“The Good in Us Will Win.”
Mishkan T’filah; Reform Siddur
Chanukah 2018 (5779)

“So where are the holy places?...A holy place is wherever that which is most divine in us meets that which is most human in God. A holy place is wherever a creative expectation is realized. A holy place is wherever life is truly lived; wherever positive direction is found; wherever peace is achieved; wherever love is shared; wherever commitment to good acts is established. A holy place is wherever tomorrow is viewed in a positive light; wherever depression and pessimism and defeatism and fear and negativism are dispelled for even a moment. A holy place is wherever a lie is put to rest, and wherever truth is discovered, or an eternal harmony revealed. You see, a holy place has nothing to do with the place itself, but rather with what happens to us there.”
Rabbi Raymond Zwerin
Erev Rosh Hashanah sermon, 1984
Delivered at Pearl Street Synagogue

Chanukah is not a major Jewish holiday. Contrary to the misperception of many, it is also not the Jewish form of Christmas. The major Jewish holidays that span the year include: Shabbat, celebrated weekly; Rosh Hashanah; Yom Kippur; Sukkot/Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah; Tu B’Shevat; Purim; Passover; Shavuot; Lag B’Omer and Tisha B’Av. Chanukah is not one of them. Existing as a minor Jewish holiday and meaning “dedication,” it is not found in the Torah; it is not a biblical holiday. Celebrated anywhere between late November to late December, it exists as a marker of religious freedom—includes the first battle for religious freedom—and engages such issues as religious oppression, religious freedom, identity, and the vicissitudes of assimilation of the Jewish people into secular societies. It is the story of the Maccabees who fought a 3-year guerilla war against the mighty armies of the Syrian/Greeks to rout them out of the land of Israel and to rescue the Temple in Jerusalem, restoring it from having been defiled by worship of a pagan god, Zeus, and a place where pigs wandered, or were sacrificed on the desecrated altar. The story of relighting the menorah with very little oil that miraculously lasted 8 days is the myth that is marked today by the lighting of the chanukiah (Chanukah menorah), candle by candle, over 8 days.

In 168 BCE, the Syrian Greeks under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, sought to impose their Hellenistic culture—which many Jews found attractive—hence the issue of the threat of assimilation and loss of identity. By 167 BCE, Antiochus intensified his campaign by defiling the Temple in Jerusalem and banning Jewish practice—outlawing observance of Shabbat, the festivals and circumcision. Altars and idols were set up for the worship of Greek gods and the Jews were given two options: conversion or death.

Enter the Maccabees, a priestly family with their refusal to bow to idolatry, their determination to preserve Judaism and their consequent leadership of a resistance movement eventually routing the Syrians, restoring the Temple, purifying and rededicating it and giving us the 8-day holiday that commemorates victory over overwhelming odds. A victory that also gives us themes rooted in the refusal to submit to the religious demands of an empire practicing idolatry, the struggle against total assimilation into another culture and loss of Jewish identity.

Originally, the period of an 8-day celebration was likely put into place by the Maccabees as a delayed celebration of Sukkot, a 7-day holiday occurring in autumn but which they had not had time to observe and observed it once the Temple was restored and rededicated. The story of the jar of oil lasting 8 days entered into the story of Chanukah centuries later.

Today, the holiday serves to remind the Jewish people to stand firmly against threats of their identity, peoplehood and culture and to maintain those values—l’odor v’odor—from generation to generation. Since Chanukah is placed close to the holiday of Christmas on the secular calendar (25th of Kislev on the Jewish calendar), Jewish parents often struggle to maintain a strong Jewish identity for their children vis-à-vis the glitz and bright lights of the Christmas holiday, AKA “the December Dilemma.” But struggle they do, buttressed by a strong reminder from Chanukah of the fine line they tread between adaptation to a secular culture and too much assimilation into it. Supported also by the voice of a single priest, Mattathias Maccabee, echoing over two thousand years, refusing to submit to idolatry, saying, “No!” loudly and alone and insisting on the return of the Temple—and the people—to a holy place.
Threats to a Temple? Outside forces wreaking havoc on a Jewish place of worship? The challenge to keep on believing when defeat seems to have gained the day? When hopelessness is the only dream at night? Sounds like the time of the Maccabees two thousand years ago. But it was 1979. 1980. No, there was no Syrian/Greek military monster-horde, there was no taking-over of a synagogue by military forces. But there were incompetent professionals—architects, engineers and a construction company and a soil containing bentonite—who brought destruction and, yes, a feeling of defilement upon a synagogue and its dedicated, hard-working people: the congregants of Temple Sinai in Denver, Colorado and its charismatic young rabbi, Raymond Zwerin.

