

“Holiness Begins in Me”

Kol Nidrei is the holiest night on the Jewish calendar. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the Sabbath of Sabbaths. But, Mishnah cautions us: this Day of Atonement does not atone for us until we have made amends with our neighbors. Teshuvah, the process of repentance, makes it incumbent upon us to seek forgiveness from those whom we've wronged. And, it is incumbent on them to forgive us. The goal is not to condemn, but to restore every person to wholeness, again. Only then can we stand before God, and ask for God's forgiveness. But, have we prepared ourselves to stand in such a holy place?

Preparing ourselves can seem routine: we're given the words to pray and we're guided through the liturgy. The greater task is actually finding the holy places in which to stand in God's presence.

In Torah, Moses found God's presence at the burning bush. In that awesome, holy place, Moses removed his sandals and stood before God. Later, commentators wisely posed a hypothetical question about that moment. They said that a non-believer might ask, “Of all places, why did God appear in a lowly thorn-bush?” The rabbis reasoned, “If God had appeared in something beautiful, he would have asked a similar question; such is the nature of a non-believer. But, not to answer a non-believer isn't right, so they explained, “If God can appear in a lowly thorn-bush, then God can appear anywhere.”

Moses' faith was unquestionable, but the Israelites' faith was fragile. The Israelites needed to find God on a mountain, in a tabernacle, and much later in a centralized worship space, a holy Temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, finding God depended on the most faithful. Dispersed but not without hope, by the Middle Ages, kabbalists, or Jewish mystics, explained that there was a spark of God in all places, people and things.

By the 18th century, Jews gained footholds in European cities and over time amassed some wealth. Soon enough, the great synagogues of Europe were built to magnify God's presence, again, and to mimic, if not directly compete, with the grandeur of nearby churches.

In America, the story is told that Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, the founder of Reform Judaism in America, built his magnificent Plum Street Temple, in Cincinnati, in 1865, in the Byzantine-Moorish style and with 80-foot soaring ceilings. The church across the street from it was built slightly taller. Not to be outdone, Wise had spires installed atop the synagogue to reach the highest of heights.

Our own sanctuary bimah, originally built in the late 1960's, reflected the expectation that higher meant holier. Just two years ago, we completed the last remodel after the first two

flood events. By design we made our bimah more accessible and more reflective of our goal not to emphasize “higher is holier,” but, rather, “holy is everywhere.”

Now, on any given Friday night, the clergy enjoy leading the worship service from the lower bimah, and I prefer to stand among you to deliver my Shabbat message. The familiarity of the place brings us closer to each other, physically and spiritually. But, it appears that we might have paid a high price for it. Let me explain.

Not too long ago on a Friday night, someone’s phone rang three times during the worship service. It was difficult to know where it was coming from; but, each time, someone silenced it. When the service ended, a woman rushed up to see me. “I’m so sorry,” she said, “but it wasn’t my phone; it was my alarm to tell me that it was time to take my medicine.” I replied very patiently, “Thank you for telling me that, but, I have a question for you: did you take your medicine?” And, on Saturday mornings, visitors to our sanctuary have been known to allow their young children to climb the stairs and run around the bimah, before services. It’s astounding.

Today, once familiar lines between the holy and unholy, between the sacred and the profane have been blurred. It brings us back to the rabbis’ question they referred to when they addressed the non-believer; but, now we have to ask, “If we can’t find the sacred in obvious holy spaces, then where should we ever expect to find it?”

The rabbis were right: if God could appear in a lowly thorn bush, then every place held sacred potential. And, the Kabbalists were right: there’s a spark of God and holiness in everybody and in everything. At a minimum, we should be able to find what is obviously sacred in our synagogue spaces. At a maximum, we should be able to find the sacred potential in everybody and everything.

Let’s continue as Moses did. Don’t take off your shoes. But, let’s go to the low places, first, and find the sacred potential there.

After Hurricane Harvey we were all in a low place. Anyone struggling in a water-soaked house, on a flooded street, or on their rooftop, struggled to find sacred potential there; except perhaps when aid and assistance arrived. Twelve months later, despite lingering repairs and unfinished punch-lists, most of us can find the sacred potential in the steps we’ve taken towards recovery --- even if it still seems in the distance. A fresh, clean mezuzah would be an awesome sign that our homes --- repaired, elevated or new --- are open again for sacred family living. With each new reason to feel hopeful, we often say, “Thank God.”

Let’s look beyond Houston, too. Not far from home, on the southern border, multi-faith religious leaders, including rabbis, visited immigrant detention centers. There they found a low place --- children without their parents who waited for word of release and reunification, and parents who struggled to know if their children were well. The religious leaders locked arms to express shared religious family values. Despite few signs of change, their physical

presence helped the children feel that hope was on their side. In those places there was some sacred potential.

In Torah, it's written 36 times that, "You know the heart of the stranger for you were strangers in land of Egypt." In the Midrash, we learn, "Do not scold your neighbor with a fault, which is also your own." The fault to which they were referring was none other than our status as strangers. It isn't that we were once strangers; we're always strangers. It's inscribed on our heart. It's part of the fabric of our being. To welcome the stranger, therefore, is akin to welcoming someone who is more like us than we might remember.

