

The Sign that We Are Still in Business:
Parashat VaYakhel

Since this is my first Shabbat back from a three month mini-sabbatical I hope I remember how to do this. In the grand scheme of things three months is not that long a period of time – but the respite from my weekly routine of preparing sermons, writing articles, teaching 4 classes a week and other meetings, obligations and responsibilities allowed me to recharge my batteries and to come back with renewed vigor and energy.

Taking a break from my ongoing commitments offered me the opportunity to step back and think; to reflect and gain perspective on what we as a synagogue do, and how we do it, to think about our mission and greater purpose and how we pursue it, as well as upon my personal goals and work and mission in life.

When I thought about what I wanted to say this morning, I initially thought it would be interesting to review all that has happened in our world over the past three months, and to comment on the major news stories. But then I realized – that would be way too much to cover. All that transpired just in this past week alone is enough to make your head spin!

So instead, I turn to this week's parasha for inspiration -- for the dual themes of this week's Torah reading contain insights related to some of what I discerned and was a constant during my sabbatical.

When we strip away all of the details about this week's reading, as well as the parshiyot of the past few weeks, the primary focus is on the construction of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, the place the Israelites used as a place of worship during their sojourn in the desert. It was a temporary structure, meant to be portable, allowing the people to carry and take it with them on their 40 year sojourn in the wilderness.

It should come as no surprise that our rabbis interpreted the passages we read about the mishkan this week and in the previous few weeks as a metaphor for the place of worship created by later generations – the synagogue.

I recently read an interesting article by Rabbi Marc Angel about award-winning author of more than 80 books and 1,300 articles Dr. Robert Coles who spent time in the early 1960's in the south studying racial conflict. At a time when public schools were being desegregated, he was interested in learning the source of resilience and fortitude of the black children who were cursed and spat upon daily and who frequently had to face threats of violence and even death. Being a child psychiatrist, Dr. Coles wanted to know what gave these children the turpitude and moral strength to endure and to stand up to their detractors in face of the hatred constantly spewed out against them. In his interviews with the African American students, he found that many of the children drew their strength and got encouragement from their churches, which they attended regularly. The children's ministers often preached about righteousness and about the importance of having the courage to stand up against evil, and about God's love of those who were strong in their faith. One student who attended a

high school in Atlanta summed up the role the church played and said, "I'm not as small after church as I am before church."

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In certain respects, our rabbis quoted in the Talmud had a similar goal. They said that a person should use the recitation of traditional prayers for personal reflection. They went so far as to say that a person should come away from prayer a better person, and they saw the synagogue as the place where this transformation occurs.

Our rabbis envisioned the synagogue as a place where holiness can be found, a place which can inspire us to reach for the best in ourselves, where each of us can reach both inward, to find our better inner selves, and outward, to touch others. They defined holiness not as a retreat from the world, but as how we relate to other human beings and the quest to find the spark of the Divine in each of us.

Over the last three months I visited all kinds of synagogues – Conservative, Orthodox and Reform. Some were magnificent edifices exuding grandeur and some were simple storefront places. The one thing they all shared in common is that they served the purpose of being a place where Jews could congregate, come together as a community, find each other, and find God.

Our sages noted that physical structures, as important as they are as places to congregate and to serve the Divine and the community, are not permanent, but temporal. The mishkan, the Tabernacle that served the people in the Wilderness did not last forever, nor did its successor, the Beit Mikdash, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.

Perhaps that is why included in the parasha the same week when we read about the instructions to build a place of holiness the opening verses command us to build another institution, the Sabbath.

Throughout our history, as a persecuted powerless minority dispersed throughout the world we were prohibited from building grandiose structures and cathedrals. In both the Moslem and Christian countries where we dwelled for hundreds of years, it was against the law for Jews to live in buildings or to build synagogues taller than churches or mosques.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel noted that since we were restricted in the structures we were allowed to erect, instead we built a "cathedral in time". Rather than focus on building elaborate physical houses of worship, we adapted and poured our energy into constructing something that was portable, that we could take with us wherever we went. We invested our energy in creating an enduring institution, creating sacred time, the sabbath.

Shabbat became the glue that kept and that keeps the Jewish people together, wherever Jewish communities existed and are found -- then, and today. And so on my travels during my sabbatical I was able to observe Shabbat, and to do so in all kinds of houses of worship.

We are told “*la-asot et hashabbat*” to make, or to do Shabbat. The key word *la’asot*, to “make” or “create” is used to describe both the building of the mishkan, as well as how we are to observe the Sabbath, showing a connection between the two.

The word is also used in the Book of Genesis to describe the act of creation. The linguistic convergence of the three is interpreted to reflect the need to take a break from the activities we undertake six days a week, the act of material creation, to allow the introduction of the spiritual dimension of life in our daily routines one day a week. And so instead of making something, as we do all week long, on the seventh day of the week we refrain from creating and instead make the Sabbath. When we refrain from producing on the Sabbath, when we devote time to our families, when we come to the synagogue we have the potential to appreciate what otherwise would be missing from our daily lives.

And perhaps it should not strike us as so coincidental that today is “National Unplug Day”, a 24 hour break from technology and the devices that we have become so dependent upon. We are so absorbed by our digital devices, constantly checking them to see what is happening, that ironically, we wind up missing out on important things happening in our lives right in front of us at that very moment. The Unplug Day website touts the benefit of disconnecting from digital devices so we can connect with ourselves, our loved ones and our communities in real time. Its goal is to free us from being slaves to our electronic devices, apps and emails.

Sound familiar? What a great idea. I wish we would have thought of that. Actually, we did. It is called Shabbat.

I recall a time a few years ago when I was in Israel at a hotel for Shabbat with my wife Symcha’s family who was celebrating a bar mitzvah. Since they are religious, no one used or looked at their cellphones on Shabbat. At the same hotel there were non-religious secular Jews. I couldn’t help but notice that those who observed Shabbat sat and engaged in conversation with each other. You could hear the sound of laughter and human interaction, while the ones who did not observe Shabbat were relatively quiet. That’s because they barely spoke to each other, for they were all buried in their phones.

The Torah refers to the Sabbath as an “*ot*”, a sign between God and the people of Israel for all times and for all generations, and many see it as foundational and fundamental to the survival of the Jewish people. A 19th century commentator Mahaneh Yisrael makes an analogy. Just as one knows that a business or store is open by the sign outside of the establishment, and that if the sign is gone, it means the enterprise has either moved or closed, similarly, as long as the Sabbath is observed by Jews, it is a sign that we are still in business.

Admittedly, it is not easy to keep shabbat. It takes work, which is why we say *la’asot*, one has to make the Sabbath. Otherwise it will not happen. But its rewards can be great. May we stay in business for many generations to come!

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