Temple Sinai, now 51 years old, started its life by three families of young adults (the Lutzes, the Shoms and the Wagners) and their enthusiasm over an exceptionally bright, talented and dedicated rabbi who was slated to leave Denver for Los Angeles and a very promising rabbinate. But those three young families, convinced they wished to be led and spiritually guided by Rabbi Zwerin, persuaded him to remain in Denver and, together, they started Temple Sinai in 1967. The office for Rabbi Zwerin was a rented space in an office building on Colorado Blvd. across from University Hills shopping center. And for a place of worship? That was solved by renting space at First Plymouth Congregational Church on the corner of Hampden Ave. and Colorado Blvd., a relationship that came to enrich both congregations. Services were held at Plymouth on Friday nights and Saturdays along with religious school on Saturday and Monday nights as well as High Holiday services, the parents telling their children that the large structure in the front of the sanctuary of First Plymouth Church was a “T” standing for “Temple.” The congregations shared Rabbi Zwerin and Rev. Haskins, each preaching a sermon a year for the other and joint Thanksgiving services were held, continuing to the present day.

Beyond all odds, Temple Sinai’s congregation grew. Families were attracted to its enthusiasm, youthful vitality and message and within 8 years, they started to build their own synagogue. Rabbi Zwerin’s words in his Yom Kippur sermon of 1980 describe the atmosphere in which Temple Sinai began. “A lot of people prophesied we’d never succeed with this venture in Judaism. Every rabbi in the community gave us about two years tops. Then after 8 years of unprecedented growth, when we began to prepare for building this Temple structure, the unofficial odds makers were predicting that we’d never even finish, win, place or show. But we knew better,” said Rabbi Zwerin to his congregation, “you and I. We parlayed pluck and good planning, hard work and foresight and did the job...well.” Land was purchased (on East Dartmouth St.) and architects were hired. And the fund raising was initiated. Would the young congregation come through? Rabbi Zwerin continues, “We were a congregation of 250 families. Many of us were young professionals then, just getting started in new practices. Doctors, lawyers and CPA’s just out of college with bills in abundance and infants to match our bills....Again, the unofficial odds makers laughed. But, guess what? We did it!” In 1976 they moved in and dedicated the new synagogue. The governor, congress people, community leaders, friends from First Plymouth Congregational Church joined with Sinai congregants to celebrate. The mezuzot went up. “We were here to stay.” (Yom Kippur Sermon, 1980)

Throughout the building project, exponential growth continued. In spite of planning for a 20% drop because of asking for funds, only 2 members left and 70 families joined—the religious school topped out at 500 children—the largest in the city. “Our programs were flourishing, services were overflowing….Of course, there were a few problems with the building. A few cracks began to appear in its second year. ‘Normal settling,’ said the architect and contractor. ‘Simply repair what you can and the rest will take care of itself.’” (Ibid.)

But the cracks did not “take care of themselves.” They began to widen. Daylight shone through some. Bricks began to splay off in the school wing for no reason. One to two-inch openings appeared in the outside kitchen walls and in the courtyard. “At night, if one listened closely, small popping noises were dismay ing..new cracks began to appear in walls previously unaffected. The front doors were suddenly out of alignment...A major glass doorway started to bend. One night a glass panel broke. It was replaced at no small cost. Almost immediately, the doors began to jam.” (Ibid.)

