

**Twentieth Anniversary Service**  
**November 6, 2015**  
Rabbi Samuel N. Gordon

When I began to think about what I wanted to say tonight, I had not originally expected to speak about current events. It had not been my plan to be topical or political this evening, but a confluence of events have led me to a recognition that I really cannot speak only in generalities and niceties, even on an occasion such as this. We have often referred to a quote from Rabbi Larry Hoffman: "If the walls of the synagogue are not porous enough to hear the cries of the street, then the cries within will not be heard on high." That has always been a core value of Sukkat Shalom.

These last few weeks, first in Jerusalem, in other cities in Israel, in Hebron especially, have been frightening times of random stabbings, shootings, and cars running over pedestrians. There is no justification for these acts of terror. Jonathan Alter last week said: "Condemn first, and only then contextualize." Let me be clear, I offer no excuse for random stabbings of innocent pedestrians, children, and the elderly. Last week Richard Lakin was murdered on a Jerusalem bus. He was a Bostonian who had made aliyah to Israel and was a beloved educator and activist who fought for peace and understanding between Israelis and Palestinians. He was stabbed to death by someone who had no idea of who he was. Murder is murder!

But to understand the very current events of these last few weeks, we need to look back some 2000 years, and perhaps even further into history. We are in the midst of the Torah cycle of the story of Abraham. Last week the Torah portion was VaYera. It tells the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac upon Mt. Moriah. Mt. Moriah would be associated with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. I have stood beneath that rock, in the Dome of the Rock and imagined Isaac tied above.

Tomorrow morning we will read the portion known as Chaye Sarah—The Life of Sarah, but it is about her death and its aftermath. Abraham purchased the burial place in Kiryat Arba—Hebron—from Ephron the Hitite. These two stories are tied to two sacred places. Jerusalem—Mt Moriah—Temple Mount and Hebron—The Cave of Machpelah—the burial place of Abraham and Sarah. These are among the key Biblical passages that connect the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, and these stories are at the very core of this past month's headlines. Who owns these two holy sites? Who prays where? Whose narrative trumps the narrative of the other?

The terrifying violence of these past few weeks stem from the largely unjustified fears among Muslims that Israel plans to change status quo of the Temple Mount—Haram al Sharif—Holy Sanctuary. Official Israeli policy is that the status quo remains. Jordan controls the Temple Mount and the Muslim Waqf is in charge of its functions. But the truth is that there are forces in Israel now, with

political authority and credibility, who are fighting for the rights of Jews to pray on the mount in opposition to the status quo agreements. There are extremists, fanatics, once considered so far out of the mainstream that they were relegated to the craziest wings of zealots, who are now even accepted as potential Likud members of the Knesset. These are ultra nationalist Jews who are committed to the establishment of a Third Temple standing where the Dome of the Rock exists today. Just this week, in anticipation of his visit to Washington, PM Netanyahu is ready to appoint as his communications director, Ran Baratz, who had written about his desire for the construction of the Third Temple as well as his attack on President Obama as an anti-Semite. An Israeli cabinet member declared that she hopes to see the Israeli flag flying over the Dome of the Rock. These are Messianic true believers who anticipate the End of Days and are happy to create a conflagration that would lead to the coming of the Messiah and the rebuilding of the ancient Temple.

Let me be clear! That is NOT Judaism! It is not our Story—not our Narrative!!! We are not the inheritors of the Temple. We have gone far beyond the Temple cult of sacrifice, altar, and priesthood. We are the inheritors of the Rabbis. The Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70—nearly 2,000 years ago, and we should be GLAD! Judaism survived the destruction of the Temple in 70, because for the Rabbis, as well as the early followers of Jesus, the Temple was irrelevant. It was already an anachronism. The truth is, even the destruction of the 1<sup>st</sup> Temple in 586 BCE helped transform Judaism and allowed Judaism to flourish. From that time until now, the Diaspora has been home of the majority of world Jewry.

This is what we learned from the Destruction(s) of the Temple: Judaism is dynamic because it could survive radical disruption. It is a religion of innovation and creativity. We are **not stuck!** In each generation we have been able to write a new story and narrative. From the year 70 we were no longer tied to that one place or location. The Destruction of the Temple allowed Judaism to be transformed. From the Temple in Jerusalem with its priesthood, altar, and sacrifice we moved to prayer, rabbis, and synagogues. Even more, we brought the sacred encounter with God into our own homes, our tables, our teachings.

