

It's Only a House – Rabbi Zoë Klein

Not long ago,  
Watching CNN,  
The coverage of AIG bonuses  
Panels on the economics of greed,  
Confessions of culture of shopaholics,  
There followed a segment of advice  
To the average viewer  
About how to protect your financial future,  
Including reasons why not to dip into  
One's 401k,  
Protecting what's left of your pension,  
And at some point in the segment,  
The newscaster said,  
“And if you can't afford your house,  
If your house costs you too much,  
Just get rid of it.  
Unload it.  
It's only a house.”

My mind kept repeating that,  
It's only a house...  
Can one really say that?  
Can one really consider  
The floor to ceiling bookshelves  
Crowded with books, fragments and photographs,  
The cluttered desk stuffed with ceaseless scribblings,  
Kitchen cabinets stocked with a variety of  
Favorite foods,  
All the sweet,  
All the savory  
that have come out of the oven,  
Whistling kettles,  
The mezuzah on the doorpost of the bedroom  
A flannel plaid shirt  
Trying to escape a half-open closet,  
Children's bath toys on the rim of a turn-of-the-century tub,  
The place on the floor where paint had accidentally gotten kicked over,  
Garden run amuck with hydrangea and lavender,

A Frisbee tangled in the wild rosemary,  
All the dents and dings,  
Broken springs,  
Heirlooms on the mantel,  
The blast of steam of the laundry when the dryer is opened,  
The blast of steam of dishes when the dishwasher is opened,  
The blast of heat off a cup of cocoa  
When shivering in a blanket with an H1N1 fever...  
Kisses at the front door, hello,  
Goodbye,  
can you really say,  
It's only a house?

Playing house in childhood,  
Thumbing house and garden magazines,  
Going voyeuristically to open-houses...  
With giant silver double-doored,  
Freezer on the bottom  
Ice and water dispensing refrigerators  
That open  
like an arks of the covenant,  
You see these things,  
Imagine these things,  
Dream these things,  
And you want these things  
And you're ready to sacrifice anything for these things,  
It's only a house.  
Is it?  
Is a house to a person  
What a nest is to a bird  
What a web is to a spider,  
Or is it a far more complex,  
Chronicle of memories  
A security not only from rain and thunder  
But from that feeling of being lesser.

It's only a house,  
Can you really say that?  
**And then comes flood.**  
Desperate souls

Standing on their rooftops  
Waving frantic to helicopters, boats,  
For rescue,  
To not be washed away  
With their house...  
The couple in Georgia last week  
Who leapt out of their home  
Into the once gentle stream which had swollen into a raging river  
Just before their house exploded  
With the force of the flood,  
They leapt out of their home each holding a child,  
Struggling to latch their legs around trees  
And not let go,  
But the water swept away their two-year-old,  
And at that moment,  
Who *cares, who cares*, about a house...

And the family who was not home,  
When the tsunami struck,  
When the levees broke,  
When the earth quaked,  
Reunited in each other's arms,  
Alive,  
Standing amidst the lumber and timber and all that's left,  
It's only a house,  
It's only a house.

**And then come wildfires,**  
And hundreds of California houses up in flame,  
Line of fire descending the mountains,  
My husband rushed to Granada hills to evacuate his parents this year,  
"What are you going to take out of the house,"  
I asked him as he went out the door.  
The answer is simple, obvious, of course,  
"My parents. What else is there?"  
Yes, you can say, it's only a house, and stuff in a house  
When flood, fire, disaster knock out the foundation...

**And then comes illness...**  
Long-term illness,

And house is not just haven  
But infirmary,  
And who wouldn't give it all away,  
All the stuff we cling to,  
Who wouldn't shed it all  
For wellness,  
If such a trade were possible...  
This is your life, and it's only a house...

**And then comes aging...**

And the inability to manage a house.  
For the frail elderly, even a humble home  
Begins to make relentless, impossible demands,  
Sapping precious energy,  
Draining the pennies,  
An unbearable yoke.

