

A Tale of Two Sanctuaries: *Erev Rosh HaShanah 5777*
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Mah Nishtana HaLeila HaZeh MiKol HaLeilot - What is different about this night from all other nights? In the spirit of those four questions, let me offer four answers.

1. The people on this bima look very different than in past years. Rabbi Zamore, we are so happy you are with us. We wish Rabbi Frankel continued health as she prepares *-b'sha'ah Tovah* - to deliver her second child. Cantor Cooperman, instead of white robe or a kittel, we are buying you a suit made of bubble wrap.

2. It's probably the first time you are hearing a rabbi deliver a sermon from a seated position. It's a first for me. If you can see me from the back, please wave.

3. We are all a year older. Some of those who we became used to seeing year after year at this, our annual reunion, are not here. Some have ascended to *olam ha'bah* to the world to come. Some have gone to other synagogues. Some have made the choice that synagogue affiliation no longer holds the same pull on their souls as it once did. We mourn their loss.

4. This may be the last time we gather in this sanctuary... as it is currently configured. If all goes well, our renovation and restoration will begin this June. We need to renovate this building. It feels tired. The systems are at the end of their lifespan. I once heard that when this building was built in 1961, the congregation was told that it had the Cadillac of heating systems. Well I ask you, how many 1961 Cadillacs do you still see on the road? There is still a lot of road to travel before we get there, including raising an additional \$2 million; and I am confident we will get there. As the old joke goes, the good news is that we have the money. The bad news is: it is still in your wallets.

Given how this may be our last *Rosh HaShanah* in this space, I am going to tell the tale of two sanctuaries: the tale of a sanctuary that was and is and a sanctuary that hopefully will be; one was designed for a time that was and another, designed for the world as it is and the world as we hope it will be. Now, it is important to acknowledge that there is a sentimentality about this space - time spent in Torah study, a consecration, watching a child read *Torah* for the first time, singing in the choir, seeing old friends, a moment of conversion, a wedding couple blessed, saying good-bye to loved ones at a funeral. It is equally important to state that nothing lasts forever. If there is one constant in life, it is change. Our task is to determine how to integrate those changes into our lives.

When this sanctuary was designed and built - and let's realize it was layered over an existing sanctuary, hints of which can be seen by gazing up between those lights and that wall by the *yahrzeit* board - *Shalom* was chosen as a central theme. You see the word emblazoned above my left shoulder. Above each of those stained glass windows are words referring to this central theme of our tradition - (include some quotes).

Choosing *Shalom* for this sanctuary was wise and thoughtful. It fit the times. It was the 1980's. It was a time of big hair, puffy shoulder pads, MTV, Ferris Bueller's Day Off and The Breakfast Club. It was the decade that Generation X, my generation, came of age. And reflecting back, the world felt a lot more peaceful than it is now. Yes, there was famine in Africa and a frightening new disease called AIDS, but our greatest fear was mutually assured destruction. We may have confronted this reality through a Mini-Series' like "The Day After," or a movie like, "War Games," but we all seemed to know that it would never happen. The Soviets were our enemy but they weren't crazy. So we fought our proxy wars in Afghanistan and

Central America and boycotted each other's Olympics. If it wasn't a peace of beating our swords into plowshares where the lion lay down with the lamb, it was certainly a more peaceful time than our current age. With the hindsight of 30 years, *Shalom* fit who and where we were as a nation. And we could come in here and find peace.

In that time, where have we come? In the 1980s, who, besides a few environmentalists worried about climate change? An Islamic leadership had taken over Iran, but did anyone foresee the likes of ISIS? Israel had invaded Lebanon but who could predict what another generation of occupation would do to Israel's soul. Racism existed but 30 years ago, who from the African American community felt that being pulled over by the police was a life or death question. Assault rifles were available but who feared that when we put our kids on the school bus it might be the last time we would see them? Remember, Columbine took place 15 years AFTER this sanctuary was dedicated.

