen to the beginning of Frost's poem:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall, 1
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, 2
And spills the upper boulders in the sun; 3
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. 4
. . . . The gaps I mean, 9
No one has seen them made or heard them made, 10
But at spring mending-time we find them there.

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” says Frost’s narrator twice in the poem - each time the “Something” is at the beginning of the line where it is automatically capitalized anyway, and the narrator is non-committal about who or what the “Something” is. “I could say ‘elves,’” he jokes to himself, ‘but it’s not elves exactly.” [line 35-36] Of course, it may not surprise you all to know that I think Frost’s “Something” with a capital “S” is God: “...Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, That wants it down.”

There’s another kind of fence or wall that’s currently under construction in our own city. You may have heard about, or seen, the eruv that the Orthodox Jewish community is building around Los Angeles. {By Reuven Koret, August 20, 2001 publisher of israelinsider & CEO of Koret Communications. [who, like me, and no doubt others, found Frost’s poem irresistible as means to speak our thoughts]. And “West Bank wall spurs divisions Some call barrier blueprint for border” By Charles A. Radin, Globe Staff, page A1 of the Boston Globe 9/3/2002. Info on LA eruv comes from “The Largest Eruv in the World” By Julie Gruenbaum Fax in LA Jewish Journal, 7/5/02. I edited some sentences for clarity here, but the editing does not change the meaning.} Upon completion it’s going to be the largest eruv in the world. An eruv, by the way, is a visible border that “demarcates an area that can be considered a private domain, thus allowing observant Jews to carry or push items necessary for Shabbat, such as a stroller, a wheelchair or medication. A temporary new eruv in the Pico-Robertson area has already freed many who were homebound on Shabbat,” I read in a recent Jewish Journal article.

According to one of the Rabbis [Yitzchok Summers of Anshe Emes] in the Pico-Robertson area [not me, by the way]: "The difference is huge. There are many more women and children coming to shul now. My youth director is a lot busier." Another said, "I believe that an eruv is a unifying element within a community," [May said,] pointing out that the word "eruv" comes from a root meaning "to mix." There is nothing more unifying than to have people of all shades and stripes of Orthodoxy being able to walk on the street on Shabbos and to greet each other or share a simcha," he said.

After a seven-year process, planners have just received all the permits and signatures necessary to begin construction on the citywide eruv, which will encompass an 80-square-mile area bordered by the 10 Freeway to the south, the 405 Freeway on the west, the 101 (Ventura and Hollywood freeways) on the north, connecting back to the 10 Freeway via Western Avenue.

. . .

The new eruv. . . is unique among urban eruvs in that it is made up primarily of actual walls, not wire strung from pole to pole. The population density of Los Angeles and the number of people who might pass through the eruv made it imperative, some rabbis believe, to have the eruv made up of solid walls.

Two local Orthodox men “conceived of the new eruv about seven years ago when they realized that Los Angeles had many walls already constructed -- the freeway sound-proofing walls, chain-link fences around the freeways or freeway embankments and mountains (which for halachic purposes are also considered walls).

Those walls will be connected using the standard eruv method of stringing heavy fishing line between poles -- either by modifying existing streetlights or constructing about 100 poles for the eruv. A rabbi from the Chasidic community will check the perimeter every week, to make sure the wires are all intact. ...the large eruv will cost about \$250,000 to erect... The smaller Pico-Robertson eruv cost \$35,000 to put up.

Four local members of these Orthodox communities “spent countless hours on the bureaucracy and logistics of setting up the eruv. Lawyers had to assure city, state and federal authorities at each stage that church/state issues were not infringed.

Individual owners had to assent to having wire strung across their property. Caltrans, the Federal Highway Administration, the Bureau of Street Lighting and the departments of Public Works, Fire and Rescue, Building and Safety and others, all had to OK segments of the project.”

Whew, it’s really something.

Interesting how some fences - like the one in Israel— are intended to keep people apart, and some, like the eruv, to keep people together. On the one hand, I respect and admire the Orthodox Jews with the tenacity to go after something that will strengthen their community. Part of me thinks what they’re creating is really cool. I certainly know what it means to study texts and teachings so intently, and to try to honor what I learn from those texts, and come up with real life doable solutions to dilemmas. And I also like the result that all those women and children are out and about and active. But then I think about how the apparent lack of fishing line kept those women and children homebound on Shabbat all these years, preventing their presence even in synagogue or in their community of friends. And besides thinking this is why I am not an Orthodox Jew, I think, could this really be what God wanted from us? An eruv needs to be checked each week before Shabbat to make certain no breaks have happened - apparently unexplained breaks appear quite frequently.

I think again of Frost’s poem:

“The gaps I mean,

No one has seen them made or heard them made...”

“...Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, That wants it down.”

One of the questions with Israel’s fence is whether it only keeps homicide bombers and terrorists out of Israel, or whether Israelis - soldiers in particular -

can cross out of Israel to the other side and for what purposes. “Unilateral separation,” this kind of fencing is called. Israel sees it as self-defense, but one major concern raised by all sides of the political spectrum is whether terrorists will see it as victory -- the successful isolation of Israel from the rest of the world, with Israel footing the bill. Who’s being fenced in and who’s being fenced out?

“Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out...”

Our journalists and researchers are saying that since 9/11, Americans have been doing a lot more nesting. . . and wall building. As a nation we seem to have lost our wanderlust, and the trouble the travel industry is in suggests the truth of that. Are we, as a nation and as individuals entering a new era of “unilateral separation”? And if so, is it our choice of how to live, or is it the terrorists winning by isolating each of us from the rest of us? I don’t doubt for a minute that Tracy and my purchase stems at least in part from that sense of wanting to hunker down somewhere safe. “One’s home is one’s castle” - but what do you picture when you picture a castle? Guard towers perhaps, and high stone walls, and moats?

As I mentioned a few moments ago, all this talk of fences and walls ought to get us thinking about gates too - how one gets from one side of the wall to the other, or if one gets from one side to the other, and who gets to go from one side to the other, and who wants to go to the other side. The eruv, of course, needs no gates - it’s purpose is to keep everybody happily inside, never leaving the area that is walled in. It reminds me of the long-standing question about ghettos and which came first: did the non-Jews wall us in against our will, or did we Jews initially wall them out?

One of my Jewish history teachers taught that during the period of Jewish Enlightenment of the 18th century, when the governments of Europe opened the gates of the ghettos, the Jews did not just walk through them to the other side . . . they ran through them. {*Rabbi David Ellenson, “Modern Jewish Thought” HUC-JIR, LA*} We speak of this time of year - the Days of Awe - as a time when gates are opening...and closing. Neilah, the last service on Yom Kippur day, means “locking,” and refers to that image of the gates closing. But what gates are they? Oral folk tradition tells us that the Temple in Jerusalem had an enormous gate that opened into the Temple court. When it swung closed at the end of Yom Kippur, they say it could be heard as far away as Jericho. {*See Gates of Understanding 2, Lawrence Hoffman, CCAR Press, p. 149.*}

The gates of the Jewish quarters long ago, in the Bible and in the Talmud, were for Jews a place of meeting, where the elders and judges gathered to pass judgment on the cases brought before them. And Jewish homes must long ago

have had fences and gates, for think of one of our most familiar prayers -- the v'ahavta -- found in the Torah itself, and posted still on the doorway into every Jewish home. The end of the 1st paragraph reads: uktavtam al mezuzot betecha u'VISHARECHA write them on the doorposts of your house, and UPON YOUR GATES. In the Tibetan and Buddhist and Taoist religions, this exact time of year (the 7th lunar month of the year), is called Ghost Month, and it is said that the "Gates of Hades" open for the month and the souls of the dead can return for a month to the world of the living. Interesting how among the many customs of Jews during this month are visits to graves of our loved ones, two Yizkor services this month, and at Sukkot, the ushpizin - we invite our ancestors to join us in the Sukkah. What gates are we opening by these customs? what boundaries are we crossing? are we encouraged to cross, for just a little while? In Jewish tradition the gates of heaven - sha'arei shamyim -- are said to be always open to us, and especially so this time of year, when the gates of our hearts are open to one another and to God. [Jeffrey Cohen, Prayer and Penitence, p. 262]

I suppose as walls and fences go in our lives there are two key ones: our Jewish one is the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, and our queer one is Stonewall, the Greenwich Village club where gay liberation ignited 33 years ago, and led to every freedom we enjoy today. At "Stonewall" more than a few walls were knocked down, and boundaries broken through. The Wailing Wall (or Kotel) was the foundation wall of the Temple in Jerusalem, and has for centuries now been the site where Jews, religious and not, weep and offer prayers to God. It is the site too of sometimes violent conflict between ultra-Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews, between Jewish men and Jewish women, between Muslims and Jews. I think about the beautiful stonewalls in the stained glass windows back at BCC - symbol of Kotel and Stonewall both. The wordless glass rainbow prayers stuck into those glass stones by our own BCC artists speak to us as they catch the light of day or the reflections of the headlights from the cars passing by at night. Pitchu li sha'arei tzedek we sang at the beginning of tonight's service from the Book of Psalms - open for me the gates of justice, that I may enter and give thanks to God. And the verse that follows - zeh ha-sha'ar l'Adonai: this is the gateway to God, presumably meaning that tzedek - justice, righteousness - is the gateway to God [Psalm 118:19-20].

