Adas

5777

In August the image of little Omran Daqneesh flooded our computer screens.  Omran, the little 5 year old boy from Aleppo whose home had been destroyed from an airstrike.  Pulled from the rubble, sitting barefoot in a bright orange chair in the back of an ambulance.  Cut off from life, love, community, normalcy.  There he sat in silence wiping the blood from his face as his little feet dangled from his chair.

All of our hearts broke staring at that image again and again. Omran torn from his home, his community, a few days after that video,  lost his brother.

Every child, every adult, every human longs to feel connected and grounded in a place, a home that is safe, where he can build his story among others, explore the world, be vulnerable, love, learn, fail.

When I look at these children in Aleppo, I want to give them what I have.  To reach out to them with open arms and to give them the kind of space that has been given to us.

That is the response of someone who is raised with a home, a community that loves...she seeks to give back with open arms when she sees the suffering of others.

A couple of weeks ago a little boy named Alex wrote a letter to President Obama about Omran.

When Alex saw what had happened to Omran, he sat down at his kitchen table in NY and wrote President Obama a letter. "Can you please go get him and bring him to [my home]," he asked. "We'll be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother."

I want to talk about 2 things tonight.  The first is the community that Jewish immigrants established here at Adas Israel 150 years ago.  Immigrants that fled from their home countries because of religious persecution. Immigrants that longed to establish a safe space to build a life.  I want to talk about the community that was established then and has continued to grow and be grounded as a place for life.

The second thing is the responsibility we bear for having such a community.  The responsibility to see what we have and to be like Alex- and seek to take our love and comfort outward to give it to others who desperately need it.

Every day when I walk into this building I think about  the immigrants who created this congregation.  Who, torn from their homes on another shore came here- to a place of hope and religious freedom and created a space for us.

In 1869, about 30 families decided to form Adas Israel (Congregation of Israel).  Newly arrived from Europe they longed to feel at home in a foreign land.  The thing that would help them?  Settling their feet and their souls in a   community like their families had established in Europe, with their traditions but this time in a space that would be safe.  These first 38 members had broken away from Washington Hebrew Congregation to form Adas.   For several years, they met in rented rooms and struggled to raise funds to build their own synagogue.

After years of planning and fundraising, the congregation completed and dedicated its first synagogue building  on the corner of 6th and G streets.  It was a way of new Jewish immigrants grounding themselves at the heart center of our country.

As the congregation continued to grow-- our first home was outgrown by a vibrant community- a second house was bought at 6th and I and then once again in 1951 as this community kept growing and opening its doors, this plot of land that we are sitting on right now was purchased and the new Adas Israel opened its doors.  This building, like the first 2,  became not just a building but a marker.. A marker of time and people and life and a country that opened its doors to dreamers, builders, and seekers.

It is through the doors off of the parking lot that I, a young 2 year old pale face, freckled girl first walked into this building.  As a puppy.  It is where the faces of bright children first re-entered our halls just 1 month ago to begin their journeys through the Gan HaYeled.  To find their first encounter with a piece of this container marked with their name as they slid their backpacks off into their labeled cubbies that would hold all that they would need- with safety and love.

I have come to think of Adas as a homestead of sorts…Not a cement building on the corner of Quebec and Porter but a place where for generations we have planted our stories and watched them grow in the thick soil of this place that is Adas- where the echoes of the refugees that first came to this country still sing out of the walls to us to keep living and dreaming and planting seeds for the future.

In an essay by Wendell Berry, one of my favorite writers…Berry talks about what a container has the capacity to do…

He says:

“For many years my walks have taken me down an old fencecrow in a wooded hollow on what was once my grandfather’s farm.  A battered galvanized bucket is hanging on a fence post near the head of the hollow, and I never go by it without stopping to look inside.  For what is going on in that bucket is the most momentous thing I know, the greatest miracle that I have ever heard of: it is making earth.  The old bucket has hung there through many autumns, and the leaves have fallen around it and some have fallen into it.  Rain and snow have fallen into it, and the fallen leaves have held the moisture and so have rotted.  Nuts have fallen into it, or been carried into it by squirrels – insects have flown in died and decayed.  …

The old bucket has been hanging on that post for something like fifty years. However small a landmark the old bucket is, it is not trivial.  It is one of the signs by which I know my country and myself.  And to me it is irresistibly suggestive in the way it collects leaves and other woodland sheddings as they fall through time.  It collects stories too, as they fall through time.  –A human community too must collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account.  It must build soil and build that memory of itself- in lore and story and song- that will be its culture.”

Adas Israel is our bucket, the container that holds the soil.  The soil is our lives- our families, our journeys the ups and downs of every day, every year, every generation.