Nearly every one of us,  
If we are lucky enough to live so long,  
Will give up our homes one day...  
One of the many prices for longevity.  
And we convince ourselves that that won't happen to us,  
Could not happen to us,  
But likelihood says differently,  
That there will be a time  
When our children may say to us,  
"Mom, Dad,  
It's only a house,  
It's you we care about..."

Flood, Fire, Disaster, Illness, Aging,  
It's only a house  
But can you say, it's only a house,  
When the thief is financial,  
When it's money that messes up your dreams...

This past November there was a 12 step program created  
Called "Dating a Banker Anonymous"  
To help women cope with the  
Relationship fallout from the collapse of Lehman Brothers.

The group meets once or twice a month.  
Members offer support,  
for the women who have found their partners preoccupied with bills,  
no money for the spa, Bergdorf or bottle service.

One member of “Dating a Banker Anonymous”  
said the downward-trending graphs began to make sense  
when the man she married,  
a 28-year old private wealth manager stopped playing golf.  
She said,  
“One of his best friends told me that my job  
is now to keep him calm and keep him from dying at the age of 35.  
This is not what I signed up for.”

What did you sign up for?  
Did you marry a house,  
Or a human being?  
Did you marry an unlimited credit card,  
Or a mysterious magnificent searching soul?

As Jews, we are all descendants of a nation of wanderers.

Our Torah is filled with stories of displacement, of exile.  
From the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden,  
to the long wandering of the Israelites in the desert.  
Our painful history has enforced  
Our sense of displacement.

For this reason the idea of home has captured our imagination,  
informed our theology,  
politics and artistic expressions.<sup>1</sup>

We are a people whose ancestors  
literally built a house for God  
in the form of the first and second Temples...  
and then that home was violently destroyed  
and we found ourselves redefining the place where God lived,  
learning to live as a people without a land to call our home.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Deborah Glantzberg

How did we survive it?  
What does our own tradition teach us about home?

The huppah, under which a couple commits  
To creating a home,  
Is itself portable.  
The sukkah  
Is a portable home.  
Throughout the desert  
We devotedly set up the Tabernacle,  
The portable sanctuary.  
Torah itself is a portable homeland,  
A home that isn't a house.

Our people are masters of the home that isn't a house.  
Right now, our historic sense of displacement  
Is shared by most Americans.  
Nearly half of us will leave our houses  
In the next five years.  
Forty percent of Americans  
expect to move in that time.  
Many of our congregants are selling their homes,  
Whether because of changing financial circumstances,  
Or to rent an apartment  
Closer to a public school they prefer...

Our lives are increasingly shaped by temporariness:  
temporary homes, jobs and schools.  
It is an era of radical mobility.

In the book: *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life*  
It is argued:  
“destruction of a sense of place  
has transformed America  
into a country of exiles.  
Failure to remember the past  
and protect a place creates

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Deborah Glantzberg

Americans who lack individualism...  
We're transients,  
moving along superhighways..."

Everything is temporary,  
there is no loyalty to place, or each other.

But Jews have been the masters of the portable ground...  
Of the home that is not a house...  
The problem is that we've forgotten what we once knew...

We, whose entire story  
Has been about searching for a home,  
Whose tradition tells us to open our front doors  
And say, "All who are hungry come and eat,"  
We, whose founding father Abraham  
Had a tent with doors on every side  
To bring in the lost,  
We have also been guilty of keeping our doors closed.

We have been guilty of forgetting that  
Low-income housing  
In my backyard  
Helps communities,  
Regulates the value of our houses  
So that our children and grandchildren can afford them one day.  
Helps communities in that  
Diversity teaches,  
Different cultures layered  
And sumptuously textured,  
And when you grow,  
I grow,  
And it is a mistake  
To think that the farther I keep the other  
From my house,  
Gated in his or her ghetto  
The safer I am,  
Because in doing so  
I've contributed to a churning of poverty and need  
And crime –

Over 10,000 children are homeless  
on any given night in LA County,  
Many of the Westside.  
It's only a house,  
But you can't have one.