Thirty years ago, who could predict that a presidential election would unleash anger, bigotry and xenophobia the likes this country has not seen for decades, an economic disparity where many ask if the pursuit of happiness is even within their grasp and 60 million refugees around the world seeking a home? And this is the external stuff, not to mention the internal stresses so many of us feel, stresses that we rarely talk about, that we medicate, that we hide under the rug knowing that it is only a matter of time before its monstrous face comes to challenge us. Is the world more peaceful than it was in the 80s? Have we attained what this sanctuary proclaimed?

Thirty years ago, a metaphor of *Shalom* was chosen. But it wasn't about striving or working or struggling for peace. We felt it. It was here. It was just a matter of time. But what happens when the metaphor no longer works? Do you change the goal or do you change the metaphor?

When the State of Israel was proclaimed, we spoke of her as a Phoenix rising from the ashes. We said she was a refuge for persecuted Jews throughout the world. And studies have shown that these metaphors still work... for people born before 1945. But now, when fewer Holocaust survivors walk among us - and we must do what we can to keep their stories alive - and when there are few to no Jewish refugees, those metaphors no longer hold sway. Today we speak of Israel as a Start Up Nation, as a miracle of the Middle East or as an island of hope in a sea of instability.

When it comes to this sanctuary, I believe we also are due for a new metaphor. Don't get me wrong. Peace is still our objective. It's just a question of how we get there.

Our *machzor* proclaims, *HaYom HaRat Olam*, today is the birth day of the world. We blow a shofar to proclaim it. According to tradition, God spoke the world into being some 5777 years ago. How did God do it? One idea is that God followed a very ordered plan, each day building on the next, with us, human beings, emerging into a fully furnished world. Another is found in Genesis Ch. 2. Here, God begins with one person, realizes that this person has basic needs - a place to live, food, companionship and through trial and error, fashions a world where our task is one of responsible stewardship.

But there is a third creation myth. This 16th century myth, written by Isaac Luria and popularized by the Kabbalists of his day, teaches that if we want Shalom, it will not come from an outside source. Shalom will happen because we bring it into existence. Here's how it goes:

Before there was anything, there was God. God filled all time. God filled all space. That's it, nothing else, because God was pure energy, or even just the potential for energy. Then, for reasons God only knows, God decided to create the universe. But there was a problem.

How can you create someTHING from Nothing? Or, how do you create something when you are everything? So God did something incredible (remember, this is God). In an act called *tzimtzum*, God contracted into God's self. God created space where there was no space. And into that emptiness, God created all planets, stars, mountains, oceans, trees, plants, all the way down to the shrubberies. But there was another problem. The stuff was there but God was not - remember, God had withdrawn. So God breathed some of God's divine or primordial light into the universe. Knowing that this light was too strong to exist on its own (think nuclear radiation), God created vessels to contain the light. But there was an accident (yes, it sounds like the Big Bang). The vessels shattered, sending shards and sparks throughout the universe. To Luria, the shards represent evil and the sparks, holiness. Our task, Luria taught, is to engage in *tikun olam*, to recognize that evil exists, to embrace it, to gather the holy sparks and to put creation back together.

Luria's myth did something exceedingly powerful. It recognized that the world is not perfect. It recognized how our world is broken and shattered but, unlike the king's horses and king's men, we can put humpty-dumpty together again. We can gather the sparks, in fact we HAVE TO gather the sparks, to create a world that is once again whole. But WE have to be the ones to do it and we can only do so when we look outside, recognize the cracks, and do something to let the light in.

Over the past 18 months, as I have gone on fundraising visits for our Kadima campaign - and to those who let us into your homes and who pledged generously, thank you! - I have often quoted the *Talmud* which says, "a sanctuary must be built with clear windows so that the light can come in and the vision can go out."

