

Praying on Zoom (Seeking the Holy of Holies in 2020)

by Rabbi Katie Mizrahi

Where is the holiest place?

Is it the Western Wall in Jerusalem?

The Kaaba in Mecca?

Is it the thick halo of aliveness surrounding an ancient redwood?

Or the anonymous hospital room

where the angel nurse in hazmat

holds up the phone

so the mother can say goodbye?

Is it that field by the ocean

sanctified by intimacy,

where eyes opened in tearful amazement

knowing love, connection, beauty

so real, so everything?

Or in that familiar (childhood) memory place

with its details

ever so slightly

matching and mismatching

mythical memory

resurrecting earlier versions of who you were?
Holy space can be found in the quiet graveyard
Holy Ground
holding bones
ghosts watching
fathers crying
stones reminding
how fleeting
we are.

Some places are holy from the outside in,
stark rock faces,
sacred mountains and rivers,
beautiful beyond imagination,
ancient beyond human scale.

There are holy places our ancestors made.
Sanctuaries of soaring architecture,
adorned with human artistry
filled and emptied of
whispers, song, and tears.

The tabernacle teaches -
it can be anywhere,

any oasis or barren hillside
in the desert
on your way.

It's where the pillar of cloud rests,
and the people stop
and set up their intentions and their tapestries and
eat and
sing.

And Home.

Home is a holy place of course!

It's where we return to
for sleep and showers,
to nurse our wounds,
which can only be done unguarded.

I won't presume
Home is a refuge,
always safe.

It can be cluttered, unconscious, loud and stinky, dangerous, painful.

Home is many things.

Holy and unholy.

For me,

it's where I release

a layer of self-consciousness.

Away from public eyes,

I engage in my worst vices.

I nestle in my cozy unprofessional pajamas.

I cuddle with my children.

I cry uncontrollably on the floor.

I dance.

I tend my garden.

And now,

Yom Kippur 2020,

the EYE of ZOOM

enters HOME

every home,

however grimy,

however lonely or crowded,

however unsuitable.

And our sanctuary seems to be

a screen of boxes,
faces focused, distracted,
a chaos of clutter and cats,
muted singing mouths.
Our sanctuary becomes
a jumble of distant living rooms,
phrases in the chat bar.

We toggle
to a shared virtual space,
too many expressions to track,
too many tech stumbles to immerse.

We toggle back
to the rooms where we sit,
in our yet-physical bodies,
breathing in localized smells,
breathing out aerosols,
seeing in three dimensions
so much that is invisible
to our zoom-mates.
We trust that the faces are real.

This is not television,
though that training is deep.

We see our words and melodies register on faces in real time.

Almost.

We adapt

to a new etiquette of muting and signs

and the unpredictable instability of the internet.

But

the screen is not the sanctuary.

The sanctuary is not in the screen.

The sanctuary is where you ARE.

And we are not simulating a service.

This IS a service.

We are not watching others pray.

We ARE praying.

At least, that's how it's meant to be.

How it's always meant to be.

And if you're not sure what that means,

you're not alone.

It's not easy to figure out what prayer means.

Maybe prayer is words,

and maybe prayer is silence,

and maybe it's music,
and maybe it's dancing
and maybe it's crying.

Now is the time to figure out
what it is for YOU to pray in this moment.

The screen is not the sanctuary.
The sanctuary is where you are.
And coming to a service is not about watching someone else.
It's not about the High Priest going into the Holy of Holies for everyone else.

Today is Yom Kippur and YOU are the High Priest.
Where you are,
in your heart,
in your home,
THAT is the holy of holies.
YOUR confession
YOUR prayer
not someone else's -
THAT is what's going to save the world.