

Transforming Our Homes Into Places of Holiness

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Once again this Rosh Hashana we awaken to a new world, a world different from the one we knew just a year ago.

Technological advances and modern means of communication allow us to witness first-hand the horrible destruction in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Heart-breaking dramatic stories unfolded in our living rooms before our very eyes. Images of people suddenly rendered homeless, of thousands of evacuees uprooted from their homes and communities, thrust into unfamiliar surroundings, and forced to start life anew cause us to feel and share the sense of tragedy, pain, separation and loss experienced by an entire region of our nation. Uprooted from their moorings, they must cope in new environments, without any of the possessions or community they knew. It is impossible to imagine the myriad of issues these people must deal with, including loss of their homes and along with it, documents, possessions, photos, pets, and worst of all, loved ones.

In the aftermath of the flood, many questions are raised, and many are forced to answer questions.

Federal and local officials are called to task for their ineptitude, incompetence, lack of preparedness and slow response. Oil company executives are asked to account for out of control gas prices and exorbitant profits. Engineers and bureaucrats are asked to justify their miscalculations and decisions. People demand that politicians defend their shortsightedness. Rabbis and ministers, theologians and religious leaders are asked to offer explanations, and even when not asked, are ready to rush in offering their explanation of inexplicable events, as if they somehow have a direct line to God and can discern and make sense out of an incomprehensible calamity.

Among the theological explanations offered is one by Reverend Louis Farakhan who is certain that the hurricane is punishment for the United States going to war in Iraq; A Reverend Michael Marcarage claims it was punishment for the annual gay pride events that take place in New Orleans. Or our own Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef says it was retribution for President Bush's support for Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, coupled with the fact that black Americans don't study enough torah. Far be it from me to question the credentials or conclusions of these esteemed religious figures. Although I can't help but notice that the reason for God's actions always seems to correspond to the political position of the individual expressing an opinion.

Theological speculation, and questions about who is responsible or guilty for the tragedy, are better left to theologians greater than me and to the commissions investigating this matter. The more perplexing and relevant question I would like to consider this morning, is how do people cope with loss of such a horrific magnitude? How can they repair and

put their lives back together? How can they face the future? How will they preserve the memory of the life they once knew?

Living in a post Katrina, post 9-11 world, we may be forgiven if we assume that we are the first generation to face destruction of such tremendous magnitude and on such a massive scale. Although the world has changed a great deal in the last 2,000 years, our rabbis living in the first century faced a similar sense of loss and destruction. As usual, the wisdom of our tradition offers instruction and guidance for us today.

The world our ancestors knew was turned upside down when they were evicted from their homes and forced to leave everything behind. Taken away as slaves by the Romans, our plight as Wandering Jews began, and what we call the Diaspora, the dispersion of Jews throughout the world was unwillingly thrust upon us in the year 70 C.E. when Jerusalem was invaded, the city vanquished and leveled by the Romans, and the independence enjoyed by the nation of Israel was lost.

The Temple was destroyed by the Romans and the people's primary place of worship stood no more. After the conquest, all that the Jews revered and held sacred was demolished. Even more than that, it was a repudiation and defeat of their entire theological and ontological system, jolting it to its very core, and threatening to rock the foundation upon which faith and public worship had been founded. It is impossible to overestimate the extent of the destruction. The calamity had a devastating impact on both a national and individual level. The Talmud tells of a rabbi walking amidst the rubble and ashes of the Temple and crying as he lamented what he saw. It was as if he was walking through the ruins at Ground Zero.

But in typical Jewish fashion, they did not languish in their suffering. Instead, the rabbis came up with a plan. Although we are separated by over 2,000 years, and our world is amazingly different, not surprisingly, their response has relevance and applications for us today. The innovative resourcefulness of the rabbis reminds me of the joke I told a few years ago about the time the leaders of the world's three great monotheistic religions were summoned before the Almighty and told that the world would be destroyed in three days.

