

Rosh Hashanah 5776 – Celebrating Our Sacred Community

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There is a tradition as we enter the synagogue to designate the sanctity of the space with words of blessing. The words were originally intended to be a curse by the gentile wizard Balaam, but God would not allow him to curse B'nai Israel. They are among the first words we teach our children, and I would like to sing them with you now, before I start talking, as a warm up. מה טבו אהליך יעקב משכנתיך. ישראל, How lovely are your tents O Jacob, your sanctuaries O Israel.

I want to talk this morning about holiness. It seems to be an appropriate topic as we celebrate the 90th anniversary of our B'nai Israel. This congregation has come a long way since that group of seven men and 2 women met in the home of Herbert Klavans in late 1925 to establish a school and synagogue closer to their homes. Our history includes stately buildings, Jewish education, extensive programming, social clubs, and thousands of lifecycle events. Just as an exercise: Raise your hand if you have celebrated a wedding, bar or bat mitzvah, or baby naming at B'nai Israel. Raise your hand if a parent celebrated a *simcha* here; a grandparent or someone of your grandparents' generation. Raise your hand if you have a *simcha* scheduled. And raise your hand if you haven't raised your hand ... because we owe you an *aliyah*. This is a special place with a lot of meaning for many people. And today I want to try to get to the essence of what makes it a קהילה קדושה, a sacred congregation.

Our tradition speaks of two types of holiness. The Temple in Jerusalem is a space of permanent holiness. It was built on what our tradition calls the Foundation Stone, the *even sh'tiyah* – the spot from which Creation began, where Abraham sacrificed the ram as a substitute for Isaac, the direction towards which all prayer is directed almost 2,000 years after the Temple was destroyed. That spot is buzzing with prayer 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. That is one kind of holiness, intrinsic to the spot.

But most sacred space is not permanent. It has what is called *kedushat sha'ah*, or momentary sanctity. Mount Sinai was the holiest space on earth at the moment when God gave the Ten Commandments, but now our tradition is that we don't even know where Mount Sinai was. The Mishkan, the travelling Tabernacle was set up at each encampment in the Wilderness so that Aaron could worship in the *Kodesh Ha-Kodashim*, the Holy of Holies, but then it would be dismantled and moved, and the place where it had stood was no longer sacred.

One of the more profound examples of *kedushat sha'ah*, momentary holiness, is in Genesis. When Jacob runs away from home after stealing his brother's blessing, he dreams of a ladder with angels going up and down. God Himself appears at the top and promises to accompany Jacob on his journey. And the Torah presents that sacred spot as completely anonymous. It is unnamed. “ויפגעו במקום, Jacob arrived at the place,” basically anyplace. And Jacob expresses his surprise: “Surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it!” Jacob names the place Beth El, the House of God, and the

principle is established: God's House is not limited to certain defined spots. Any space – in Israel, Mesopotamia, Egypt, even Rockville can become holy.

The story of Judaism as we know it began with the establishment of momentary holiness. It was 70 CE and the city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the Romans. It was only a matter of time before the walls would be broken and the Holy Temple, the focal point of Jewish life and worship, would be destroyed. One of the leaders of the time, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai hid himself in a coffin and snuck out of the city. He met the general Vespasian and correctly predicted to the general's face that he would soon become emperor. When this prophecy came true, Vespasian granted Rabbi Yohanan a wish.

Well what do you wish for when you know you are about to be defeated, your people will be scattered and may even die out? It was too late to save the Temple, so Rabbi Yohanan asked that he and his students be allowed to settle in the city of Yavneh and establish a place of Torah learning, which became the first great academy. Rabbi Yohanan recognized that sacred space could be established anywhere as long as it was guided by the sacred word, sacred values and sacred action.

Mah Tovv Ohalekha Ya'akov, For the Rabbinic imagination, the tents and tabernacles of Balaam's blessing refer to *batei k'nesiyot* and *batei midrashot*, synagogues and houses of study, which could be established anywhere that a community was willing to support them.

The synagogue of my youth was *Kehilah Kedoshah Ahavat Achim*, the Congregation of Brothely Love in Atlanta, or as the locals called it, Ahavath Achim Synagogue, or just AA. It's a great name. There was one Saturday morning when my friend Daniel had a soccer game and his parents decided to go to *shul*. I don't know how, but Daniel ran into the goal post and he needed stitches. The coach asked Daniel where his father was and he explained: "He's at AA." "And what about your mother?" he asked. "Well, she's at AA too." "Really? Both of your parents are at AA?" "Well of course," Daniel explained. "They go to AA every Saturday."