Based on Jewish religious values, the question about immigration might be put this way: Our hearts are historically open to the pleas of immigrants; therefore, how might our nation's immigration system reflect the sacred potential that's present within newcomers, too, and, whose futures are linked with ours? The answer to this question leaves room for many reasonable answers.

Next, the kabbalists, the mystics who lived in Sefat, atop a mountain, were aware of God's holiness, every day. If you've been to Sefat, then you know that it's still a busy town with many rabbis, their students and some unique mystical characters. The early kabbalists taught that a spark of God existed in everybody and everything. The goal was to find the sacred potential in God's acts of creation and reveal it. Then, they believed, that all the sparks would be assembled and peace would reign over the world. It was the ultimate conclusion of "tikkun olam," of repairing the world.

Though we're not kabbalists, our search for holy places continues exactly where they said we might find God's sacred spark; deep inside each of us. But, every day, escalating numbers of people suffer with depression --- family, friends, or you. Such deep personal suffering has been described as "living on the outside while dying on the inside." Tragically, the rate of suicide is climbing. Many therapies are part of healing what hurts deep inside us, but we also need to make room for spiritual therapy. It's the kind that awakens us to God's sacred spark that burns within us, too.

A Danish proverb teaches that "even a small star shines in the darkness." The small star is our soul that is alive within us. It's filled with sacred potential. Gratitude for the pure soul we've been given lends purpose to our life, even when it feels like it's burning low. A Jewish prayer in the morning gives us the privilege to say, "O God, the soul You have given me is a pure one! You created it and formed it, and breathed it into me, and within me you sustain it. So long as I have breath, therefore, I will give thanks to You, O God." At the end of the day, we might add to our nightly ritual these words of faith and trust, "Adonai li, v'lo ira," God is with me; I will not fear.

For those who struggle often, Judaism guides us how we can be at our best. It places the responsibility squarely on us. The rabbis explained it this way: there are two energies within us. The good energy is called the Yetzer Hatov; and it inspires us to do mitzvot, good deeds

that reflect honor to God. The evil energy is called the Yetzer HaRa; and it moves us to do evil. But, the rabbis taught that this Yetzer, this evil energy, is also responsible for our decisions to build a home, make a career, and even to marry. It sounds odd, but they were teaching us to balance our personal ambitions with personal responsibility. Build a house, but make it safe and compatible with the neighborhood; make a career, but from prosperity give to charitable causes; and, marry your soulmate, but rear Jewish children who aspire to model your good ways for the sake of our Jewish future.

The rabbis also teach, “The greater the person, the greater the yetzer” (Succah 52a). That is, the Yetzer HaRa, the evil energy, is powerful. It can cause us to accomplish great things even if we struggle with it. And, when we do struggle with it, it’s important to know that that energy can be transformed by us into a worthy purpose. When we fail in our intended purpose, the process of Teshuvah becomes an integral part of balancing our good and evil energies. Even one good deed, we’re taught, can tip the scale of justice in our favor. The sacred spark always burns with potential.

Tomorrow, we’ll read from the book of Leviticus. In chapter 19, we’ll hear the words, “Kedoshim tiheyu...” You shall be holy, for I the Eternal One, am holy. This reading, especially chosen for Yom Kippur, is called the Holiness Code. Its specificity, unlike narratives we find in Genesis or Exodus, outlines a course for living. It provides ethical boundaries that help us find sacred potential between us and our fellow human beings and between us and God, every day. There are two special ways to understand the verse, “You shall be holy...”

First, “You shall be holy,” means that sacred perfection is a process that unfolds sometime in the future. Salvation, the act of overcoming human sins, is a personal process that Torah enables us to achieve; not in a day, but over the course of one’s lifetime. Every mitzvah, every deed that orients us to our relationship with God, enables us to be more with mitzvot than without them. Those who struggle with faith in God, still find that doing mitzvot binds them to a body of moral duties that leads to sacred relationships. Therefore, the commandment to “Choose Life,” which we’ll also read tomorrow, is more than a plan for the future. It’s a commandment to use our days for living up to our sacred potential.

Second, another interpretation of the same verse teaches us what we really want to know; that holiness is already present in us. It requires us to read the verse slightly differently, that is, “As I, the Lord your God, am holy, so are you holy.” **I like it.** It means that we are holy right now.

So, remember those kids who ran around the bimah? I do. Next time, their parents shouldn’t miss the teachable moment they could have with their children. What a difference it would make if next time the parents secured their children long enough to say, “This is not a playground. This is a holy place.” And, what a difference it would make if they sat with their children and modeled the sacred potential that begins with them.

The bimah is an easy place. The farther one goes from it, the harder it is to remember that wherever we go, we're always with God. And, it's there, especially, where we need to know that the sacred is always within us. We're the ultimate bimah, the personal altar, on which we stand before God. From such a holy place, we can see others who are in their holy places, too. Then, it's quite possible to begin to see that even in those who are different than we are --- religiously, ethnically, politically, sexually, and more --- they contain a spark of the divine and they are sacred, too.

Then, when we stand before God and ask for forgiveness, God responds, "Salachti ki d'varecha," I have pardoned according to your plea, and the the Day of Atonement atones for us.

Let's make no mistake about where we stand with God, within and beyond us. Let's gather these sparks of sacred human potential and reveal respect for personal diversity and appreciation for civility between us. Then, may the world know that we are each a starting place for greater love and enduring peace.

Amen.