

God is Waiting for Us to Speak

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We are taught; God created the world with 10 sayings. 10 is important to Pirkei Avot: it was done with care and concern. It was done thoughtfully. There was a whole process--needs assessment, capital campaign, design before God began creating.

However, when you look closely, and I always recommend verifying Rabbi math, you will note that God only speaks 9 times in the Creation story. That is, the last word of Creation remains unsaid. The world remains incomplete, in need of completion to reveal the moral order that God ordained in calling the world "very good." Perhaps God still needs to finish up, and according to Heschel, it may be our job to say this with God.

The Rabbis are clear that what we do changes the world--either we invite God in or we don't. And when we don't we undo the careful work of creation, the structure and order that ought to be in the world.

Our tools are clear. When we value our shared connection to others and see our basic human connection, when in humility and compassion we seek justice and understanding, then we are helping God say that final word that will perfect our all too broken universe.

But when we are filled with contempt, hatred, inhumane or bigoted views of the other, we drive God out of the picture and increase the brokenness hurt and violence around us.

And there is plenty of this contempt and violence.

In-person friendships and communities are shrinking and loneliness increasing. In the absence of shared bonds and humanity, our views, political and otherwise, harden and are vulnerable to the latest inane tweet or sound bite. We turn our eyes away from inhumane treatment

Violence and inhumanity are widespread, whether the shooting in Pittsburgh or the shooting at the Gilroy Garlic festival. We look at refugees as others, failing to

see their inner shared humanity. Everywhere we are surrounded by acts and language of violence, contempt and hate.

There is so much anger everywhere that it is overwhelming, and so overwhelming that we risk hardening our hearts to the brokenness that daily confronts us.

Yet we are partners in effecting change and healing.

There is a concept in Judaism of *Hillul Hashem* that means the emptying of God out of the world through acts of hate and disconnection. I worry that we have emptied God out of our discourse, our communities, our lives. And we are less as a result. We need more *kiddush hashem*: acts of concern, love, humility, that invite God back in.

Two years ago I was on a clergy trip to Israel and while there met a fascinating Christian thinker named Stephanie Saldana. She grew up in the US and moved to Israel as a Catholic connected to the Arab Israeli community. She spoke movingly and beautifully about her faith. She also spoke about a wedding she chose not to attend rather than cross the green line. She didn't want to break the boycott. At the conclusion of her remarks, she said: If my words have made you angry, I have failed. There is plenty of anger here. What I want to inspire is more compassion and love.

Our usual fear is that if we are compassionate, we have to give something up or be abused. But I feel if Stephanie and I can listen to each other, despite meaningful differences about Israel, if we can start to hold in love what the other feels, there is hope. Absent that effort, there is only violence. And as much as I disagree with many of her views on Israel I have come to know and care about her as a human being.

Well, God created the world in seven days. We too are building something special. It's taking a bit longer than seven days, but it is on time and on budget! We need a place that can invite God back in.

We have chosen a verse for our new Sanctuary: "Make for Me a Sanctuary that I may dwell in your midst."

This verse will adorn our new building and set an intention. The verse is odd. It begins saying Make for Me, singular, Sanctuary, that I may dwell in them, plural. In other words, as Rashi teaches: I will dwell in you, not in the building.

The building becomes a catalyst for our openness to the divine, for our willingness to be transformed.

By creating a space that holds our values, a body for the soul of Kol Emeth, we are building a vessel of hope and promise to inspire us and a new generation. We are intending to build something that will remind us to choose compassion, choose humility, choose valuing our shared humanity by inviting God in.

It will be beautiful. But also humble. We have chosen the story of the mishkan, the movable Sanctuary in the desert, not the Temple. This is about an intimate encounter with God and with the divine.

For us to inhabit our building with meaning, it must inspire and embody certain values. Among them:

Loving your neighbor.

I attended a conference once where we were told that the Ari, the great Jewish mystic, would instruct his students to awaken compassion for each other as they prayed, because loving your neighbor cannot be abstract. It must mean to love the actual people around you.

We were then instructed to look at one another and awaken compassion. For most, this was easy. We had shared a moment or a time of study and it was easy to feel compassion. For others, I had little context but it was easy to awaken those feelings. Yet there was one person who had been rubbing me the wrong way all during the conference. She seemed to self-focused and difficult. And I looked at her and felt all this frustration. It surprised me and I worked on letting it go. To remind myself of her own story and the pain she experienced and which perhaps led to some of what annoyed me. And while we didn't become great friends, it gave me a new and warmer sense of her.

In our new Sanctuary, we will see each other as we pray and when we gather in our new space, and we need to practice love. We need when we sit in the round to see each other and honor and love the members of our community. This will

strengthen us in the world as a whole to feel love and compassion for others as well.

Part of how we feel love is letting people be in their own experience. I had a congregant in New Jersey whose husband was diagnosed just after his retirement with a lethal brain tumor. He died amid great wisdom as he invited people to come to his home and renewed and held onto all his most key relationships.

