

Edifice Complex is Not Good for the Jews

Rosh Hashanah, Second Day

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The story is told about a couple that was nearing their 50th wedding anniversary. The husband called his son in a distant city and tells him that they are getting a divorce. “Don’t do that!” shouts the son. “Don’t make any rash decisions, don’t do anything until I get there...I’m on my way” The son then calls his sister in yet another city and tells her what their father said to him about their parents getting divorced. So she picks up the phone and calls her father. “After 50 years you’re going to get divorced? You can’t do this!” she cries. “Don’t do anything until I get there, I’m coming immediately.” The old father hangs up the phone and says to mother, “Well, they didn’t come for Pesach and they didn’t come for Rosh Hashanah, but I got them all to come for our 50th anniversary.”

This summer, my in-laws celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary! And I am pleased to report that they did not have to concoct any stories or God-forbid threats of divorce to get their 2 kids, their kids' spouses, and their four grandchildren all together to celebrate with them. For such a monumental anniversary, the decision was that we would return to where it all began. And for my in-laws, it all began in Montreal, Quebec. So all ten of us made a pilgrimage to Canada, where we literally walked in my in-laws' footsteps...as kids and as a young married couple. We saw where they lived as children, where they went to school and *cheder*, we even went to see their very first house together. My father-in-law called the people living there, the same people he sold the house to 37 years ago, and we got to actually go inside the house where my wife and brother-in-law lived as young children. I think we were all a little shocked that the very same wall paper that my in-laws put up in the 1970's was still on the walls to this very day!

One particularly memorable day, though, we took a Jewish walking tour of Montreal. Like most big cities, the Jewish population has largely moved out to the suburbs, leaving behind only vestiges of what Jewish life was like when they all huddled close together in urban Jewish concentrations back in the day. We passed by old bakeries, the building where my father-in-law went to afternoon Hebrew school, classic restaurants that still serve smoked meat sandwiches and Montreal bagels. As the tour rounded the corner of Duluth Street and Hotel De Ville, the

guide pointed her finger in the direction of a massive brick structure, much taller than the other buildings on the block, even today. She explained that this particular building was at one time considered the most beautiful synagogue in all of Canada. Built in 1923, the building was the pride of all of Montreal Jewry. But almost as soon as this splendiferous synagogue was built it was placed under a sheriff's sale. I don't know if you know what a Sherriff's sale is, I certainly didn't. It sounded like something either out of the Wild West or Robin Hood. The guide explained that a sheriff sale was a kind of public auction to liquidate a property that had been foreclosed on. The crown jewel of Canadian Jewry couldn't pay its bills. While some generous members rescued the Beth Yehudah Congregation from the sheriff, the troubles continued. One of their best fundraisers was actually the hiring of a cantor who was a child prodigy. He was only 12 years old and he was called Cantor Shloimele...people came out to hear his incredible voice and they ponied up too...Little Shloimele brought in \$4,000 following his High Holiday debut! That was 4 times as much as any other fundraiser ever brought in. But the shul still couldn't get out from under water. As we turned the corner we saw what became of it...today, the building that was once the most magnificent shul in Canada is an apartment building. The balconies and aluminum windows cover up the original architectural details. A massive circular window that once contained beautiful stained glass that illuminated the space above the *aron ha'kodesh*, above the holy ark had been entirely filled in with dull red brick, leaving only the outline of what was once there. In fact the synagogue amalgamated with other struggling congregations and is now called *Congregation Shomrim La'Boker Beth Yehudah Shaare Tefillah Beth Hamidrash Hagadol Tifereth Israel*. They have really large letterhead.

By now, I'm sure, you have all strolled around the renovated, refreshed Har Shalom. You have no doubt examined the new carpets, the beautiful chandeliers in the Paul Family Social Hall, the wall treatments, the new doors and furniture. Now I happen to know that not everyone loves every single paint choice or detail, but I think we can all agree that this shul looks incredible. No more carpet on the walls of the Gordon...no more splotches or stains...no more austere, institutional social hall or dim, unwelcoming entryways. While certainly not ostentatious, our shul looks respectable, modern, inviting. And while I championed this renovation over two years ago, I am acutely aware that a synagogue is not the sum of its bricks and mortar. What we renovated and remodeled here is meant to be a catalyst, a vehicle for community building, Torah

study, the celebration of lifecycle events and the convening for all kinds of sacred purposes. It cannot be just a building that we are proud to show off on our kids' B'nai mitzvah or weddings...and I do hope you schedule your weddings here. It's not meant to be like my Nana's living room, where the couches were always covered with plastic and you could only walk across the room if your feet didn't make any marks in the perfectly vacuumed carpet. This place was built to be used...to be filled with energy and activity, to be a gathering place, a home away from home for us and our children. We should have learned a long time ago that edifice complex is really not good for the Jewish people.