Consequently, Rabbi Zwerin gave a Yom Kippur sermon in 1980 that delivered a disastrous message. With heart-aching presentation, he told his congregation of devoted members, “The story I have to tell this morning is as difficult a task as any I’ve ever had. I have not slept well in weeks because of it. I did not ask for the honor of telling it nor do I relish the occasion chosen for its telling. I wanted to be able on this most wonderful of sabbaths to speak about love, about elections, about Israel, about almost anything else but what I am about to tell you.” No one in that congregation moved. There was a perfect silence. Having just married and, thereby, a new member of the congregation, it was one of the first sermons I heard Rabbi Zwerin give. But many highly incredible sermons later, this one was then and remains now, his most riveting. Calling it moving is not even close to what it felt like in that sanctuary. And the feeling of broken hearts? That was palpable. Carefully, artfully, methodically and articulately, Rabbi Zwerin led his congregation through their short history: of the formation of Temple Sinai, of its growth, of the dedication of its young members, of its uncommon successes, of the hard work they all gave to bring about their own synagogue building—only to have to tell them that it was falling apart.

He shared with the congregation that an engineering firm of high repute, Jorgensen and Hendrickson, was hired by the Board of Trustees to study the building and render a report. Over 6 months they studied every aspect of Temple Sinai and reported that
over the past year, the changes had been dramatic with no wall free of hairline cracks and no side without major areas of stress. Their assessment pointed a finger at all of the principles: the architect, the builder, the soil engineer and the structural engineer. All of them had made major mistakes in making the building unstable, including gross negligence in the structure to accommodate for the characteristics of bentonite, a type of clay, in the soil.

The congregation remained in the building, keeping it safe with constant repairs (think large steel bands holding walls together) at the cost of $150,00 to $250,00 per year from 1979-1983, long enough to win the law suit conducted pro bono by Sinai member, Al Wolfe, that gave sufficient funds to purchase another site. In 1983, the old Pitts Elementary School at Hampden Avenue and Glencoe Street was rented from Denver Public Schools with the plan to purchase it. Over Chanukah 1983, the entire membership of 300 families worked for two weeks taking everything out of the building from carpet to ceiling tiles and toilets and copper tubing. Members moved, tore down, stored, shoved, dragged and drove everything possible over to Pitts School. Services started there January 1984. High Holiday services for the next 3 years took place at the old Temple Emanuel, a beautiful Moorish-style structure, then called the Pearl Street Synagogue. With the monies from the law suit and another building fund drive, a new Temple Sinai sanctuary wing was built adjacent to the Pitts School—said purchase negotiated with the help of Sinai congregant, Ed Pepper.

Rabbi Zwerin’s fateful sermon on that Yom Kippur of 1980 was more prophetic than perhaps he realized. But, on the other hand, perhaps it was a true prediction of the strength of his people. Telling them they were “...a very strong and stable group of dedicated Jews...whose children are learning about our values and history and traditions as a people and loving it because we’re loving teaching them—our children are positive committed Jews. They come back from college and tell me so. They come back from Israel and tell me so. They get married and join Temple as a new family—that tells me so. They continue to study after Bar/Bat Mitzvah and tell me so.” He finished: “...let me conclude this by letting you in on a personal observation... What makes us great as a people is our ability to master challenge. We will meet this test and we will emerge from it mature in our self. We will measure and be measured by how we meet our test.” (Ibid.)

In the autumn of 1987, the new sanctuary was dedicated and soon thereafter, the congregation held its first High Holiday services there. Placed above the entryway in the foyer was and still is—a stained glass piece of art. Created and designed by Sinai congregant, Helen Ginsburg, it depicts a bush with flames in oranges and reds surrounding it but not burning it. The flames actually form a phrase of Hebrew letters, the phrase in Hebrew reading: “and the bush was not consumed.” (Exodus 3:2) States Helen Ginsburg, “I wanted an image that spoke to the resilience of our congregation; that greets you as you enter and blesses you as you leave, reflecting the many colors of life.” The congregation continued to grow. Today it numbers approximately 1,000 member families.

