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One of my favorite books is a collection of magnificent Synagogue photos taken by Neil Folberg. A student of Ansel Adams, Folberg has selected images of Synagogues from many different corners of our world: Italy, Morocco, Uzbekistan, India, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Israel and the United States – just to cite a few of the locales. With his artistic eye, Folberg captures the unique character of each synagogue, as well as the elements common to all of them. What is particularly intriguing is that the title of his book is: “And I Shall Dwell Among Them” – a phrase taken literally from Parashat Trumah, our Torah portion of this week.

Let's think of Parashat Trumah as a time-capsule -- giving us the outline of sacred space, as it exists in Judaism – with its detailed description of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle accompanying the Israelites on their journey through the desert. From that initial blueprint, we move forward to the period of the Temples in Jerusalem – and then we land, so to speak, precisely at the moment when the Synagogue emerges as the central spiritual address of our Jewish people.

Yes, Parashat Trumah provides us with information about elements familiar to all of us – the Ark, the Menorah, the Table – but at its core, its theology is not about cubit measurements. God does not reside amid the Torah scrolls – even though that is a fantasy which we occasionally enjoy having.

Our Parasha puts it aptly: “V' shéchanti b'tocham – And I – referring to God – shall dwell among them.” (Exodus 25:8)

Neil Folberg explores this idea more fully in the following comments: “Some thoughts on the architecture of the synagogue: In a cathedral . . . one is made to feel small before the glory of God. The emphasis in a grand church is placed on the divine aspect of the man-God relationship. God is great and beautiful, while we are small and insignificant – and the architecture becomes a spatial metaphor for that principle. Jews, by contrast, are responsible for bringing sanctity into their own lives – and do not expect it as a gift from above – as some kind of divine grace.”

The Hebrew nomenclature of a Synagogue underscores that idea. We call it a Beit Knesset – a place of assemblage, of gathering. Our concern is not so much about “flying buttresses” – as in the Gothic Cathedral – but rather about what happens to people – what happens to us – as we convene in this setting. Without people, a Synagogue is a composite of walls, ceilings and floors – but with us, with our passion, our commitment, our energy, our vision, a Synagogue indeed has the potential to become “sacred space.”

In 21st century America, the role of our Synagogue has expanded exponentially: It is where we worship God and study tradition. It is where we engage in social action and express our concern for the needs of the Jewish people . . . here, in Israel and beyond. It is where we grapple with all the larger, tougher challenges of our society and respond to them – it is where

we find friends and community on our own personal life-journey, with its joys and inevitable sorrows – in short, it is where we draw on values and teachings spanning thousands of years – because deep down – we believe that our heritage represented by the many dimensions of our Synagogue – can influence and shape our lives for the better.

Our Synagogue must therefore transcend ages, gender and sexual orientation. It must be dynamic, warm, welcoming and inclusive. It must speak to our hearts, our minds and our souls.

I cherish the words of a Christian scholar, Robert Herford:

“In all their long history, the Jewish people have done scarcely anything more wonderful than to create the Synagogue. No human institution has a longer continuous history – and none has done more for the uplifting of the human race.”

“V’ shéchanti b’tocham – And I (God) shall dwell among them.”

We are heirs of that remarkable legacy – and we are also its agents – in activating that message for our own lives and for our Synagogue.