If you travel to Israel today, and you take the standard tour of the major sites and cities there is one name that you hear more often than any other...and that is the name of King Herod. Though he had a very long reign, 33 years from 37 BCE to 4 BCE, you'd think he lived as long as Methusaleh. His stamp is all over *Eretz Yisrael*. King Herod, who happened to have been a paranoid sociopath who murdered his enemies or suspected enemies without blinking an eye, also was obsessed with building. He is singularly responsible for the fortress of Masada, the one of the 2 largest port cities of the Roman Empire, Ceasarea, complete with amphitheater, hippodrome, bath houses and temples; and most famously, the expansion and beautification of the *Beit Ha'Mikdash*, the second temple in Jerusalem. It took 10,000 men 10 years just to build the retaining walls, of which the Western Wall was only a small part, and the platform atop the Temple Mount was expanded to the size of 24 football fields. Herod gilded the Holy of Holies with solid gold, the walls and columns with white marble, the floor with blue gray Carrara marble, the curtains with tapestries of blue, white, scarlet and purple threads. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus said that Herod's temple had "everything that could amaze either the mind or the eyes." And when he was done, the Second Temple was the largest functioning religious site in the world.

But Herod really didn't care much for what happened there on a daily basis. He executed 46 members of the Sandhedrin so that he could install his hand-picked High Priest Aristobulus...who he soon became insanely jealous of and had murdered. He placed a Roman Eagle, an antagonizing pagan symbol, at the main entrance of the Temple, and interfered in its day to day operations so much that the priesthood became corrupt and while the daily sacrifices

were offered, there was little that was Godly or holy about that place. The Talmud¹ went so far as to declare that five features of the first temple were not present at all in the second: Things like the *Aron* and *kaporet*, the ark of the covenant, the *Shechinah*, the very presence of the divine, the *eish*, the heavenly fire that consumed the offerings, the *urim ve'tumim*, the special breast plate the high priest would use to determine God's will, and the *ruach ha'kodesh*, the spirit of prophecy...all disappeared from the first temple to the second! What *did* the Second Temple have? Well it had dissention, rivalry, sectarian strife, internecine conflict, violence, mistrust...oh, and a very, very nice building. Friends: having a very nice building doesn't guarantee anything about what happens inside its walls. And I'm talking specifically to you about this...you're a special crowd...you're the second day crowd. I don't know if you noticed, but today is Tuesday, and some of your fellow congregants are at work or school today, maybe they're on the golf course—it's a beautiful morning. But not you...you represent the committed core of this shul and in many respects, because you are here a little more often, you are the folks who help to set the tone of this place.

That's why I need you. I need you to help make this not just a pretty building, but a building that buzzes with activity and community. I need you to help make this beautiful shul a place that is warm and welcoming to everyone who crosses its threshold. I need you to help make this a destination not only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the occasional bar/bat mitzvah, but a place you want to be on Shabbat on the other *yom tovim* throughout the year. I need you to *davven* here on Shabbat and eat lunch with me in the beautiful new Paul Family Social Hall each week. I need you to dance in the newly refurbished Gordon Sanctuary on Simchat Torah in a just few weeks--let's inaugurate that carpet with our dancing shoes! When you drop off your kids at Hebrew school or for a bar/bat mitzvah lesson or a youth group meeting, I need you to grab a cup of coffee with your friends and hang out in the hospitality center. I want you to know that my door is always open to you and with all the new lights and open corridors you ought to be able to find it much more easily now.

A few Sundays ago, I was invited to do a Q & A with the seventh grade religious school class, as we ate bagels and cream cheese together. One of the kids asked me where I even got the idea of

¹ Yoma 21b

becoming a rabbi; when did I start thinking about it, and why. I told them very honestly that when I was about their age, my synagogue was one of the most important places in my life. After my parents' divorce, there was a lot of instability, some moving around; I felt different from a lot of my friends from intact families. But the one place I always felt whole and happy and cherished was at my synagogue. The people there were uncommonly warm, and I had some wonderful friends there. My papa, my grandfather sang in the choir which always made me so proud. I was dazzled not only by his beautiful voice, but by his facility in singing the Hebrew prayers. And the rabbi of my synagogue, he noticed the *pintele yid*, he noticed the twinkle of interest in Judaism in my eye, and he quickly brought me under his wing. Somewhere in those critical years of my youth...when I could have rebelled in all kinds of unhealthy, self-destructive ways, instead I was being nurtured by my synagogue community. It was then that I decided that this is what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to be a rabbi who showed loving, sincere interest in his congregants; I wanted to lead a synagogue where people felt welcome and whole and appreciated...I experienced firsthand how a synagogue community can be a life-changer! And I wanted to go into the life changing business too!

God forbid that this synagogue goes the way of the Beth Yehudah synagogue in Montreal. I happen to think that Potomac could use some apartment dwellings, but I don't want this place to be where they are built! I don't want that stained glass star to be filled in with sheet rock, or for this room to be turned into a gym because our members built a really nice edifice, but they didn't make it enough of a priority in their lives to keep its doors open. And I very much want this to be a place of *hachnasat orchim*, of radical welcoming of Abrahamic proportions--where no one is made to feel excluded because of how much they know or don't know, or who they happened to have fallen in love with or married, or how much money is in their bank account. May these walls, freshly painted as they are, contain conversations of consequence, and meetings of meaning. And may we recover even a tiny particle, just a remnant of what was lost between the first and second temples...a sense of the *Shechina's* presence, an awareness that God is in this place, and when we walk through these doors, we feel something sacred and holy and substantially different from the crassness and commonplace of the street. I need you to help me to make it so...with your presence, your words, your deeds of loving kindness. And may God bless and keep the sheriff *far away from us!*