Clear windows. So that the light comes in and the vision goes out. Over the past thirteen years we have worked hard to create a community that is transparent, accessible and flexible. Shouldn't our sanctuary reflect this? Through learning, worship, the performance of good deeds and by intentionally bringing people together for a purpose we have transformed people's lives. Just look at some of what our *tzedek* council does - from literacy projects to helping those living with food insecurity, from combatting climate change to advocating on behalf of Syrian refugees. Time and time again we put the vision out there and so many of you join us on the journey. Shouldn't others, still standing on the sidelines, get a chance to look in to see what we are doing? Why should the first thing that people see be a brick wall and an office? Why should our unintentional messages be, "what goes on in here is private?" There is so much good that emits from this community. Shouldn't those holy sparks be allowed to shine outward into our larger world? Shouldn't our building be a reflection of who we are and who we still want to become?

And since my cycling accident I've been sharing another quote, equally descriptive of what we want this sanctuary to be. It comes from my *landsman*, Leonard Cohen who writes, "There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." On July 19, as many of you know, I was involved in a cycling accident that resulted in a fractured femur (hence the sermon from the chair). If, as Luria taught, our task is to redeem the sparks from the brokenness of our shattered world, then, on a personal level, I experienced this first hand - the support, compassion, care and love was a sign of light rushing in. On a communal level, our sanctuary can serve as a constant reminder of our task in the world - to repair that which is broken, to mend the tears in the fabric of our society. The cracks in our newly designed sanctuary that will allow light to get in can serve as a metaphor for our task and role as human beings, to crack open the

darkness, to gather the sparks of holiness together, and to shine that light into the darkened corners and crevices of life.

A true story: After Robert Fulghum, author of “Everything I Needed to Know, I learned in Kindergarten” became a professor, minister, and speaker he got an invitation to visit a peace institute on the Island of Crete. The peace institute was founded by Alexander Papaderos and it was strategically built between two cemeteries. One was filled with the graves of Nazi soldiers who had invaded the Island of Crete during World War II. The other held the graves of the Cretans who defended their island.

At the end of Dr. Papaderos’ last teaching, he told the gathered guests a story. It was, as he told them, “the meaning of life.”

“Once when I was a young boy,” he said, “after the Germans invaded our Island, I was out walking. I came upon the remains of a German motorcycle. I don’t know what happened to the German, but his motorcycle was wrecked and the rearview mirror on that motorcycle was smashed on the ground. I picked up the mirror and I tried to put it back together again. When I realized I could not put the mirror back together again, I took the largest, jagged piece of mirror. I sanded it with a rough rock until it became a perfect sphere. I created a childish game that involved holding my mirror and getting the light to reflect off of it and shine into dark places. I got really good at shining light into crevices and very dark places. When I learned how to hold the mirror just right, I could shine my light into any dark place.”

Like the sparks of holiness in Luria’s myth that make up the totality of God’s presence, each and every one of us is a fragment of a mirror whose size and shape we do not know. But as a fragment of that mirror we are each uniquely essential to its wholeness. If we pay attention to what we love and are focused on creating a life that makes a difference not only for ourselves but our community, we will find that we will be more content, more whole, more at peace. So what are we here for? To take whatever seems dark in life, shine light on it and bring forward, that which what we care about.

Tomorrow, I am going to speak more about my accident and lessons learned but I want to share one thing I have realized over the past eleven weeks that, I hope, can serve as inspiration for the building and sanctuary we want to create. Walking aided by these crutches has instilled a greater awareness of what life must be like for people with disabilities. I am thankful whenever there is an automatic door, a lowered curb or a ramp. I am upset when a restroom lacks a handicapped stall. I am amazed how much I have to plan ahead - where will I park? Are there accommodations? If I have to walk from one place to another, how far is it?

