

Seeing Our Sacred Space

It apparently started with a broken chair. Do you remember those old pews with the seats that would bounce up whenever you would stand?

Right as the Torah service started, you would hear “bump, bump, bump....” as all the seats hit the backs of the pews?



These pews were popular in many synagogues in the '60s and '70s and sure enough, they were part of Temple Emunah's original main sanctuary which was completed in 1963.

[\(A little history during our 60th birthday year 😊\)](#)

Well, the springs in those seats were failing in the late 1990s and a member wanted to replace them, as well as the carpeting in the sanctuary that was worn through.

It was then that Rabbi Eisenman shared that if we were going to do all of those upgrades and even though it was unclear if we would be able to raise all the funds, we might want to explore building an entirely new sanctuary.

And, sure enough, that was exactly what we did.

The community dreamt, planned, raised millions of dollars, and built this amazing sanctuary that we have been enjoying for the last 17 years.



Not only were there wonderfully generous members, but the project was also spearheaded by wonderful leaders: Lois Bruss and Marcy Lidman, with whom I sat this week to get the inside scoop and thanks to Toni Stechler, our historian, for sharing all of these materials.

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Reading this *parashah* about the design of the first Jewish sacred spiritual space reminded me to consider our space today.



Our sanctuary is designed to evoke a tent in the desert. The ark is facing Southeast, pointing us both to Jerusalem and towards the light – helpful for New England winters.



The cupola above us lifts our gaze like Mount Sinai. The *menorah* woven into the front windows and staircase, which later became our logo, takes us back to this morning's reading where the *menorah* is first mentioned.

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Our reading mentions numerous objects, including the *menorah*, which were to be made to exacting specifications.

And then we find an unusual verse: *U're'eih Va'aseh b'tavnitam asher-atah mar'eh bahar* – note well, and follow the patterns for them

(presumably, the *menorah*) that are being shown you on the mountain.” (Ex 25:40)

This is a strange verse.

First, what is so special about this *menorah*, these lamps, that we must note them well or literally, see them carefully – *U’re’eih?*

And second, what is this pattern that is being shown on the mountain? When does God show Moshe a design pattern on Mount Sinai and what could that mean?

Rashi, the great French commentator of the 11th century, apparently had some of the same questions.

He explains that we are supposed to pay attention to the *menorah* that held these seven lamps.

And then he adds: “*nitkashah Moshe v’ma’aseh hamenorah ad she’harah lo HaKadosh Barukh Hu menorah shel eish* – Moses had trouble, he was struggling with what this *menorah* was supposed to look like until God showed him a *menorah*, a lampstand of fire.”

I love this Rashi. God has to bring in a visual aid to help Moshe understand what this *menorah* was all about! And it is helpful!

But that then leads us to ask what is the point or the symbolism of this *menorah* and this entire project of creating sacred space?

For that, let's jump ahead two hundred years after Rashi to the *Zohar*, the great medieval repository of Jewish mysticism.

The opening verse of the entire reading states: "*V'asu li mikdash v'shakhanti b'tokham* – you shall make for me a holy space and I shall dwell among you."

While this seems pretty clear – it is clearly referring to the actual structure – what is known as the *Mishkan* – the portable sanctuary that the Israelites could take with them as they traveled through the wilderness, some commentaries look for other ideas.

In particular, the *Zohar* likes to go deeper, to the place of feeling, to a more spiritual dimension.

It says that this holy space, the *Mishkan*, does not have to mean simply a holy building, but it can relate to ourselves. Make yourself into a vessel of holiness – such a beautiful idea.

The *Zohar* then identifies the commandment, the *mitzvah* to put on *tefillin* as the holy space that the Israelites would build.

Really? That seems odd.

Tefillin are small black boxes with mini-Torah scrolls that Jews wear on weekdays on their arms and head – what does that have to do with a sacred space?



The *Sefat Emet* – Rabbi Yeudah Leib Alter of Ger, living at the end of the 19th century in Warsaw – explains it like this: just as you need a building to come together as a community, so, too, do we need actual objects, physical objects to help us focus the spiritual energy, to draw the Divine presence more fully into our lives.

In our souls, we light a lamp or a *menorah* for God. When we put on the *tefillin*, God's presence rests powerfully in our souls. *Tefillin* and the *menorah* draw that spiritual fire into the world, through us.

And with that spiritual energy, sensing that Holy Fire, we perform *mitzvot*, we engage in the commandments – that bring us closer to one another.

When we wear the *tefillin* and wrap it seven times around our arms and our hands, we are reminded that we are God's hands in this world. We pray and hope that we will be open, or sensitive enough to become aware

of God's presence, to sense the Divine flow of spiritual energy flowing through the universe.

And when we do, we know that our work is carrying out these Divine teachings. When we engage in *mitzvot*, we become God's partners – actualizing the Divine energy which primarily exists in the realms of the intellect, the emotional, and the spiritual – and bringing that into the physical world.

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All of that brings me back into this building and this space.

When we look at our sanctuary, we are hopefully inspired by its beauty, its simple elegance.

And we note how it incorporates light and the natural surroundings through its windows. Its openness and its cupola lift our eyes to the mountain – “*esah einei el heharim*” from Psalm 121.

Our architect, Claude Menders, cited that verse as he wanted us to feel like we were in an open tent – one that lifts our eyes and



souls to the mountains, but also connects us to each other.

Here, we sit in the round – so we can see each other. The biggest change in this sacred space from our old one was to change the rows from all facing forward – to a more circular feel where we can see each other.

This is the entire point of this tradition – while our souls may soar looking to the mountains, if they are left there, they are alone at the pinnacle.

We are asked to come down from the mountain. We are invited to move our spiritual experiences from the heavens to here, bringing them into community.

While the fire of the *menorah* and the heights of Mount Sinai help us pause, they are not the end of the journey. They center us, but it is at the base of the mountain where we live – in community.

That's why we need our *mitzvot*, our commandments to help us live in community. They bring us together – commanding us to care for one another – to support one another and to learn how to speak kindly with one another.

Not always easy to do.

Sadly, much communication these days becomes angry and caustic.

Especially when we share words via email and the Internet, we seem to forget that our choice of words makes a difference.

And so, we are invited back into this *mikdash* – this holy space each Shabbat – and asked to use our spiritual toolkit each weekday to put on our *tefillin* on our bodies to remind us of how we should act, whom we truly aspire to be, that we are God’s hands in this world. And we engage in building community – that messy, complicated and unbelievably powerful act of making ourselves vulnerable enough to deeply connect with others in a group.

When we do that, when we use our sanctuary to come closer to others, the opening verse of the reading is fulfilled – “*asu li mikdash v’shakhanti b’tokham* – the Divine declares: when you build for Me a sanctuary, I will dwell among you.”

Not that I will dwell in the sanctuary.

But down here, among all of us.

Let us always remember what we are doing here and what we are really building within all this spiritual beauty.