

Ringling Hollow (March 2008)

It was the most unlikely of synagogue entrances. In contrast to the 17th century Great Portuguese Synagogue that stands as a proud and dynamic statement to all within sight, the new (and temporary) quarters of Amsterdam's liberal Jewish community looks more like an apartment building than a house of worship. In fact, it is an apartment building. Its address—267 Stadiumweg—and its two doorways are entirely indistinguishable from the apartment doors to the right and to the left.

This, in and of itself, is not so remarkable for Amsterdam. The city is home to many “hidden” churches. Owing to the tensions between Catholicism and Protestantism in the 16th and 17th centuries, even though the Catholics were tolerated they still were required to make their buildings unobtrusive. To this day you literally need signs at their doorways telling you there's a kerk (church) behind the door. And then, as you walk in, your breath is taken away to see the majesty and splendor that towers over you. “How did they hide this?” you almost blurt out.

Now the Liberaal Joodse Gemeente (Amsterdam's Reform congregation) is not housed in one of those ancient Catholic churches. Rather, it's a relatively plain but smart-looking art deco evangelical Protestant church. Some of the congregation's furniture from their old building (which was demolished to make way for the western terminus of Amsterdam's new subway line) has been imported. The amud or Torah reading table is there, as is the Hebrew inscription that was above the ark. Of course the enlarged photo of Anne Frank hangs in the temporary social hall in memory of the congregation's famous member. And yet what I will recall most about this building was the staircase that led you from the street to the offices and social hall above.

The stairs were long and steep. (I now realize that the staircase was so long because the “chapel” with its high ceiling was the first floor of this church.) At the landing above stood my friends Rabbi Menno and Riete ten Brink. With big smiles and hugs they greeted me. But as I ascended the last few steps, elevating myself to them, I felt something odd beneath my feet. Something just didn't feel right. Like the “sound” of the step was different, almost hollow. I hugged Menno, kissed Riete the customary three times (right, left, right), and then instinctively turned around to look at the steps. “Ah, you noticed our little prize,” Menno said proudly. “You know what this is, Steve?” he asked. But without giving me a chance to guess, he continued, “It's a hiding place. Look at the top of the fourth step down, you'll see a hinge. It's a trap door. We discovered it, too. They used it as a hiding place during the war.”

Standing there I realized I was in a makom kadosh, sacred space. More than just a place of worship, this was a place where the presence of God could be felt. Because this was a place where humanity had risen to its highest level. Even more than the celebrated Anne Frank house, this out-of-the-way church that no one knows of was once, beneath the steps, a place of refuge for those fleeing evil. I immediately thought of the teaching from Pirkei Avot, “In a place where no one behaves like a human being, you must strive to be human.” Or even better, as it is rendered in the Hasidic tradition, “Even in a place where there is no one else—where you are completely alone and unseen—you must still behave like a human being.”

In relating this story to a friend of mine, she replied. “Wow! The hollow places beneath our feet. What a metaphor.” Indeed. The challenge of being human is defined by how we fill the “hollow” places beneath our feet. Or for that matter, whether or not we are willing to create such spaces. Sometimes they just fall to us. Sometimes they present themselves to us as opportunities. And then there are times when it falls to us to make them ourselves, to forge a space into the emptiness of possibility when life offers us no other options. Either way, they become for us sacred vessels waiting to be filled. I will forever be in awe of those who, at the risk of their lives, made space for others.

So it was for Moses, standing before the burning bush, when God said to him, “...remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.” But do we not understand that that place is everywhere we stand? Our lives are forever in search of the emptiness into which we might pour our souls. All we need do is to listen carefully for the hollow ring of possibility.

For me it was a blessing to simply notice that I was standing in the very footsteps where humanity’s greatness could be heard—in the gentle echo of a church’s staircase. If only I had had the presence of mind to remove my shoes.