We were once masters of home,  
Now we are masters of home-design.

But what a home MEANS  
Is not marble, cobblestone,  
granite.  
It is not defined by what is mined or milled,  
But by what is drawn up from the well of the self,  
It is love.  
It is tenderness.  
M. Scott Peck wrote  
That love is an action that promotes the growth of your beloved.

Love is not a feeling. Love is an action. – M. Scott Peck

Love is when we extend ourselves to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth. Love is an action. The most important action you can take is to give someone your attention.

Love is an action.

The most important action is to give someone your attention.

And the most important way to give someone your attention is to listen to them.

Love is an action.

The most important action is to give someone your attention.

The best way we give someone our attention is to listen to them.

Love is as love does.  
The most important thing to give to your family

*Love* is an action.

The most important action is to *give* someone *your attention*.

The best way we give someone our attention is to *listen* to them.

Is love,  
And the main way we show love is through giving our attention.  
And the main way we give each other attention is through listening.

*Love*

*give*      *your attention*

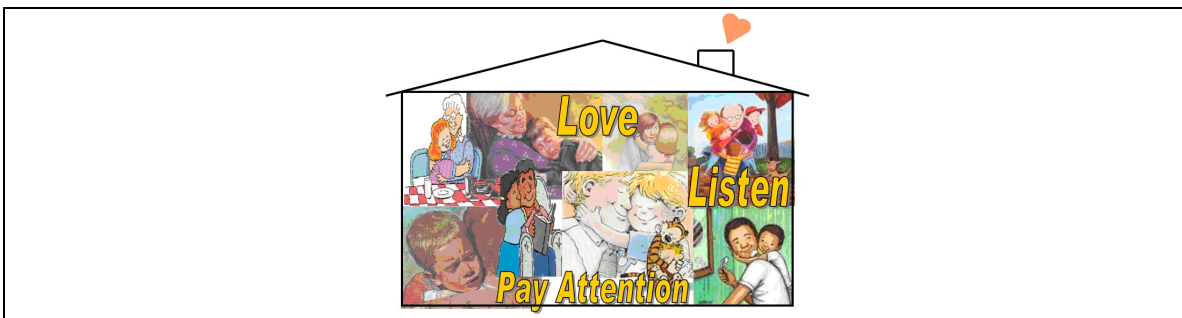
*listen*

I once heard a rabbi's sermon  
That made me so sick,  
It made me so angry,  
I could not stop thinking about it,  
Why? Because he was talking to me,  
He was talking about me.  
And I didn't want to hear it.  
But it gnawed at me because I had to hear it.  
I asked him for a copy.  
He called the sermon "Reality,"  
And deep inside, I knew it was...

Rabbi Feinstein said:

"It is a myth that we can have it all,

without making choices:  
we can pursue our careers  
and at the same time, raise happy, well-adjusted children.  
Without ever facing a conflict,  
or bumping against the limits on our time, or our energy.  
For a long time, the myth was called “Quality Time” –  
as long as the time you spent together was really good time,  
it didn’t matter how much time you spent.  
But it’s a myth:  
What if you fed a child 100 calories a day...  
but really quality calories...  
what would happen?  
Your child will starve.  
And that’s what happens when parents impose a strict diet  
of quality time on children.  
Children starve – for love, for attention, for limits, for guidance, they starve.  
Of course, you can have a career and have wonderful children.  
Of course, you can pursue personal goals,  
professional goals, and have a lovely family.  
We all do. But there are always choices,  
difficult, painful choices to be made, every single day.  
You can, (he said) I believe, be good at what you do professionally,  
and be a good parent.  
You can be a good doctor, a good lawyer,  
a good executive, a good rabbi...and be a good parent.  
But if we choose to be great at what we do...  
then there is a price to pay...  
and our children pay the price.  
That’s reality.”