In the middle of Frost's poem the narrator talks about the trees on each side of the fence, saying of his neighbor:

"He is all pine and I am apple orchard." line 24

I read in a commentary on this poem that coniferous trees like pines often live in isolation because they harm the soil and endanger nearby plants, while apple trees are often found near other trees because their roots nourish the soil creating a better living environment for the trees around them. I wonder about the evergreens on the border of Tracy's and my new house - what message are we sending? perhaps we should plant apple trees instead. In the Boston Globe this week there was yet another article on Israel's fence. It describes the

intimidating “coils of the razor-sharp wire,” filling a deep trench on the property of an Armenian church, and reports that “about 300 of the [Armenian] church's 1,900 olive trees have been bulldozed to create the right-of-way.” {“*West Bank wall spurs divisions, Some call barrier blueprint for border*” By Charles A. Radin, *Globe Staff*, page A1 of the *Boston Globe* 9/3/2002. I rearranged the order of some sentences for clarity here, but the rearranging does not change the meaning.} I thought about those olive trees, and the famous olive branch that Noah’s dove brought back from its journey out into the new world after the flood, making the olive branch ever after a symbol of peace. Perhaps Tracy and I will take out the evergreens and plant olive trees instead.

Is there a difference I wonder since 9/11 or is it just more of the same? Hasn’t life always been a search for security in an insecure world? For Jews it has, and for queers certainly. 30 years ago, at BCC’s first Rosh Hashanah service, they lit 12 candles before kaddish, one for each of the 11 Israeli Olympic athletes just murdered in Munich, and 1 for people everywhere who had died from “man’s inhumanity to man.” This week saw another vicious gay hate crime in our supposedly safe haven -- West Hollywood. We pray for the recovery of Treve Broudy (and his friend Edward Lett). I remember my mother, zikhrona livracha, saying to me when I came out: you’re already a woman and a Jew, why do you want to take on more trouble? And a few years later, when Tracy told my mother she was going to become a Jew...you can guess her response: you’re already a lesbian and a woman, why take on more trouble?

Our longing for security often takes an ironic form: a razor wire fence to keep out human bombs so that Israelis might once again move freely; an eruv of solid walls - no gaps allowed—so that Orthodox Jews might mix with one another; a lovely house complete with handsome iron gate and isolationist evergreens—a place you could invite guests. All three an odd blend of “unilateral separation” and an invitation “to mix.”

Even though this has been a year of retreat inside, of hunkering down, of fear of strangers, can you feel that the purpose of this time of year, these Days of Awe, is just the opposite? That these days are intended to be a time when we let down our defenses and open up our gates? These ten days are not intended as a time “to walk the fence” in order to mend its gaps, but to widen them.

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, That wants it down,” says our poet.

Beginning tonight, and all during the Days of Awe right through Sukkot and Simchat Torah is the time to leave those gaps so wide that two can pass through side by side. [see line 4 of Frost]

Walls with gaps in them, porous boundaries, gates wide open.

This is what this time is - these Days of Awe - with their opening of the gates (and eventual closing of them), with the opening of hearts, with our confessions and amends and resolves to be better people, to make different mistakes next year, rather than the same ones over and over again.

We cross boundaries in these Days of Awe through our communal confessions - not only confessing our own sins, and asking forgiveness, but trying on one another's sins simply by proclaiming them all aloud, and asking forgiveness for us all. We take down our walls of defense by turning within to examine our souls, our wants and desires, our failures and successes. We break down walls of isolation and "unilateral separation" by turning outward to one another and to God. In these Days of Awe, we cross borders to other worlds, by intently and intentionally remembering our dead - and the history of our people.

On Rosh Hashanah, our Torah texts remind us of other boundaries built up long ago, of how Jews and Muslims, both fathered by Abraham though differently mothered, moved along very different paths even though both were in covenant with the same God. Walls dismantled, boundaries stretched, borders crossed, defenses down, gates open - these Days of Awe are a time to listen to each other speaking from the heart, a time to hear God's voice, a time to let God hear our true prayers.

May we find the ways to open all our gates wide these Days of Awe, and may we walk in and out of them together, hand in hand.
Shanah tovah u'metukah May it be a good year, a sweet year. Shanah Shalom a year of peace.

"The Mending Wall" By Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall, 1
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, 2
And spills the upper boulders in the sun; 3
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. 4
The work of hunters is another thing: 5
I have come after them and made repair 6
Where they have left not one stone on a stone, 7
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding, 8
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean, 9
No one has seen them made or heard them made, 10
But at spring mending-time we find them there. 11
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill; 12
And on a day we meet to walk the line 13
And set the wall between us once again. 14
We keep the wall between us as we go. 15
To each the boulders that have fallen to each. 16
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls 17
We have to use a spell to make them balance: 18

"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!" 19
We wear our fingers rough with handling them. 20
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game, 21
One on a side. It comes to little more: 22
There where it is we do not need the wall: 23
He is all pine and I am apple orchard. 24
My apple trees will never get across 25
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him. 26
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors." 27
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder 28
If I could put a notion in his head: 29
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it 30
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows. 31
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know 32
What I was walling in or walling out, 33
And to whom I was like to give offense. 34
Something there is that doesn't love a wall, 35
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him, 36
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather 37
He said it for himself. I see him there 38
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top 39
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed. 40
He moves in darkness as it seems to me, 41
Not of woods only and the shade of trees. 42
He will not go behind his father's saying, 43
And he likes having thought of it so well 44
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors." 45

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