“V’shinantam l’vanecha. You shall teach your children.” While the first Temple Sinai structural building was falling apart, as the cracks appeared and widened, as wind blew through the open spaces between bricks in the school wing, scattering papers hither and yon, the heart of Temple Sinai remained a beating force—the teaching of its children. The religious school went on and forward, seemingly not skipping a beat. Teen-agers in Sinai during the late 1970’s lived through the crisis of the building but their parents continued with their children’s religious education, with such dedication that the confirmation class of 1976/1977 numbered 46 teens strong. It was such a large class that it was decided to divide it in half: one half of the teens would attend confirmation classes in the summer of 1976 and the other half in the winter of 1977. Volunteer teachers from the congregation taught both halves. The youth selected Shabbat as their topic of study. Together with their teachers, Judy Schwartz, Verna Lind and Anita Churches (of blessed memory), they gleaned knowledge of the weekly holiday, Shabbat. Using as their basis for their curriculum a quote from the Talmud, “Shabbat was God’s guarded and precious treasure, a day to be rededicated to building a relationship with the Divine and reconnecting with the spiritual,” they bonded readily and had many in-class readings and discussions with considerable hands-on experience—including baking Challah, making their own tallit from muslin and an Erev Shabbat dinner at the end of the summer session. They visited the West Side (for years, a vibrant, vigorous community of Jewish people in west Denver), the mikveh there, a nursing home, the cemetery there and the Hebrew Educational Alliance Synagogue (then on the west side)—Rabbi Zwerin coming with them, answering their questions—about Judaism, their curriculum, about himself and about life. (Information from Judy Schwartz and Verna Lind)

At the end of their experience, they made a time capsule, putting into it letters to themselves in separate bags as well as other items such as a copy of The Rocky Mountain News. When teacher, Verna Lind, moved to Minnesota, she took the time capsule with her. There it stayed for all the years she lived in Minnesota, but, recently, she moved back to Denver and discovered amongst the boxes and stuff of moving: the time capsule. Calling former co-teacher, Judy Schwartz, she said, “Judy, I have the time capsule from the ‘76/’77 Confirmation Class!” Judy contacted confirmand, Leba Sunshine, and together, with another confirmand, Lauren Sterling, they determined, “We need to get the class together for a reunion!”
Hence, forty-one years later, after the heart-breaking nightmare of “the temple that fell down,” on a Kabbalat Shabbat evening, September 14, 2018—Shabbat Shuvah—representatives of the confirmation class of 1976/1977—gathered for a reunion and were present, together with their teachers, at services at Temple Sinai that evening. The old Pitts School building exists no longer, having been replaced by Abrahams Family Chapel and a new school wing built. The confirmands returned to celebrate their confirmation of 41 years earlier, to re-affirm their commitment to Jewish values as adults. Their beloved Rabbi Zwerin joined them as they stood on the bimah and blessed the Torah together, with current senior Rabbi Rick Rheins and Rabbi Susan Miller Rheins, joining in the joyful reunion. Leba Sunshine and Lauren Sterling spoke of how meaningful their confirmation had been. They spoke of their continuing love of Judaism, of their dedication to Jewish values—their excitement of their return together and the plan to open the time capsule. None of them mentioned that they learned all of this while the physical building of their synagogue was crumbling around them. No—because as their rabbi had said, “..a holy place has nothing to do with the place itself, but rather with what happens to us there.” They were the children about whom Rabbi Zwerin told their parents when courage-to-go-on was all they had: “Our children will see our efforts and our dedication. Make no mistake about that.” Yes, they saw. And came back. And remembered the values.

“When the children of Israel stood at Mt. Sinai, God said to them, ‘I am prepared to give you my Torah. Present to me good guarantors that you will observe and study the Torah and I shall give it to you.’ They said, ‘Our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah will be our guarantors.’ God said, ‘Your ancestors need their own guarantors. Bring me good guarantors and I will give you my Torah.’ They said, ‘Our prophets will be our guarantors.’ God said, ‘I have issues with them. They are not sufficient guarantors. Still bring me good guarantors and I will give you my Torah.’ Then they said, ‘Our children will be our guarantors. God then said, ‘Yes, they are excellent guarantors! For their sake, I will give you my Torah.’” (From Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:24)

The pundits have said we live in shallow times, that dignity and civility are nearly lost to a whole generation. But there are those who have believed in 3,000-year-old values, who have taught them I’dor v’dor to their children, who have resisted defeatism, championed resilience, who have built, re-built and kept on building, who have given support to each other, helped those who are ill, wept with those who are grieving, laughed with joy at simchas and given definition to the word, “dedication.” Who make me grateful I am part of them. Sadly, yes, the pundits have spoken truthfully. But so have they. And the good in them won.

Happy Chanukah
Jean Guthery

With appreciation to Rabbi Zwerin, Judy Schwartz, Verna Lind, and Helen Ginsburg for their patience with my incessant questions. Todah rabah. J.G.