And that brings us to Sukkat Shalom in the year 2015. We stand here, legitimately claiming to be the inheritors of a long tradition of history of radical innovation and adaptation. It is why we are here. We are NOT a people of Sacred Place. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that lesson clearly. Judaism does not sanctify space. It sanctifies TIME. We encounter the Divine each Shabbat. Time is Holy. You can be anywhere in the world, in any building, or no building, and God is in that place. Shabbat is our Cathedral. We have no St Peter's Basilica of Rome, or Notre Dame of Paris, or St Paul's Cathedral of London. We have Shabbat—Time. We have the Holidays. The key moments in our lives are sacred.

Where does that put Sukkat Shalom? For 18 years, we existed without a building of our own. Sacred time and moments always were more important than sacred space. Wherever we gathered was sacred. Words and ritual connected us.

We are now blessed with this incredible building and sanctuary. It is moving, inspirational, and welcoming, but it is still not what defines us. These brick walls do not define and determine our identity. I believe it is easier to sanctify time in a space of our own—but it is not a requirement. The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints—the Mormon Church—is also our sacred space. The picnic shelter at Gilson Park is our sacred space. When we share worship at First Congregational Church, we are in sacred space. Even the auditorium at the Community Recreation Center is sacred space when we fill it with our voices in song and prayer.

As I said, Heschel taught that Judaism was a religion of Sacred Time. We go back to the truth of that teaching often. But, even more importantly, his contemporary, Martin Buber, taught that spiritual life is about sacred relationships. At the center of the ancient Temple was the Holy of Holies. In that room was the Holy Ark of the Covenant. It was thought that God lived in the space right above the Ark, in between the faces of the cherubim, the angels, turned to each other.

But the Temple is gone. There is no Holy of Holies. There is no Ark of the Covenant. Instead, we believe that God lives in the space between each of us in our most meaningful encounters. The I and Thou of Buber taught us to find God in each other and in our meetings with each other. Each of us contains the Divine Breath—a measure of the first breath of God that animated Adam. We are made of the clay of the earth—the adamah--that God formed into Adam—the first human from humus. God breathed into the earthling “Ruach Elohim”—the breath of God. And so God—the Divine—is in each one of us. But it is not only that we see God in each other, but that God exists within the space between us—between our two faces as we turn to each other in love, caring, understanding, and respect.

God is in Relationship. I have said many times that the value of Sukkat Shalom over these past twenty years has been that friendships have been formed. We are an extended family. We have built a community. We know each other, and we care about each other. We find the Divine at those moments when we are open to the holiness of another person whom we care about. That is what Sukkat Shalom is: US! a congregation, a sacred gathering, a holy community. Let it be clear, the person who has helped build those relationships for most of these twenty years is Judy Buckman. She has created, nurtured, and sustained that culture that has defined Sukkat Shalom and has allowed this institution to truly touch your lives.

Tonight we celebrate those twenty years. What have we truly built? What will last? I hope that the transformations that have occurred have been personal for many of you. I hope that your lives have been touched and enriched and that Sukkat Shalom has added meaning to your own sacred moments. I would like to imagine that Sukkat Shalom has opened your eyes to new ways of thinking, allowed you to experience the world with a brighter lens that added clarity in the midst of confusion, awakened in you a greater sense of purpose and mission, deepened for you a caring and love for others around you, and made you all the more aware of how blessed we all are to be embraced within this Sukkah of Peace.

We learn about the ancient story of Balaam from the Book of Numbers. Balaam was sent to curse the Children of Israel, but instead, only blessings and praise emerged from his lips. He looked at the encampment of the Hebrew people, saw their tents, their dwelling places in the wilderness, and exclaimed:

“How lovely are your tents Oh Jacob, your dwelling places/Sanctuaries Oh Israel!”

I could easily add: How lovely are your Sukkot—your shelters—these shelters of Peace. Mah Tov Ohalecha Ya’akov, Mishkenotecha Yisrael! How blessed we all are to be gathered together, here, as one sacred, holy community. May God continue to bless this wonderful congregation as we move on to our very bright future.

Amen