Then I think of this sanctuary. For years I have noted the challenge of these stairs - they are shallow. They are steep and the lack of right angles makes them hard to navigate. I hold my breath every time a grandparent descends after blessing the *Torah*. I know there are dedicated members of this community, who come with great regularity, who are unable to ascend this bima with ease. Yes, there is a ramp. That ramp and I have become fond of each other. But let me tell you something. When a handicapped ramp covers the length of the sanctuary and you know that dozens if not hundreds of eyes will be on you as you make a long walk to the bima, how comfortable would you be? Would you make that walk?

Friends, one of Judaism’s core concepts is *Kavod*. Whether abled or disabled, we are to treat each person with honor and dignity because, made in God’s image, they have infinite worth. If we are going to create a sanctuary and a building where people can feel that sense of *Kavod* when they enter, if we are going to live our mission of truly being a caring Jewish community, then let us build a building that allows those living with disabilities to enter, ascend and descend

from this bima with the same *kavod* as any able bodied person. We should have automatic doors. We should have ramps that are subtle and even hidden. We should have stairs that are easy to traverse. And of course, this notion of treating others with *Kavod* is not only for people with disabilities. It's a question for all. How do we create an overall safe, warm and accessible space for any who enter this building? How do we make this place, as the prophet Isaiah adjured, a house of prayer for all people? When we do so, we will allow light to shine into dark places. This is how we will make sparks of holiness burst forth. And you are the ones who can make this happen.

I know that this topic about altering this sanctuary and change in general is difficult for many of us. Many who are here contributed to this very space. Your names are on the walls, on the backs of these pews. Others, who joined this community in the past 30 years cannot imagine this space looking differently, cannot imagine praying without these stained glass windows. In fact, one congregant accused the chair of our Kadima campaign as being like a member of a radical Islamic group saying, "only groups like ISIS and the Taliban destroy works of art." He later apologized. In speaking with him, he recognized that what was hard about this planned renovation is that it might destroy his memories that are held here, within this sacred space. What would become of the memory of his daughter's wedding or his wife's funeral? He feared that changing this space would mean that his memories would be lost. Yet we all know that if you try to hold on too tightly to something, even memories, they will slip through your grasp. It was Thoreau who said, "Time is like a handful of sand - the tighter you grasp it, the faster it runs through your fingers." Better to cradle that sand gently, for when you do, more of it will remain for you to enjoy. When the physical place is changed, I promise that the memories will remain; for we will be here to tell the stories. And as we tell our stories, we can also dream of the future - of the *b'nei mitzvah* that will take place in this space, of the wedding couples who will come here to be blessed, of the *Torah* that will be taught, how our actions will bring light into darkened corners.

One of the most crushing scenes in *Torah* is the moment where Moses descends from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Witnessing the Israelites dancing around the Golden Calf, he hurls the tablets to the ground, smashing them to pieces. He then ascends the mountain a second time to carve a second set of tablets. Our sages ask, "What happened to those broken tablets?"

The *Talmud* answers: The broken tablets were placed in the holy Ark along with the second, intact set (*Talmud Bava Batra* 14b). The broken tablets were not buried, which is what we generally do with holy items no longer in use. They were placed in the most sacred place, in the *Aron Hakodesh*, the holy Ark. Eventually they sat next to the second tablets, the whole set of the Ten Commandments. Together they remained securely protected as the nation journeyed through the wilderness.

Why do the broken pieces remain precious? If they represent the Jewish people disregarding the covenant with God, would we not wish to simply forget about them?

The broken tablets remain, simply to remind us that brokenness and wholeness coexist side by side, even in Judaism's holiest spot – in the heart of the holy Ark.

Many of us, perhaps, feel a sense of brokenness that this will be the last *Rosh HaShanah* we will be in this sanctuary, as it is currently configured. But like those broken tablets, we will always carry a piece of this sanctuary with us. By creating a sanctuary that reminds us of our obligation to help bring *Shalom* - to ourselves, our families, our community here in Westchester

and to the world - we will help bring light and wholeness and healing into the world. There is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.