The Pope appeared on international television and informed the world of the extraordinary message the three religious figures had just received. He appealed to the entire world to accept Jesus and convert so their souls would be saved. The Grand Ayatollah got on international satellite hookup and proclaimed that now was the time to submit to Allah, and that as the one true religion, all should become Muslims within the next three days. In the interest of FCC regulations of fairness and equal time, the Chief Rabbi of Israel was also allowed to address the world. He looked into the camera and told his fellow citizens of the world, "My friends, we have just learned from God that we have three days to learn how to live underwater."

The rabbis of the first century, known as tannaim, realized they had to teach their people how to live underwater --- how to survive in a world in which their holy Temple, a

symbol of the Divinity of God, of His presence on earth, and of the ability to reach Him and the primary means of communicating with the Holy One, had all been annihilated.

What did they teach? What was in the genetic composition of their writings which gave us Jews the will, ability and means to continue? After all, all the other peoples from that same era are no more, yet somehow, miraculously, we are still here today.

For one, the rabbis taught that God's covenant with Israel was eternal. Contrary to what appeared to be obvious to others, and what they might have otherwise concluded, they affirmed that it had not been abrogated. They postulated that the *shechina*, the Holy Presence which hovered over the Temple Mount had not been destroyed, but had gone into exile with the people and would accompany them wherever they would go. Furthermore, and even more significantly, they taught that although there was no longer a Beit Mikdash, a Temple where people could bring their sacrifices, God could be placated and satiated and would be just as pleased by acts of *hesed*, deeds of lovingkindness. Third, they developed a system of prayer to take the place of sacrifices. Synagogues became the focal point of the community and the place where holiness could be sought and found.

It was almost as if they had their own version of FEMA, a planned response to the destruction of the Temple – only it worked! As a result of their ingenious adaptations, access to God was not cut off, and the community was preserved. Judaism would live!

The synagogue would play a central role in educating its members, in creating a community by bringing people together. But important as it was, they knew this would not suffice. It was necessary to find an even more decentralized place where the ideals and values they articulated and were in the process of developing could be transmitted and reinforced in an ongoing fashion.

In a brilliant move, they ordained that the other place to replicate *kedusha*, to find God and to bring holiness into the everyday lives of the people would be the Jewish home! Whereas the Temple was called the Beit Mikdash, the place where holiness was concentrated, the Jewish home would become a *mikdash me'at*, a miniature place of holiness, kind of like a mini-me of Temples. The home would become a microcosm of the sacred Temple, and instead of there just being a single central repository of sanctity, the whole world would emanate with sparks of the Divine.

Each and every Friday night, two hallot would be consumed, just as there were two loaves in the Temple. The hallah would be sprinkled with salt, just as the priests used to sprinkle the sacrifices. Some of these practices are still observed in many of our homes today, and that is the whole point, and why regular observance of Shabbat is so important.

We, no less than the rabbis of 2,000 years ago have the same need to bring holiness into our lives. While we fortunately are not victims of natural disaster or human destruction, our lives are in disarray. We are challenged by rampant individualism coupled with an

increasing sense of anonymity and polarization from each other. We live in a rapidly changing world in which technological advances outpace our ability to master the previous invention. In other words, no sooner do I finally learn how to operate the remote control on my vcr so that it doesn't constantly flash 12:00, than it is replaced by a new contraption for me to master.

Few of us grew up in homes as nice as the homes we live in, and that our children are growing up in. Terms like modern, contemporary, novel, and latest are affixed to products to entice us to assume the product is better and necessary, and therefore, something we must have. Our closets overflow and are larger than the bedrooms in which some of us grew up. Some of our bathrooms could sleep a family of four. We have a different pair of designer shoes for every sport, regardless of whether or not we play the sport. Some of us have as many shoes as Imelda Marcos. Yet, despite the fulfillment of all our material desires, our hearts yearn for something else. We may add and expand our homes, but the truth is, the bigger they get, the emptier we feel. Our homes may be filled with the finest furniture and biggest and latest tv screens, but they are empty of true communication and quality human interactions. We lack the kind of lasting relationships our parents' generation knew.

