

The Making of a Jewish Home

Rabbi Ephraim Nissenbaum, yud aleph shevat, 12/20/16

Rabbi Nissenbaum began by explaining, what makes a house into a home? A house and a home are not one and the same. Rabbi Nissenbaum told over the story of a couple living in Eretz Yisroel who after a few years, were not making ends meet in Eretz Yisroel and moved to England. There they lived in a dilapidated home. The father was a maggid shiur. After a few years, he wanted to fix his home but his wife did not agree. He was surprised and asked her why not?

She replied, “We don’t want to lose focus on our goal to move back to Eretz Yisroel. If we fix our house, we may lose our focus.”

So what personifies a Jewish home? Rabbi Nissenbaum brought down a few points:

The first thing is the mezuzah on the doorpost. It seems like such a simple mitzvah but yet it is quite profound. What does it really represent? When a person enters a house, and sees the mezuzah on the doorpost, what that means is Hashem is here. Hashem is in this house and we acknowledge his presence. It is a recognition that we are not by ourselves. How do we conduct ourselves when we think no one is watching us, and how do we conduct ourselves when we know we are being observed. The mezuzah reminds us, “we are being observed.”

The second point is the following: in most homes the most important thing in the home is displayed in the living room. In a non-religious house you will usually find besides, the chairs, the coffee table, the sofa-there will be a huge television set. Because in those homes, the TV is the most important thing. In a Jewish home, you are most likely not going to find a television set and you will find a bookcase with a lot of Jewish seforim in it. So as soon as you walk into someone’s home, you know instantly what is important in this home. Additionally, as Rabbi Avigdor Miller said, seforim serve as a reminder of what is important in our lives.

Rabbi Elya Meir Block, the Rosh Yeshiva of Telz Cleveland was niftar in 1954. In those days, television was nothing like it is today, but yet he was very opposed to it. Someone once asked the Rosh Yeshiva, why he was so against television. He answered, ‘when Yidden lived in Europe, in the shtetl, there were challenges, life was not easy, but the atmosphere in the village was conducive to Jewish life. In America, there are wide open spaces, melting pot mentality which run counter to the ideals of a Jewish home. In America, it is difficult not to be assaulted by all that surrounds us. What is supposed to happen is, a Yid is supposed to come into his home, which is supposed to be a safe haven for him and his family to get away from society’s influences, but explained the Rosh Yeshiva if one has a TV in his home, he is bringing the outside in and his home is no longer protected.’

In Gemara Avoda Zora, there is a story about Unkilos, who was the nephew of the Roman General, Titus, who destroyed the Bais HaMikdash. Unkilos came to his ‘wise’ uncle and told him, he is looking for good business advice. Titus answered, ‘find something cheap that is not popular now, and purchase it. Hold on to it and you will see with time, it will go up in value and price.’

The next thing Titus finds out is that his nephew was megayer and was sitting in the Beis Medrash learning. He sent a legion of Roman soldiers to get him and bring him back to Rome. They come to the Beis Medrash, find Unkilos learning and tell him he has to go with them. He agrees, but first, he tells them a whole Gemara discourse. They were so impressed that they all stayed and became Jewish.

Titus sends a second delegation and tells them not to talk to Unkilos.' He is a savvy speaker, he will influence you as he influenced the others, so do not engage in conversation with him, just take him and bring him back.' Unkilos is prepared to come with them, but he says, let me just tell you this really short vort, which he does and they also stay behind and become Jewish.

Titus sends the third delegation with the same message. They listen, they don't let Unkilos talk to them and as Unkilos is leaving the room he stops to kiss the mezuzah. "Why did you do that?" they ask him. And he answers, 'in a King's palace, the King is inside the palace and the guard is outside the palace. But by the Jews it is different. We are inside the palace and the King is outside the palace guarding us, the people.' These guards also stayed behind.

So the mezuzah is on our doorpost reminding us that Hashem is standing guard and we appreciate that. For those who internalize this message, this is a real message of emuna that the divine presence is there.

Another ingredient of making a house into a home is learned from the placement of the mezuzah, Rashi and Tosfos are in disagreement. The way we place the mezuzah is a compromise from their two positions. So we see that if we keep to halachic guidelines, there is room for compromise. This concept of 'compromise' is such an important component of making a house into a home. Hashem only rests his shechina where there is shalom and in order to gain shalom, we need to be able to compromise within our families.

There is a great comparison between Hashem's house, the Mishkan, the BAis HaMikdash and our homes. Just as the Kohan Godal announced his presence by the bells on the bottom of his 'me'il, so too we are told that we must knock on the doors of our homes before we enter to announce our presence. What is the connection between our homes and Hashem's home? The answer is our homes are meant to be a microcosm of the Bais HaMikdash, of Hashem's home. The Seforno explains that the utensils used in the Mishkan are comparable to the basic utensils in the home, namely the Kior, the Aron, the Shulcan and the Menorah. Again we see from here, that we model our home after Hashem's home.

Another important component on making a house into a home is learned from Avrohom Aveinu. The concept of hachnosos orchim-having guests. We know he had a tent with 4 sides open, so no matter from which direction one was coming, there would be an opening. Rabbi Nissenbaum explained how the letter 'bais' which also happens to mean 'bayis' a home looks like a house. It a roof, a floor one closed side and one open side, so the guests can always enter.

The posuk says, "I'gadale kelev ra b'vaso' that a person cannot have a bad dog in his house. Why not? So as not to scare away the guests. And the posuk doesn't even mean a 'bad dog' even a barking dog, a person shouldn't have because that too will scare away the guests and that is not a Jewish home.

The last component Rabbi Nissenbaum mentioned is the concept of 'simcha' –happiness. A Jewish house has to radiate with simcha, it has to be a place where everyone feels welcomed and is comfortable. Simcha transfers a house into a home.

Rabbi Nissenbaum told over a beautiful story about Rav Elchonon Wasserman, one of the big rabbonim of prewar Europe. He went to the home of a very rich man, Mr. Denis and he wanted to ask him for a donation for the yeshiva. Mr. Denis was a big baal tzedaka and was also only too happy to help out. It was a rainy day, and the ground was muddy. Rav Wasserman did not want to enter through the front door and muddy the beautiful carpet laying there. So instead, he knocked on the kitchen door, the servant opened the door and let him in. She then went to call Mr. Denis. When Mr. Denis entered the kitchen, he was so upset to see such an important Rav in his kitchen and he asked Rav Wasserman, why are you in my kitchen? To which Rav Wasserman answered, "I did not want to come through the front and dirty your expensive carpet." To which Mr. Denis answered, him, "Rabbi, you are ruining everything I have ever tried to teach my children, as to what is important in life and what isn't. " Rav Wasserman asked him to explain further. And he answered, "I also tell them that we have been blessed by Hashem that we have all these materialistic things. I teach them that even though they are beautiful and we are lucky to have them, the most important thing in our lives is the Torah. Rabbi, by you not wanting to dirty my carpets, you are teaching them exactly the opposite-that the carpets are more important than the Torah.' With that he asked Rav Wasserman to go outside back to the front door and enter through the front door and to please dirty the expensive carpet.

What a life-lesson for us all! We have to remember that our homes are given to us to share with others, to share with our guests, to make our homes welcoming places where we share the mitzvos, where we share Shabbos with them. All the points combined make a house into a home, where Hashem will want to rest his shechina.