It is the container that holds our children as they grow- walls filled with noise early on Sunday mornings as feet run up the stairs to get to class on time.  It is the container that holds the sounds of Torah being debated and questioned and loved deep into the night at MakomDC.  It is the container that holds the weeping of a parent who has recently lost a child in the inner offices of the rabbinic suite.  It is the place that I leave sometimes late at night, after the lights have been turned off, and the building is quiet and the dust has settled- the place that feels like home- the home that is holding us, watching us, rising and falling with us- helping us to account for our time here.

It is our container, our home, our bucket.

And the soil is our lives- our stories, our intricacies, and our journeys.  The soil is 15 women meeting, and singing and meditating to send off a beloved friend for surgery to remove cancer.  It is a minyan raising children in chairs to celebrate becoming bnai mitzvah.   It is a Hesed community cooking in the kitchen of the synagogue to fill the freezer with honey cake and kugel so that when a child is in the hospital with hydrocephalus, the family can receive sweetness and love and cake.  It is the death of a beloved, 104 year old congregant whose community rallies around him not only in life, but in death with 4 people gathering late at night to gently wash his body and prepare him to be laid into the earth.  Forever holding that moment in their group of 4 -as a sacred experience.

Everyone needs a place to get grounded in the soil of other people’s stories and to share a safe container.  Ours is a container that holds not only desks and seats and Torahs, but lives and stories.  Stories that have carried this community for 150 years.  That sing to us from the walls of the synagogue as we move this place forward.  Stories that remind us that this moment in history, this problem we are confronting now, this joy and this sorrow is part of a long web of connection.

In an essay called Majesty and Humility the Rav, Joseph Soloveitchik writes about the human need to be grounded.

He reminds us that when God created Adam in the beginning of Genesis- Adam was created from the dust of a single spot.  That spot from which God took the dust to create Adam, says the midrash, was the spot which was designated by the Almighty, at the very dawn of creation, as the future site of the altar in the Beit HaMikdash. That particular spot would forever be the central home in the very DNA of humanity.  Rooted, grounded from a single spot.

Though we are cosmic beings and we can roam the earth, says Soloveitchik,  we all long to be rooted.

“A villager” he says  “who belongs

to the soil that fed him as a child and to the little world into

which he was born.

At this juncture we encounter the old Biblical idea of nahalah- inheritance or homestead.

Homelessness, uprootedness is a curse. Man

quests for the origin. Because of this origin-con-

sciousness, he is curious to know everything about his roots, about the ,makor which sustains his selfhood.”

Though we roam both intellectually and physically,it is a deep human need to be rooted.  To feel a connection to place.

The idea here is that we can go anywhere on the planet.  We can adapt, our minds can go to worlds beyond this one with thought and research and imagination.  Facebook and twitter can give us instant contact with friends near and far, but it is community- time given, commitment given, that gives us a place.  That grounds us in the soil of nahala- of homestead.  Where our name is known, where our story is cherished and held and interweaved with the web of stories that have been here for over a century.

Adas Israel is not just a synagogue it is a home, it is a single spot to be grounded.  A place that will hold your story and a place that will link your story to the thousands who have come before you.

When you walk by someone in the lobby- someone you may not know- remember that that person is bound to you through this locus.  That person you pass is part of you.  Maybe they lost a parent like you, struggled to have a child like you, got a new job just like you…maybe they participated in the tahara team that washed your mother or your child before being laid into the earth.  They sing just like you, dream like you, long like you to feel grounded.

If we just understood how impactful this place is in our lives, it would change how we walk out of here.  That every person is a world in an of themselves.

If I ended the sermon here, that might be enough.

If all you do is see yourself as part of this container and anyone who walks by you in this builiding as essential, that might be enough.  But its not.  Its not enough.  Because the way you see yourself here--this soil is what you need to take with you out there.  Out into the streets of the world.  So that Omar is not a refugee on a distant shore whose blood is not our blood but that when we look at him thousands of miles away, he becomes our neighbor, our brother, our son.   5 year old Alex did not ask Obama to give Omar a visa or to lift the quota on how many refugees we let into this country.  No, his words were, “can you please go get him and bring him to my home.  He will be our brother.”

It is from that place that touches the very depths of our humanity that we turn to live in the world.

To remind ourselves that every time we are told by politicians to fear the stranger, the refugee, the one who looks different from us…we are obligated by our very sacred Torah to reject that message.

We need to remind ourselves that **we are** different.  Our ancestors were killed, exiled for being different.  That this particular Makom, this place, was established because someone recognized that it is not a sin to look different, to pray in a different way, but actually the very thing that makes walking in this world holy.

We should vote with our values in front of us and carrying our own past with us.  When given the chance to help fleeing families, which the Social Action committee will give us, we should help- with our time, our resources and our open hearts.

And we should spend the time getting grounded here, in our own place, to remind ourselves why we give in the ways we do.

May this season open our hearts to each other and to the world outside of our doors so that our world can learn to become a little less fearful, a little safer, and a container that will hold humanity.

Shanah tovah