Shelter in Place, Shelter in Peace
Creating Sacred Space for the High Holy Days (Days of Awe / Yamim Noraim)

ותֵשָׁו לִי מֵקָדְשָׁה וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹם
V’a’asu li mikdash, shakchanti betocham
Make me a sanctuary that I will dwell among you. (Ex 25:8)

“The sacred is in the ordinary...it is to be found in one’s daily life, in one’s neighbors, friends, and family, in one’s own backyard . . .” Abraham Maslow

From sojourning in the wilderness, through the destruction of two temples, the sages knew that “God will dwell in the holy spaces we create, for they are the Temple in miniature.” (Talmud: Megillah 29a)

Synagogues, schools and even homes became Mikdashei M’at, small sanctuaries.

In 2020, CBH cannot gather for High Holy Days in person. This year demands connecting in a deeper way with the roots of our tradition. As we each shelter in place, may we shelter together in peace. Let this be a time to create or reconnect to our own Mikdash M’at, enhancing Shalom Bayit - peace in the home.

We have been spending so much time inside of our homes. Our homes have become classrooms, offices, gyms, yoga and studios, etc. Time at home has become complicated. How do we create space that feels sacred and set apart for the High Holy Days?
Creating Your Mikdash M’at

Include a touchstone -- an object you gaze upon or hold in your hand, as a physical connection to creating sacred space. It can be something pleasing, that feels good in your hand. Whenever you see or feel the object (a small stone or shell, an object belonging to a loved one) it brings you back to your sacred space inside. Sometimes people use a sacred word nicely written.

Dedicate Your Space. Set your intention/kavanah. Identify what you wish to release and your aspirations for return/teshuvah to what is most essential in your life. Clear the energy. Consider ringing a bell, burning sage, lighting a candle, singing a song or chant, or reciting a prayer such as the Sh’ma or Shehecheyanu. If you have other members of your household, engage them in the process. Invite children to bring their sacred wishes to the space.

Identify a place. It can be your dining room table, a table in the backyard (with a rain plan), a cleared desk, or an unused corner. It may be a private space or shared space you co-create with your family. From Elul through Simchat Torah, this is your place to return to for reflection, connection, worship and practice.

Transform the Space. Take the time to eliminate clutter, distractions, and any electronics that will not be needed for connecting to services. Have lighting that is conducive to contemplation (and Zoom).

Place a few meaningful ritual items. Consider some of the following:

- A grandparent’s tablecloth.
- Candles and candlesticks.
- Photos of loved ones.
- Jewish ritual objects, like a shofar or a kiddush cup with wine or water.

- A journal.
- Items from nature like stones, driftwood, plants or flowers.
- A Tallit.
- A small piece of art.
Tending your Mikdash M’at

A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar; not to go out. (Lev: 6:6)

Visit your sacred space. Aim for once a day throughout the Days of Awe. Sit, take a kind breath, write a note in a journal, share a smile with your spouse or child; or if alone, take a moment to place your hand on your own heart and envision yourself surrounded by loving community, and connected to spirit.

Create a ritual. Transition from the everyday to the sacred each time you visit.

- Stand or take a seat and feel your feet on the ground, connecting to the earth.
- If you are with others, make gentle eye contact and smile.
- Hold hands or bring your hands to your lap.
- With eyes open or closed, take a moment to feel your breath, inhaling fully, exhaling with a gentle sigh.
- Light candles.
- Hold or look at your touchstone to bring you back to the sacred space in your heart.
- Bless the space and share your gratitude for the moment together or alone.

This Havdallah prayer is traditionally used to demarcate the transition between sacred time to week day:

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

Blessed are You Adonai, who separates between holy and ordinary.
Make the commitment to attend services. Go to your Mikdash M’at whenever you want to participate or connect. Wear clothing that makes you feel as if you are entering a spiritual space. Kippah and tallit are welcome.

During services on Zoom, take the time to be present. Arrive at your sacred space early and do your ritual to transition to a place of focus. Clear the desktop on your electronic device. Close all the windows except Zoom. Put on the “do not disturb” feature to eliminate distractions. Turn off your phone. Silence your watch. Arrive with your full attention; and when you feel distracted, return to your breath, touchstone, or transition ritual.

Be kind and forgive yourself. Be gentle with your imperfections and your humanity: being late to services, not making time for your practice. Each new breath is an opportunity to reconnect, reaffirm your commitment to making this High Holy Day season meaningful and heart-centered. Remember you are loved.

“Slow down, breathe deeply, and open your eyes because there’s a whole world right here within this one. The bush doesn’t suddenly catch on fire, it’s been burning the whole time. Moses is simply moving slowly enough to see it. And when he does, he takes off his sandals.

Not because the ground has suddenly become holy, but because he’s just now becoming aware that the ground has been holy the whole time.”

From Walk, Don’t Run by Rob Bell

The Kotzker Rebbe, Menachem Mendel (1787-1859) was once asked: “Where does God dwell?” to which he replied, “Wherever you let [Mystery] in.”