

What Makes a Space Holy?

“Build me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” These are God’s instructions to the Israelites. Nearly half of the book of Exodus is devoted to this massive building project. Four hundred and fifty verses describe in minute detail the dimensions, materials and structure of Israel’s portable house of worship. The Torah’s emphasis on the Tabernacle and at this time, our rededication of *this* beautiful sanctuary- challenges us to consider the question: what makes a space holy?

We know that our surroundings have the power of moving and inspiring us. For many of us, nature has this power –a mountain range, the ocean waves or the sun setting over the horizon. But it’s not just the outdoors. I remember an article in the Globe about the opening of the Ted Kennedy Institute in Dorchester. Its centerpiece is a full-scale reconstruction of the Senate chamber. You are first invited to choose a legislative identity and then escorted into the Senate chambers. You listen to a debate on a bill currently discussed in the Senate and have a chance to vote. Kennedy hoped that young people, sitting in this exact replica of the Senate Floor, would feel the excitement and awesome responsibility of civic engagement and be inspired to serve.

I visited the Ted Kennedy Institute about a month ago and it was, undoubtedly, an inspiring experience. However, while listening to the debate portion of the program, I must admit that my mind wandered away from the Senate Floor. I thought about our own space and about what makes a place not just inspiring but sacred. True, the presence of the Torah scrolls and the “ner tamid” – the eternal light by the ark, make our Sanctuary a holy place. But holiness is much bigger than that.

The midrash tells us that when Moses heard God’s instructions to build a tabernacle, he became frightened. “Mighty one,” said Moses, “is it not written, “behold the heaven and the earth cannot contain you?” How then can you say, “they shall make a sanctuary for me?” That is why the verse continues, says the midrash, with the words: “that I may dwell **among** them.” Notice that it doesn’t say, “that I may dwell **in** it” but “**among** them.” The tabernacle was not a house of God; it was a reminder that God could be present in the midst of the community as long as the Israelites aspired to live according to God’s teachings. Building the Tabernacle was all about striving for holiness.

In Hebrew the word for Sanctuary is mikdash, from the root word kaddosh, which means “sacred.” Many words in Hebrew come from this root: Kiddush (the blessing over the wine), kiddushin (the Jewish wedding ceremony) and Kaddish (the prayer that mourners say for their loved ones). Rabbi Ed Feinstein explains the connection between all of these words with three examples that come together in a beautiful teaching. The first example:

A family, a circle of friends, gathers about the Shabbat or holiday table to share a celebration. A cup of

wine is raised. The wine is not sacred. It's only Manishevitz. What is sacred –holy, are the bonds that gather us together to celebrate life. So together we recite a prayer called Kiddush.

A second example: Two individuals in love determined to share a lifetime together. A ring- whole and unbroken –is slipped onto a finger, signifying a commitment whole and unbroken. And words are spoken “harei at mekudeshet li, you are kadosh to me. This rite that bonds two lives together is called kiddushin.

A third example: A loved one has died. And with tears we rise in the presence of a community at prayer to declare that even the catastrophe of death cannot sever the bond that holds us together. This prayer is called kaddish.

Kiddush, kiddushin, kaddish, kadosh, kedushah – all mean holiness and all mean opening the self to embrace another, bonding with another, holding the other close, making the other part of the self.

“And what is the opposite of holiness,” asks Feinstein? To which he responds: “In Hebrew, the opposite of *kadosh* is *hol*. Translated as ‘profane’ or ‘ordinary’ *hol* literally means ‘sand.’ Sand has no cohesion, no connection, no bonds. But when you are in relationship, the opposite is true - you share a bond with another.

This idea that holiness is found in genuine and meaningful relationships isn't new. Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian, contrasted what he called “I-thou relationships” with “I-It relationships.” When we treat a person as a means to an end, said Buber, we are engaged in an I-It relationship. I-thou relationships are different. They are motivated by a desire to truly understand and “be there” with another person, without masks or pretenses. The bond created in such encounters enlarges both people and each responds by trying to enhance the other.

This philosophy is the basis of a book by Ron Wolfson entitled – *Relational Judaism*. The strength of a community, says Wolfson, is based on being able to bring people together, regardless of their backgrounds and beliefs to encounter each other in meaningful and genuine relationships.

To build a Sanctuary where God may dwell among us means to build structures that facilitate and encourage these types of genuine connections and relationships. As the book of Genesis tells us: *lo tov lehiyout adam levado*. God doesn't want us to be alone. God wants us to be in relationship with others, connected to others.

And **where** is God in all of this? The Kotzker Rebbe, a great Hasidic master of the nineteenth century, was fond of saying: “God is wherever we let God in.” Rabbi Harold Shulweiss – a well-known congregational rabbi and author, rephrases this question. He asks: “**when** is God?” And his answer takes us back to relationships. When is God? God is to be found when human beings encounter each other in deep and meaningful ways.

And so my hope is that our “building project” will continue into the New Year and beyond. My hope is that this magnificent space -which we enter, each with our own stories and dreams, will inspire us to build a web of connections and relationships worthy of our Sanctuary being called

“holy.” My hope is that here we will be motivated and challenged to make our circle of care and concern an ever-expanding one. That here we will find meaning, purpose, belonging and blessing.

I'd like to invite all of us to join in with the Cantor as we “sing” our aspiration to be a holy vessel, to create a holy space:

O God prepare me to be a Sanctuary
Pure and holy tried and true
And in thanksgiving, I'll be a living Sanctuary for you

V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham
V'anachnu n'varech yah
M'ata v'ad olam.