One of the things the holidays does is bring us back to our roots and our values. It comes to remind us that life is about more than the latest fad and mode of finding pleasure and material satisfaction.

The question confronting us is how to bring meaning and value into our lives, for even though we have so much, deep down, we know something is missing.

I am here to tell you on this Rosh Hashana, that involvement in our synagogue community, coupled with creating homes filled with holiness is a path that leads to finding the meaning and the fulfillment we yearn for. Jewish traditions, as practiced in our homes, can play a crucial role in conveying a sense of history, values, identity and belonging.

Rabbi David Hartman has written that the family is important precisely because of the role played by parents to connect their children to their past. He goes so far as to say, "Unless people understand the depth of what the family could be, they miss the whole meaning of Judaism."

The late Rabbi Morris Adler of Detroit, put it this way, "Judaism begins at home. It doesn't begin at a meeting or a conference or at a philanthropic campaign. It begins in homes where Judaism lives in the atmosphere and is integrated in the normal pattern of daily life. It begins in homes where the Jewish words re-echo, where the Jewish book is honored and the Jewish song is heard. It begins where the child sees and participates in symbols and rites that link him to a people and a culture."

It is the responsibility of parents to prepare their children so they can cope with critical situations, with life itself. A Jewish home is one in which children are taught respect for

parents and teachers, and is not focused only on satisfying the child's needs. The family is an instrument of history, a purveyor of memory and values, all of which ultimately fosters independence. This is achieved when we make our homes places of holiness, a *mikdash me'at*, and it is accomplished in a number of ways.

Jewish symbols should permeate a Jewish home. This can include Jewish works of art, as well as ritual objects. It is best when the symbols are actually used, which creates customs, ceremonies and rituals, all of which lead to memories.

The most obvious and prominent symbol is the mezuzah. It is not an amulet or good luck charm, but something far more profound, proclaiming that the family living there is Jewish. Some people have the custom of kissing the mezuzah when they enter or leave a home as a token of love and respect for the ideas and ideals it contains and to subtly show that God is present wherever we go. It further reminds us when we enter or leave our homes and are about to enter into the everyday world that the teachings of Judaism should accompany us and guide our actions whether in our interactions in the work world or in our family.

The parchment which must be handwritten is what makes the mezuzah holy, and is often as expensive as the actual container. Some of you may know the story about the man who bought a mezuzah for his rabbi when he went to Israel for the very first time. He proudly gave the box to his rabbi and told him, "you know rabbi, it came with a little paper written in Hebrew. But since I figured you already knew how to use it, I threw the instructions away."

The simple requirement to place a mezuzah in our homes can teach us a great deal. One of the debates in the time of the Talmud was whether the mezuzah should be horizontal, in accordance with the injunction to repeat the shema when we lie down at night, or if it should be vertical, since the shema is to be recited when we rise up in the morning. This is why it is placed diagonally, leaning inwards, to teach the importance of compromise in family life.

This in turn points to the principle of "shalom bayit", peace in the home, as something to strive for. While it is doubtful that any of us fully enjoys this blessing, the point is to work for it, to strive to make our homes places where the goal is not just to buy everything on our list, but to make our homes places where holiness prevails, and where the voice of God is sought, and words of Torah are spoken.

Pirke Avot quotes R. Yose Ben Yoezer as having said, "let your house be a meeting place for the wise." His vision is that the home should be a place of education and enlightenment, where sacred ideas and values are transmitted to the next generation. This happens when our homes are not places where we talk *lashon hara* and gossip about our neighbors, and where our conversations consist of more than car pool arrangements, where on Shabbat and other days of the week, we converse about the great ideas of our people and the principles of our heritage, and what it means to be a Jew in the 21st century, of the responsibility of the next generation to carry on our tradition, and of their

obligations as Jews to work for *tikun olam*. We must expose our children to the excitement of discussing the concepts of Judaism and of the great debates of our people. We Jews are admired for our commitment to education. But too many people think this refers only to their obligation to provide their children with the means to attend college. This neither suffices, nor is it what our sages had in mind. Our children need to be equipped to understand what Judaism has to say about the great issues of the day. What position might our sages take on various contemporary crises which pull at our society? Do our children have any connection to the weekly parasha, torah reading? Are they taught to be passionate about the fate of their people, and to care about Jewish survival?