"How lovely are your synagogues, your places of study, O Israel."

Another term for the synagogue is *mikdash me'at*, a miniature sanctuary, basically a microcosm of the Temple. In many synagogues, the verse inscription above the ark connects back to the original Tabernacle, "ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם", They shall make for me a sanctuary that I may dwell within it." The furnishings include the *ner tamid*, the eternal flame reminiscent of the flame on the altar that was never extinguished; a *menorah* to remember the lampstand in the Temple; we call the reader's table a *shulchan*, the name for the table in the Tabernacle that housed the showbreads. We conduct ourselves with a certain decorum, dress in a certain way and try to keep talking to a minimum (☺).

The Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunam, offers an interesting commentary on a grammatical inconsistency in that verse. The Hebrew doesn't actually say, "Let them make for me a sanctuary that I may dwell within it." That would have been *ושכנתי בתוכו*. It says "בתוכם", Let them make for me a sanctuary that I may dwell within them." What does it mean "to dwell within them?" The Hasidic master teaches that God doesn't dwell within space at all. God dwells within the people, wherever they let Him in, and the space is merely a conduit. It is the people, not the building, that create sanctity.

It reminds me of a story from Chelm, that charming old town in Poland known for its wise men. It is said that one of the townsfolk, a man named Selig, longed to get out of Chelm to experience the big city in Warsaw. His wife thought he was crazy; why travel to Warsaw when he had everything you could possibly need is right here in Chelm? But Selig could not be deterred.

He packed some food and set out on his journey. After a few hours he stopped to eat, and then he wanted a nap. But he worried that he might wake up disoriented and start walking in the wrong direction, so he set his shoes in the middle of the road with their toes facing towards Warsaw.

Well, as luck would have it, while he was sleeping, a beggar came along and saw the shoes. He picked them up to take them, but when he saw how tattered and worn they were, he decided it just wasn't worth it. The beggar put the shoes back in the middle of the road, but of course now their tips were facing Chelm.

Selig awoke from his nap and continued on his journey, and after a few hours he arrived at the wonderful city of "Warsaw." He was amazed – and a little disappointed – by how familiar it all looked. He was greeted at the market with a friendly, "*Shalom Aleikhem*, Reb Selig!" And he thought: "Wow! That man looks just like Haim the Tailor back in Chelm; and there must be someone here in Warsaw who looks just like me!" He saw the synagogue and couldn't understand why the great synagogue of Warsaw was no different from the little synagogue in Chelm.

Selig continued walking until a woman called out from a nearby window. "Nu, Selig, will you be joining us for dinner or not?" "Oh my", he thought. "She must have mistaken me for the Warsaw Selig"; and he could not get over how much she reminded him of his wife Leah.

Not wanting to disappoint, Selig went inside and sat at the table, which was set exactly as his table back in Chelm. He ate his dinner without saying a word, wondering when the other Selig would enter and set matters straight. But the other Selig never did return. Selig from Chelm remained in "Warsaw", ever hoping that one day he would muster the strength to return to tell all the shocking truth: that going all the way to Warsaw is simply not worth the trip.

Any space can be holy because it is the people, not the building, that create sanctity.

On the top of the Aron Kodesh in Dweck Sanctuary, there is a set of tablets – as you find on top of many arks. But these tablets are different because they are blank; they don't contain the text of the Ten Commandments. The ark's designer, Phil Ratner, once explained to me that this is intentional because it is up to each individual, it is up to each of us to create the text for our tablets through our actions and commitments. One person's attention to the rules of Passover, another person's commitment to helping individuals in need, another's love of and devotion to Israel or commitment to the traditions of Sukkot – each of these commitments comes together under the banner of community. That same term, *mikdash me'at* / mini sanctuary, which is used to describe the synagogue, is used to describe the Jewish home. Each of our houses becomes a miniature space of holiness that sustains and lends meaning to this house for B'nai Israel.

