

The Ongoing Process of Creation; Parashat Pekudei 5784

Reflections on a Visit to Argentina

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I am a little travel weary, having just returned yesterday from our congregational trip to Argentina, but I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect briefly on the experience. I hope what I say makes sense, and at the very least, I promise it will take less time than even the quickest of our meals in Argentina. (You can ask me later; one person's "pleasurable dining experience" is another's "eternity.")

I want to acknowledge the incongruity of embarking on a vacation – it was a Jewish heritage tour, but it was vacation – while Israel is still engaged in war. The poor timing was obviously not intentional, but it meant a lot when, during our transfer from the airport, our guide Gabriel offered a prayer ending with the words "Am Yisrael *chai*, The people of Israel lives on." Buenos Aires is very far from Israel, but its people feel every bit as close as we do.

On Friday night, we attended a spirited, musical Kabbalat Shabbat at Amijai Congregation, where we were hosted by the parents of our member Mica Carmio, Jose and Susana, who are founding members there. We didn't understand the Spanish sermon, but when the 600 people in attendance all stood up, turned around, and began clapping, we didn't need to understand the language. The rabbi had just welcomed a young couple from the congregation who had made *aliyah*, were serving in the Army, and were back in Argentina for a visit. It was very moving ... as it was when he mentioned B'nai Israel Congregation and Rabbi Michael Safra, and the congregation started applauding again. And then we had a beautiful Shabbat meal with Mica's family.

I say all this because it is why we went to Argentina. We went to experience Jewish *life*, not to memorialize Jewish history. Because Jewish life in Argentina is not mere history. It is vibrant. It is a *kehillah kedosha*, a sacred community. They speak a different language and have different customs, but there is so much we understood just because we are all Jewish. It was like the old camp song: "Wherever you go, there's always someone Jewish..."

As Addie explained earlier, Parashat Pekudei describes how Moses and the Israelites put the finishing touches on the *Mishkan*, the traveling sanctuary. It is easy to get lost in the details, which don't feel so relevant today. But, as Nachum Sarna explains, the *Mishkan* is more than just a building project. It has cosmic significance. The Torah describes the *Mishkan* as the capstone to creation. The other creation stories from the Ancient Near East conclude with the lesser gods constructing a palace for the chief god; but the Torah's account of creation doesn't end that way. The Torah's account concludes with Shabbat, with God resting. We can say – as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said – that Shabbat is a palace in time; but it is not the conclusion of creation. Creation isn't finished until the people build the physical structure.

The people in Exodus play the same role that the gods in the polytheistic stories. The people are God's partners. The *Mishkan* is not just a building; it is a symbol of an ongoing partnership to continue the work of creation. When we build communities, when we build synagogues and worship inside them, we are furthering the unfinished work of creation.

Nahum Sarna points out other parallels in *Etz Hayim*. Our parasha says that "Moses saw all the work that was done .. and Moses blessed [the people]." Which sounds similar to what Genesis says about creation: "God saw all that God had done and it was very good." "And God blessed [the human being]..." "And God blessed the seventh day..." Midrash Rabbah offers other examples. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth; the first vessel of the *Mishkan* is the ark, which stored the covenant between heaven and earth. On the second day, God separated the waters above from the waters below; and the second vessel was the laver to wash hands and feet. On the third day, God created vegetation; and the third vessel of the *Mishkan* is the *shulkhan*, the special table to display the showbread, the produce of the earth. And the Midrash goes on. ...

The story of Jewish immigration to Argentina is similar to the US. Jews from Germany established the first synagogue in Buenos Aires in 1862. The first Jews from Eastern Europe arrived in 1889 and soon established their own synagogue and community institutions. There were ups and downs, two world wars, unique stories involving the Jewish *gauchos*, the tragedies of the military *junta* and the bombings of the Israeli embassy in 1992 and the AMIA community offices in 1994, but on the whole, theirs is a familiar story of Jews coming to the new world and establishing communal institutions. But the work was not complete.

Marshall Meyer graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1958, in the same class of our own Rabbi Simon, of blessed memory. At that time, newly ordained rabbis were required either to serve in the military or a "hardship pulpit." Rabbi Simon joined the Navy and served in Japan. Marshall Meyer was sent by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel to Buenos Aires. The community was large but religious infrastructure was lacking. The rabbis there were trained in Europe and didn't understand the local culture. Marshall Meyer served a short time in the established synagogue, and when it didn't work out, he built something new.

Understanding the need for Spanish-speaking rabbis, Meyer founded the Seminario Rabbinico Latinoamerica, which today trains rabbis, cantors, educators and community leaders who serve throughout Latin America. He established Comunidad Bet El, which he modeled after the American synagogue center. He established a Jewish day school and a youth group. He got involved in social justice work during the era of the military *junta*. The Reform movement eventually came to Buenos Aires, and even the Orthodox adopted some of Meyer's ideas. And more than 30 years after his death, people speak of Rabbi Marshall Meyer's enormous legacy.

Today, there are 240,000 Jews in Buenos Aires. There are 20,000 students enrolled in 20 Jewish day schools. There are 75 synagogues and 25 Chabad houses, 3 JCCs, a laudable social service network, and ... still much more work to be done.

I found it ironic, after hearing the story of Marshall Meyer, to learn that Amijai, the congregation we visited Friday night, was founded 30 years ago by a group of 8 families who felt Bet El was no longer speaking to their spiritual needs. And even at Amijai, Rabbi Avruj was excited to tell us about the new “young professionals” minyan he had recently launched a few blocks from the main synagogue. Rabbi Avruj is wonderful and amazing (his words!), but the next generation doesn't want to go to listen to him. So he established a new space.

I guess that's how it works. Synagogues feel competition, but the real competition comes not from other synagogues but from the religious “nones” (n-o-n-e-s). The synagogue is not a building; it is the foundation for a yet-incomplete, ongoing process of spiritual creation. That's the message of waiting so long to construct the Tabernacle. And it remains relevant.

On Shabbat morning, we attended services at Comunidad Bet El, which certainly felt more traditional and familiar. Once again, we were welcomed with open arms. Over a beautiful lunch with synagogue leaders, we talked about community. We have so much for which to be proud – in Rockville and in Buenos Aires – and yet there is still a way to go from the World as it Is to the World as it Should Be.

Near the end of our meal, we met the teen *madrichim*/counselors who were coming to set up for the Shabbat afternoon youth groups. In Argentina, students who don't attend day school do not receive a formal Jewish education like Addie's. They attend a pre-*b'nai mitzvah* course for about a year and the rest is left to the informal experiences of youth groups. The *madrichim* led us in a spirited *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after Meals), which would have felt familiar to anyone who attended Jewish summer camp in the US.

And that's my point. There is so much to celebrate, so many reasons to be joyful about Jewish identity and community. And also work to do and reasons to worry – not just about antisemitism or war in Israel, but about assimilation and the uncertainties it breeds. That is the message of the traveling *mishkan*. It is the capstone of creation but not its end. The *mishkan* is replaced by Solomon's glorious Temple, described in today's *haftarah*. And that Temple will be destroyed destroyed and rebuilt and destroyed and ... the journey continues.

That is the meaning of the song I tried to sing when we lifted the Torah. Each of us has a role to play in the ongoing process of creating community:

Bilvavi mishkan evneh, I will build a sanctuary **in my heart** to honor God's glory.

And inside, I will dedicate an altar to God's divine splendor.

Ul'ner tamid ekah li, And for the eternal light, I will draw from the ancient fires of Abraham's altar.

Ul'korban akviv lo et nafshi, And for the offering, I bring to God my unique, individualized soulful self.

Shabbat Shalom.