An example of a Jewish value dependent upon the home is *hachnasat orhim*, welcoming guests into your homes, for Shabbat, holidays and other occasions. Holidays should be celebrated at home and in the synagogue, with families and friends. Since it sometimes can get complicated, I want to give you a quick, practical and useful compendium of the holidays.

As a general principle, Jewish holidays are divided between days on which you must starve and days on which you must overeat. Though there are many feasts and fasts on our calendar, none of our holidays require light snacking.

So here it is -- The Dieters' Guide to the Jewish Holidays

Rosh Hashanah -- Feast

Tzom Gedalia -- Fast

Yom Kippur -- More fasting

Sukkot -- Feast

Simchat Torah -- Keep feasting

Month of Heshvan -- No fasts or feasts for a whole month.

Hanukkah -- Feast on potato latkes and sufganiyot, (jelly donuts.)

Fast of the Tenth of Tevet -- No potato latkes, or anything else, for that matter.

Tu B'Shevat -- Feast on fruits.

Fast of Esther -- Fast

Purim -- Eat triangular shaped pastry.

Passover -- Don't eat any pastry you would eat on Purim. Feast on creative variations of matzah.

Shavuot -- Dairy feast (cheesecake, blintzes etc.)

17th of Tammuz -- Fast (definitely no cheesecake or blintzes)

Tish B'Av -- Very strict fast (don't even think about cheesecake or blintzes)

Month of Elul -- New Year will be here in a month. Consider enrolling in The Center for Eating Disorders before High Holidays arrive and the whole cycle starts up again.

On this day when our torah reading centers on the life of the first Jewish family, Abraham and Sara, the tradition guides our thoughts quite naturally towards our own families as well as our lives as individuals. Our rabbis projected into the future and bequeathed to us an amazing gift. Out of the ashes of the destruction of the Temple came the concept of the home as a place of holiness. It has served us well all these millennia.

I would not be surprised if a number of my colleagues speak today about the lessons of Katrina, of what is precious and truly worth saving, and of what to save and take with you if a home is destroyed, a truly important message. But I want to challenge you on this Rosh Hashana to think about our homes in a different context: how can we transform and elevate our homes into places of holiness, where yiddishkeit, Judaism and Jewish values are found.

The home I am describing may seem unattainable, and beyond your reach. But trust me, it is not. You may feel ill-equipped to create such a place. This is where the synagogue plays a role in helping to teach and reinforce these lessons. Do not expect us to do it all, to be solely responsible for teaching your children everything there is to know about Judaism, but approach it as a partnership. Together, we can make a difference.

Take our adult ed classes, come to services, and your homes can become places of ideas where the intellect is stimulated, and Judaism is portrayed as vibrant, dynamic, and important. Are there Jewish books on your bookshelves? Do you subscribe to Jewish magazines, and to our local weekly Jewish newspaper? Do you try to be informed of what is going on in Israel and stay on top of things? Is Shabbat a part of your weekly routine?

I recently reviewed some passages from various ketubot. The words in the wedding document used when a couple starts their life together captures their hopes and dreams and expresses the essence of the kind of homes we should seek to create and of the message I am attempting to convey this morning. An amalgamation of the samples provides some very inspiring imagery. “The bride and groom pledge to work together to build a home based on a foundation of love and dedicated to the love of God; filled with mutual support, reverence for learning, kindness, happiness, friendship and love; to establish a home imbued with Jewish culture and tradition that embraces the beauty of our heritage; to have a home based on Torah and where the flow of the seasons and the passages of time are celebrated through the symbols of Judaism and the traditions of our Jewish heritage.”

May we each, in the New Year, resolve to bring kedusha, holiness into our home, and to make the home we live in a mikdash me’at, a place where holiness resides, where the presence of God is felt, and the spirit of our tradition permeates and enriches our lives.

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