Our Congregational theme for this year is *Bayit: From Our House to Yours*. B'nai Israel is a sacred *bayit*: A House of worship, a house of study, and a house of assembly. But our *bayit* is infinitely strengthened by what takes place in yours. We will be celebrating the Jewish home as the foundation stone of the synagogue. We want to position our synagogue not merely as the central address for Jewish life, but as a guide to empower and support the celebrations and observances of the home. What you do in your own house gives meaning to what goes on in this house.

The other day I was speaking with a member of the congregation who told me about a beautiful custom that his sister had just started. Every Friday, she sends an email to the family – it's a large, tight-knit family, so I imagine the distribution list is sizeable. She includes something about the Torah portion, maybe something she heard or received in her inbox earlier in the week. And then she lists highlights from the week that was and things to look forward to in the week ahead. Mazal tov to this one who just got a promotion, good luck to another who is having a birthday next week, whatever it is. The details don't matter, and I know people who do something similar around the table. But I heard about this practice and it was reinforced for me that there are probably hundreds of beautiful traditions within the ranks of this congregation that we don't know about. One of my goals for this year is to share, to give you the opportunity to show off, to learn from best practices about practical things we can bring into our homes. I'm not just talking about learning the words to Kiddush or Havdalah, but ideas we can use to make Shabbat and holidays uniquely ours.

Before Rosh Hashanah, we sent out a home holiday enhancement packet with recipes and small ideas of things we can all do. I hope you saw it; and if you didn't see it and use it, there is another one available now for Sukkot. In order to strengthen the links between home and synagogue, we have also created a space in the hallway between the Hayman Chapel and the Dweck Sanctuary for pictures of our members celebrating Sukkot in their own homes. I hope you will send me pictures – from this year or previous years – to reinforce the message that synagogue life is not only lived in this building.

Shabbat Around B'nai has been expanded. The idea is simple: Invite another member to your home for a Shabbat meal. There are no rules about what to serve; there are no expectations that you do everything "the right way" (whatever that is). For our hosts, the synagogue has a little gift bag with *hallah*, blessings, wine, candles, and the like. And if you are being hosted, we hope that you will "pay it forward" and invite another person who has not previously participated. The goal is to strengthen the web of relationships between our members inside and outside the building.

And I don't want this to be just about ritual; it is also about culture and attention to our universal values. I find sanctity in Mitzvah Day, when community members come together to strengthen our impact on the outside world. **We make this space holy** when we use it as a gathering point from which to make the larger world a better place. It is not clear how the synagogue can best respond to the refugee crises from Syria and Asia, but whatever we do, **we will create holiness** if we work together to make a difference. Or the work of our Caring Committee. A little over a week ago, an elderly member of our congregation who lives alone contacted us. Her washer and dryer broke and she needed a ride to Sears to try to purchase a new one. Our chairs put out the word and we had a volunteer in less than an hour. **We created holiness** that day; a sacred community means that every one of us matters and shares in the responsibilities of sustaining it.

The founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov explains the point with a parable. Once a beautiful bird came to the king's garden and nested high in a tree. The king wished to catch the bird, so he commanded his servants to form a human ladder to reach the top of the tree. Just as the servant highest on the ladder was about to reach the nest, the one at the bottom weakened and the entire human ladder collapsed. "And so it is with us," the Ba'al Shem Tov taught. "We depend on each other to catch a glimpse of God's love. When one of us weakens, everything collapses and we must begin anew."

Mah tovu ohalekha ya'akov. The medieval sage Rashi offers another explanation for what Balaam saw in the Israelite tents that he found so beautiful. He saw how all of the tents were lined up neatly in rows, but in a modest way such that the doorway of one tent did not open into the doorway of another. Nobody knew what was going on in anyone else's home, and yet each played a critical role in upholding the traditions, values, and teachings of the community.

But forget about tents. As we celebrate 90 years of B'nai Israel, I want to build a pyramid. The bricks of its wide base represent the musings of the heart, the practices of the home, the things that individuals do to strengthen relationships and help others in need. Those activities form the base of synagogues and community institutions, of which B'nai Israel is one shining example. The worship and activities of our synagogue in turn point to the singular values at the top: Israel, Torah, God. As this new year begins, let us rejoice in the blessings of 90 years of sacred community as we pledge to strengthen the foundations, enhance the beauty, share the love, and create spaces of momentary sanctity within B'nai Israel, our model Israelite community. Shanah Tovah.