What to do about it?

If the essence of a home is love  
And the essence of love is attention  
And the essence of attention is listening  
And listening takes *time*  
And almost every adult is now in the paid labor force,  
and the average person works 163 more hours a year than he did 20 years  
ago—  
a whole month stolen from their families for both Mom and Dad...

What do we do about it?  
People make time to build up their houses.  
To fix their curb-side appeal...  
Everyone empathizes how long construction takes,  
How much time is spent correcting mistakes,  
Waiting for the tiles to be shipped.

We take the time to build up the walls,  
But we need to take the time  
To hang around inside them, and do nothing.  
And this is the wisdom Judaism gained  
In all its search for home...  
Through centuries of displacement...  
We have a word for it,  
The word is Shabbat.  
One day when you are liberated to love,  
To be attentive,  
To listen.  
“It is about time spent both at synagogue and home,  
and about saying that we will not let our work life  
consume what rightfully belongs to spouses and children and friends.”<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote in his book: *When All You've Ever Wanted Is Not Enough*: “Ask the average person which is more important to him (or her), making money or being devoted to his family, and virtually everyone will answer family without hesitation. But watch how the average person actually lives out his life. See where he really invests his time and energy, and he will give away the fact

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Yoffie

that he does not really live by what he says he believes.  
He has let himself be persuaded  
that if he leaves for work earlier in the morning  
and comes home more tired at night,  
he is proving how devoted he is to his family  
by expending himself to provide them  
with all of the things that they have seen advertised.”

In the Talmud, we read the following: Why are people like weasels? A weasel spends life darting about, gathering things, and knows not for what purpose. So it is with people. <sup>4</sup>

My colleague Rabbi Timoner said:

“The more things we bring into the private sphere, behind our walls and fences, the more we have to take care of those things. The bigger our homes, the larger our land, the greater our possessions, the more we are forced to attend to our property. And that means less time, attention, and resources are left for the public sector -- for public spaces, public institutions, public life. The bigger our home libraries, the less we need a public library. The bigger our back yards, the less we need public parks. The more bottled water we buy, the less invested we are in the safety and quality of the municipal water system.

“And our self-reliance is illusory...Our fences cannot protect us from toxic air and the consequences of a devastated earth, our belongings cannot shield us from the consequences of hopelessness and shameful inequality. And, as we sit behind our castle walls with the drawbridge up, who have we become?”

Blank
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When your house is filled with love,  
When the members of your household  
Feel *seen* and *heard*,  
When we open our house to others,  
Welcoming neighbors  
Without worrying about impressing one another,  
Without straightening up in a frenzy,  
When a house is filled with the spirit of welcome,

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<sup>4</sup> Talmud Shabbat 13:1

*It's not only a house.*

When is it open to the blessing of friends,  
When the holidays are filled with off-key singing  
And food that wouldn't be homemade  
If it wasn't burnt on the bottom,  
When humor is met by laughter  
And sorrow is met with compassion,  
And affection is met with affection,  
And anger is met with careful communication,

*It's not only a house.*

When a house has as its foundation  
A philosophy of forgiveness,  
When hurts are handled tenderly  
And grudges are sacrificed for the greater good,  
When silences in a house  
Are mainly when people are sleeping,  
Or thinking,  
Or meditating or reading,

*It's not only a house.*

When a house is furnished with the gold of righteousness,  
The silver of repentance,  
The copper piping of kind acts,  
When it is restructured from the inside  
With Sabbaths as its sheer-walls,

*It's not only a house.*

A verse from the Song of Songs reads:

Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can floods drown it.  
If one offered for love  
all the wealth of one's house,  
it would be utterly scorned.

There are a lot of houses,  
Some big and some small,  
There are lots and lots of houses  
That are only houses...  
Magnificent houses  
With museum-like collections,

Many, many houses...  
But *home* –  
It has been said in Oz  
And other imagined and, in our history,  
very real exiles –  
There is no *place* in the world like it.