

Building A Spiritual Home

Parshat Teruma 5784/2024

Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation

Rabbi Aaron Finkelstein

A few weeks ago, something happened which was both unexpected and unsurprising. It was a weekday afternoon and it was time for Mincha and there were 5 or 6 men from our community signed up on the minyan WhatsApp group. I walked into the sanctuary and saw two women I didn't know. One of the women was clearly there to support the other.

In speaking with the women, I found out that she was there to say kaddish for her sister who had passed away two days earlier. Instantly, our shul became a shiva minyan. After a few desperate pleading texts and WhatsApp messages, the minyan was official, allowing the mourners present to say kaddish.

Afterwards, the woman who'd lost her sister expressed her appreciation. She said, "I'm just so thankful that each of you were here tonight as I mourn my sister. I'm grateful that I was able to say her name aloud to you. I'm so grateful for my tribe."

I've been thinking about this woman, her words and her sentiments for a few weeks now and they have stayed with me. She was not even the most recent "walk-in" that we've received in search of sanctuary and the community within it. It's nearly a weekly occurrence that someone comes here looking to pray and be supported by this community. It is both an awesome responsibility and also a real burden, for there of course have been times - especially in the afternoons - when we don't have a minyan, leaving everyone who is assembled feeling frustrated and unfulfilled. Our weekday prayer experience here, like in many shuls, is a perpetual work in progress.

There is a very basic question hovering over this week's Torah portion, Parshat Teruma which describes the formation of the Mishkan, the wandering Tabernacle in the desert:

Ultimately, as we read in the Haftorah just a few moments ago, King Solomon would build a permanent resting place for God's presence: the Beit HaMikdash. Why bother with building a smaller, less impressive portable version in the desert?

The great Spanish commentator the Ramban (25:1) offers the following response:

וידוע המשכן הוא, שיהיה הכבוד אשר שכן על הר סיני שוכן עליו בנסתר

The secret of the Tabernacle was that the Glory which abode upon Mount Sinai [openly] should abide upon it in a concealed manner.

According to the Ramban, the Mishkan was meant to be like a mini-Sinai experience. While God's presence had been revealed with great fanfare, lighting and thunder, in the Mishkan it would be revealed in a more quiet, hidden way.

The Gemara in Megillah (29a) takes it even a step further:

תניא, רבי שמעון בן יוחי אומר: בוא וראה כמה חביבין ישראל לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, שבכל מקום שגלו — שכינה עמהן. גלו למצרים — שכינה עמהן, שנאמר: "הנגלה נגליתי לבית אביך בהיותם במצרים וגו'". גלו לבבל — שכינה עמהן, שנאמר: "למענכם שלחתי בבלה". ואף קשה עתידין ליגאל — שכינה עמהן, שנאמר: "ושב ה' אלהיך את שבותך". והשיב לא נאמר, אלא "ושב". מלימד שהקדוש ברוך הוא שב עמהן מבין הגלויות.

It is taught in a baraita: Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai says: Come and see how beloved the Jewish people are before the Holy One, Blessed be He. As every place they were exiled, the Divine Presence went with them. They were exiled to Egypt, and the Divine Presence went with them...

They were exiled to Babylonia, and the Divine Presence went with them...

So too, when, in the future, they will be redeemed, the Divine Presence will be with them, as it is stated: "Then the Lord your God will return with your captivity"

(Deuteronomy 30:3). It does not state: God will bring back, i.e God will cause the Jewish people to return, but rather it says: "God will return," which teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, will return together with them from among the various exiles...

The Jewish people's experience of God was not limited to Sinai or the Mishkan. Rather, says the Gemara, God went with the Jewish people to wherever they were exiled and Godself is in *galut* with us, so much so that God will return with us once we are redeemed.

In 1972, Rav Soloveitchik gave a public lecture at Kehillat Jeshurun (KJ) on the Upper East Side of Manhattan entitled, "The Synagogue as an Institution and as an Idea." In this lecture the Rav made a slightly startling assertion:

"First, man is in exile. Man is a homeless being. Second, exiled man or homeless man must pray; he has a strong need to pray; through prayer he redeems himself from his loneliness."