And then he died, leaving his wife bereft and with a model of wisdom to which she couldn't live up. She was in grief, having lost her beloved partner of four decades and with whom she had hoped to spend years of happy retirement.

She came to me about two months after his death. She was so sad that she sometimes wanted to put her head in the oven. She told me the only thing that stopped her was her grandchildren. And worse, people wanted her to be over her sadness. Someone had even asked her if she was dating yet!

Our space has to have space to hold and carry her sadness; not to fix it.

It's just as true of joy. A few weeks ago a newlywed was leading Shabbat kiddush. He was bouncing up and down in his joy of his new bride and his beloved community. Our space has to hold this joy and share in it.

If we could develop this quality of love in ourselves imagine how it might transform our relationships. If we brought compassion into work meetings, family gatherings, clubs, and looked for opportunities for love, think how much richer and fuller such relationships might be.

We are all created in the divine image.

I want to use an example of what happens at a bar mitzvah – how we look at the young adult vs how the world looks at that person.

This is what a bat mitzvah student recently told me:

I'm in 7th grade. And people are already asking me about college. I get asked which math lane I'm in more often than anything else. And I stood here and I was counted just for being me. I saw adults look at me with real interest--not for my grades or achievements, but just for me. Can't you get them to do that all of the time?

That's how our new building needs to teach us to look at one another. All the time.

Our Sanctuary needs to be accessible to all. Our playground is being made in partnership with Magical Bridge so that everyone can play. We showed a family with a disabled son. He's never been able to go to the playground. He can't climb the steps, and the equipment assumes he is able bodied. They saw the sketches and tried out some of the equipment. He squealed in joy; his parents sobbed in relief.

We are all created in the divine image. We are all bringing a lot of different Jewish experiences into this Sanctuary. Our Rabbis tell us the reason the Amidah begins praising the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, and so forth is because each patriarch and matriarch had their own unique and value experience of God. Every one of us has a unique Jewish experience and our Sanctuary needs to hold all of that.

We will have alternative services and a willingness to experiment alongside traditional forms. We will choose to make this space expansive enough for all of it.

Think how such an awareness of our shared humanity could change our political discourse, for example. Imagine if we remembered our connection with all people and then tried to suggest laws and practices that value the divine image in every single person?

Humility

Our space will be amazing, but imperfect. As we move in, appreciate the planning and effort that went into each space and the overall design. There will be things that aren't quite right. Let's take a breath and get used to it and realize the promise of what our human made imperfect and wonderful new building can be.

And patience with each other. Out there, we are expected to perform perfectly and to say things just right. In our new Sanctuary, I want us to feel compassion, to create space for one another so that we can feel loved for just who we are.

I heard from someone: I am so alone all the time. I live by myself. I have friends, but we seem not to often do things together. And even at kiddush or services, I feel invisible, unseen. I wonder sometimes why I'm even here.

Our new spaces need to be open our eyes to the people around us. Everyone has to be heard and seen.

I heard from someone else: I'm in charge of a mid-stage startup. It's hard and demanding, and I'm always worried about letting the people who work for me down if the company fails. But when I come here, people don't ask me about that. They ask about how I'm feeling and how my wife is. They ask me to sit and have lunch with me. And letting me be me, just me with friends, gives me the strength to go back out and engage in the healing work I am so committed to.

Think of the room we create for others through humility. By realizing we are imperfect, by knowing we need to grow and learn, we remind ourselves to listen and pay attention. Think how much better all our connections become when we do that.

When I was young, I loved playing with Legos and making buildings and spaceships and all kinds of things. It did not suggest a promising career as an engineer.

So I love the construction part of this project. It is exciting to see the buildings take shape. If this is only a building, we will have done this wrong.

As we do it right it becomes a place that invites God in and makes us better, more compassionate, more humble, more able to be God's partner in repairing our too broken world.

The world needs repair. It doesn't need more anger or more contempt. These are seductions of hillul hashem; the world needs more compassion more humility, more love.

Normally one + one equals two. But there is something of the divine, or the deepest sacred core of ourselves, that is limitless. If we make the effort to bring more love, something in us get unlocked, or God helps us discover, a far greater capacity for love than we would have imagined.

We will learn that compassion, humility, our sense of shared humanity make us stronger. It is an illusion that they weaken us; when we invite God in, when our compassion creates Kiddush Hashem, we become stronger and more able to find a path that deters violence and contempt and leads to us being healing partners with God, a place that is indeed tov meod, very good, and wholeness.

By creating this kind of building, it will let us see a model and strengthen in other work that can heal the world. It will give us a place of Sanctuary, a place to acquire faith and understanding and hope, to invite God in, so that we can be partners with God in repairing the world through love and compassion.

May our new building be a place of care, of compassion, of humility, a place that inspires us to be tov meod.