

Lighting the Fire in Our Hearts

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“How does the city sit empty, that once was filled with people?” Such was the cry of the author of Lamentations who had witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem. These words have great resonance this week, as we have witnessed our workplaces, schools, and highways empty out and our silent airports go silent. In the past when faced with frightening times—times such 9-11 and the Pittsburgh and Poway shootings—we were able to gather as a congregation and as an interfaith community, but right now that comfort is not available to us.

There is irony that this week, a week in which we are not able to sit together in our sanctuary, our weekly Torah portion is *Vayekhel-Pekude*, portions that focus entirely on the ancient *Mishkan*, the portable Temple that the Israelites built during their desert wanderings. The menorah in the *Mishkan* was designed to give every Israelite the experience of standing at the burning bush and sensing the presence of God during their desert wanderings. Our rabbis believed that the commandment to build the *Mishkan* came after the incident of the Golden Calf and demonstrated how frightened the people were and how much they needed a physical sign of God’s support.

The *Mishkan* was the predecessor of the great Temple in Jerusalem, the Jerusalem Temple being God’s special place, a nexus between heaven and earth, and the focus of our Haftarah this week.

When the Jewish people were not able to come to the Temple, they mourned. We know this from reading “By the Waters of Babylon,” a Psalm that illustrates that while living in the Babylonian Exile, the Israelites wondered how they could sing God’s song without visiting God’s Temple. We also know about this mourning from the writings of the rabbis who stood on a hill overlooking the remnants of the Temple and wondered how the Jewish people would survive without their center.

And yet, we have been without the Jerusalem Temple for more of Jewish history than we possessed it. And yet, even though the Temple was gone, Jewish life continued.

The new institutions created were not called Temples, not until the Reform movement centuries later. Instead, they called themselves *Kehillah Kedoshah*, holy congregations, with the focus on the people and not on the place. In that way, they captured something of the original instruction to build the *Mishkan*, when God said, “*Ve asu lee mikdash, veshchanti be tocham*: Let them build me a sanctuary, that I may dwell, not in it, the place, but among them, the people.”

Coming into the synagogue helps us find a sense of spiritual elevation. For some, this sense of elevation is in the architecture; for others it comes through the music or from joining together in community. The minyan, the quorum of ten for prayer, has been an invitation for God’s presence since at least *Geonic* times (early medieval era). Yet traditional texts also teach that God’s presence can be

felt even when a minyan cannot be put together. Whether we are three family members joining in a meal, two friends talking with each other, or a lone individual sitting in contemplation, it is possible to find God's presence. In *Pirke Avot* we find this teaching:

Rabbi Shimon said: "But, if three have eaten at one table, and have spoken there words of Torah, [it is] as if they had eaten at the table of the All-Present, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*," and he quotes a verse from Ezekiel (*Ezekial 41:2*).

Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradion said, "If two sit together and there are words of Torah [spoken] between them, then the *Shekhinah* abides among them," and he quotes a verse from Malachi (Malachi 3:16). Then he continued, "Now [that] I have [scriptural proof for the presence of the *Shekhinah*] [among] two, how [do we know] that even [for] one who sits and studies Torah, the Holy One, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, fixes his reward?" And he quotes from Lamentations. "As it is said, "Though he sit alone and [meditate] in stillness, yet God is with him there" (Lamentations 3:28).

We are not able to gather as a whole congregation, or even as a minyan. We may be with a few family members in our home, or we may be alone, yet we can reach out for that same sense of Divine Presence and of peace.

When I was a rabbinic student, one of my favorite stories was a story of the Hasidim, a story about loss but also about being able to hold onto what is most important. I'd like to share it with you.

When Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, saw that the Jewish people were threatened by tragedy, he would go to a special place in the forest where he lit a fire, recited a particular prayer, and asked for a miracle to save the Jews from the threat. Because of the Holy Fire and faithfulness of the prayer, the miracle was accomplished, thus averting the tragedy.

Later, when the Baal Shem Tov's disciple, the Maggid of Mezrich, had to intervene with heaven for the same reason, he went to the same place in the forest, where he told the Master of the Universe that while he did not know how to light the fire, he could still recite the prayer. Again, the miracle was accomplished.

Later still, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov, in turn a disciple of the Maggid of Mezrich, went into the forest to save his people. "I do not know how to light the fire," he pleaded with God, "and I do not know the prayer, but I can find the place and this must be sufficient." Once again, the miracle was accomplished.

Then it was the turn of Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn, the great grandson of the Maggid of Mezrich, who was named after the Baal Shem Tov. In order to avert the threat, he sat in his armchair, holding his head in his hands, and said to God, "I am unable to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story. That must be enough."

This week, when we can't come to synagogue, nor can we join together in a minyan, the fire must be lit in our own hearts, and we must tell the story. For now, this must be enough.