The Rav goes on to describe the shul he grew up in, a humble Chabad *shtiebel*, and the change that would occur on Friday afternoons when people would come into shul. *“The population of that town consisted almost exclusively of poor people, workers, tradesmen, particularly peddlers...you cannot imagine the primitive conditions in which the Russian peasants lived. Yet after spending a full week in those primitive shanties, the people used to come home every Friday afternoon...to pray means to return home.”*

For Rav Soloveitchik, we are all “homeless” on a religious level. We are in exile, which is why so many of our prayers speak of an end of galut and a return to Zion. We are also existentially exiled from God, until we walk into this space, to our spiritual home. When we come here and pray, we are home.

However, Rav Soloveitchik also adds that there is a difference between a house and a home. This building is not just a physical construction. We call it something very distinct: a *Beit Keneset*. In fact, Rabbi Yishmael ben Elazar in the Gemara (Shabbat 32a) says, be careful about what you call this place and this thing:

תניא, רבי ישמעאל בן אֶלְעָזָר אומר: בעון שני דברים עמי האֶרְצוֹת מתים — על שְׁקוּרִין
לְאֶרֶן הַקֹּדֶשׁ “אַרְנָא”, וְעַל שְׁקוּרִין לְבֵית הַכְּנֶסֶת “בֵּית עַם”.

On account of two sins, ignoramuses [amei ha'aretz] die young: Because they call the Holy Ark simply ark, and because they call the synagogue the house of the people.

Perhaps it makes sense to not just call this an ark, the same word for a closet in modern Hebrew. After all, it is the *aron kodesh*, the holy ark. But what is so bad about calling a shul a “Beit Am”, a house of the nation?

Rav Soloveitchik explains that a Beit Keneset represents much more. The *Am* refers to the nation of Israel, right now in this moment. Rather, this space is a home for a much larger body, the entire Jewish people, *Kenesset Yisrael*, the full “gathering” of Israel.

Beit Keneset connotes something much larger than even the nation, meaning something more like the entire Jewish collective, past, present and future. Anshe Sholom then is the home of the entire Jewish people, for all time.

When we step into this space, we are part of a much larger tribe and this means we represent the entire Jewish people. For that visitor who was here to say kaddish, we weren't just ourselves but rather, part of her tribe ready to welcome her and support her. And when we do this, God meets us here as well, as the Rav adds, “Beit Haknesset is the home of God because it is the home of man.”

Being a part of a Beit Keneset - the home of the Jewish people - then is a big responsibility. It means that we have to show up, to be here for the possibility that others might be here.

Make no mistake about it: as R' Devorah Schoenfeld recently said, the rest of Chicago looks at us and relies upon us for a traditional daily prayer. We are the only game in town.

And in case people think I am just speaking to the men's side, we need women here as well for you are part of the Jewish people. We each have things or people in our lives to pray for. And if not, try to come on the off chance that we have a visitor here, a woman who is saying kaddish, so that she is not the only one, and can be embraced by the caring and thoughtful supportive community we have here. There are many weekdays when a couple of people are the difference between this being a supportive community, representing the larger Jewish people and this being a big mostly empty room a bit after 5pm.

We all hold two identities when we walk in the building. It is our community, our tzibbur, and it is our home. But for someone else who comes to visit, we are also strangers of sorts, we take on the identity of the *Kenesset Yisrael*, part of the larger, imagined Jewish community. We are other people's tribe and they rely on us. Please, don't let them down - pick a day during the week, or once a month and come here to be part of the tribe.

Rav Soloveitchik writes that God is waiting for us, in this *mikdash me'at*, every single day. The Mishkan was about continuing the sanctity of Sinai, in a more hidden way. If you want to experience God's presence, and see it revealed, you have to show up, not just on Shabbat but during the week when it's a bit quieter, and when you have the chance to become a familiar stranger and welcome somebody home.