

**Responding to Desecration:  
Cultivating Reverence  
*Parashat Shmot*  
January 9, 2021  
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In this week's parashah we read of the call to Moses at the burning bush.

**Exodus 3:1-6**

(1) Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. (2) An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. (3) Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" (4) When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." (5) And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. (6) I am," He said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

What I find intriguing about this short but fascinating episode is that the first thing that God tells Moses to do is to remove his shoes, for the place on which he is standing is "holy ground." In essence, God seems to be telling Moses, Moses must be in contact with the holiness of the ground in order better to appreciate it.

What is a **holy place**? A holy place is one in which we can connect with the transcendent, that is, to what is beyond the physical, material world in which we live. Somehow, it's a connection with the transcendent. Hence, you might think that holy spaces exist only in religious settings, such as synagogues, temples, churches, mosques, and other religious institutions.

We, on the other hand, live in a secular society. I was reminded of this the other day when I was addressing an Israeli class of adult students learning English as a second language. I was invited to speak with them about Conservative Judaism, but we went on to talk about some of the distinctions between the United States and Israel. One key distinction, I pointed out, is that in America the separation of church and state is an important legal principle. It was a novel idea to some of the students.

But I took pains to emphasize to them that the fact that ours is a secular nation does not mean that we don't have sacred spaces, sacred moments, or sacred experiences in our country. We do.

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What happened this past Wednesday, January 6th, was not one thing. It was several things. On the one hand, it was an armed assault on a building in Washington, D.C. As we now know, five people died as a result of this assault. This is a grievous loss. Some of those who entered the Capitol were armed; others had ammunition. Pipe bombs were discovered in the area. Many more could have been killed.

What happened is a reminder that *mavet v'hayyim b'yad ha-lashon*: life and death are in the hands of the tongue. Words matter. Incitement sometimes succeeds, and it can be deadly. It was deadly on Wednesday.

The fact that we are contemplating a situation in which the President of the United States is accused of inciting a deadly riot -- that's extraordinary.

So this obviously wasn't merely trespassing; it also wasn't simply a crime against certain people; it wasn't even simply a violent crime against certain people and certain property. It also wasn't simply a riot.

In addition to all of those, it was an assault on a special building, **a building that symbolizes the transcendent: the striving for justice and equity, the striving for freedom and dignity, the striving for safety and security ... all of the things that we aspire to when human beings gather together to form societies and create governments to handle their affairs.**

It was an assault on the closest thing we have to a holy place, in the closest we have to a holy city in our country. I say that with full recognition that there's an air of ridiculousness about that statement. After all, there's so little respect for Congress in our country. I think that the respect for Congress is somewhere around 20%.<sup>1</sup> Laughable.

I remember, several years ago, watching several episodes of that TV series, *House of Cards*. If you're looking for a cultural document that captures the lack of respect, the *cynicism*, that we have for government in general and for Congress in particular, take a look at that show.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, whether we think that Congress is functional or not; whether we respect individual congressional Representatives and Senators; what we have in Washington itself deserves our reverence. It is truly miraculous. We have a generally peaceful, well-functioning government that is set up to perform what the Constitution sets out as its goal in its preamble:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America ....

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<sup>1</sup> The actual figure for 2019-2020 is 15%:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/207579/public-approval-rating-of-the-us-congress/> .

<sup>2</sup> I actually don't know whether it's even accessible any more, given the recent charges brought against Kevin Spacey, who starred in the show -- see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin\\_Spacey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin_Spacey) -- which just reinforces the sense of cynicism.

Every society needs its holy places, and in our society, most of them are in Washington. The White House is one of them. The Supreme Court is another. The U.S. Capitol Building is a third.

**Among the things we witnessed on Wednesday was the desecration of a sacred place.**

By the way, I mean that word, “witnessed,” in a way that it could never have been meant hundreds of years ago: We really did witness it. All of us. We saw the desecration, in real time, with our own eyes. Because of the miracles of modern technology, we saw photographs and videos taken from within the building as the assault was taking place.

Desecration is upsetting. It wounds us in a way that nothing else does.

If you’ve ever seen a synagogue that has been vandalized, you know what I mean. Seeing siddurim strewn about can be terribly upsetting.

I remember once visiting a church that had been set on fire in Israel. It was the famous Church of the Loaves and the Fishes in the Galilee. The arsonists didn’t just set it on fire. They also spray-painted graffiti on the walls of the church.<sup>3</sup>

What should our response be to the desecration that we witnessed this past Wednesday?

We should respond the way Jews have always responded: Where there is evil, we should respond with good. Where there is darkness, we should bring light.

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<sup>3</sup> I spoke about that experience a few years ago on the High Holidays. See: [https://images.shulcloud.com/13691/uploads/uploaded\\_documents/rh\\_day\\_two\\_2015\\_sermon\\_not\\_in\\_gods\\_name\\_1.pdf](https://images.shulcloud.com/13691/uploads/uploaded_documents/rh_day_two_2015_sermon_not_in_gods_name_1.pdf)

**Let's respond to desecration with reverence.** Reverence for the enterprise that takes place in that desecrated building; namely: representative democratic government.

Destruction and desecration is easy. Governing is hard. Governing *fairly* is really hard.

Governing should not be judged by the standards of reality TV. If we want to judge governing by the standards of reality TV, we're going to get folks like Jake Angeli storming into the Capitol building.<sup>4</sup>

But there's more. Being reverent isn't enough. Let this act of desecration remind us of how precious democracy is, and how much was lost this past Wednesday.

Let's promote democracy in our land. Let's devote ourselves to seeing to it that young people growing up in our country are educated to understand what democracy is and what it demands of us. Let's promote the importance of truth -- and freedom, equality, justice and human dignity.

Let's not allow those who entered and defiled our holy secular temple to have the last word.

Instead, let *us* utter the last word(s): words uttered in defense of our fundamental values -- truth, justice, liberty -- and words uttered in appreciation of our privilege in living here, and expressing our love for this great nation.

Let us join in the singing of "America, The Beautiful," led by Cantor Gloth.

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<sup>4</sup> Jake Angeli is one of the names of the bare-chested man with the horned helmet (carrying a six-foot spear) who appeared in numerous photographs and videos on Wednesday. Recently, he apparently appeared in a mugshot, as he was arrested. [Capitol Rioter Seen in Horned Hat, Carrying Spear Arrested: US Attorney](#) .