

**A Sanctuary in Our Homes**  
**Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5781**  
**September 20, 2020**

I have a dance studio in my house. No, there are no mirrors, or bars, but there is an open space with a yoga block in the middle, to delineate the center of a circle. My spouse Matthew is an excellent Israeli dancer, and



ever since the Coronavirus pandemic began, his only dancing outlet has been the dance lessons that he patiently gives me in our basement, despite my challenges with memorizing choreography.

One evening several months ago, we were on his computer, participating in a world-wide dance session on Zoom. At first, we just planned to watch. Dancing together with people on Zoom? Too weird. We figured we'd just tune in for a few minutes, then do something else. But then, something changed. Out of the thousands of songs that have Israeli dances written for them, they were playing Darkeinu, one of the very few dances that I knew! I grabbed the computer, ran downstairs to our improvised dance studio, and danced along.

That was the only dance they played that I knew, but after that, we stayed there for an hour, riveted to the computer. As I stood looking at the other dancers, I saw how they had each created dance studios in their homes, just like we had, using household items to mark the center of a circle. Some people danced in their kitchens or their living rooms, with their kitchen appliances visible behind them. One woman had moved her furniture and used tape to delineate a circle on her tile floor. One man was outside, dancing around his water bottle. Some people had a partner with them, while many danced alone. Being part of that Zoom meeting, I felt surprisingly emotional. After all, I'm not even a big dancer! If Covid didn't exist, I probably wouldn't have joined an in-person session that night. However, there was something intimate and moving about being welcomed into the homes of people I had never met, from across North America, South America, and Israel. As much as dancing on Zoom has its challenges, and let me tell you, it definitely has its drawbacks, there was something uniquely powerful about how we came together.

In the past several months, our homes have been transformed in ways we never would have imagined. Out of necessity, we have turned our homes into the places where much of our lives take place, and as a result,

both our homes and the activities we now do in them have been transformed. Our homes have become offices, dance studios, special effects studios, audio recording studios, art studios, performance venues, hair salons, gyms and, yes, synagogues, and so much more. Moreover, we have learned to engage in many activities in new and different ways.

These dramatic changes, of course, were forced on us by a loss. Because of Coronavirus, we have lost, mostly temporarily, sometimes permanently, many of the public spaces that had previously been integral to our daily lives.

This is not the first time that Jews have lost a central gathering place, a place for communal worship and connection, a place for individuals to



join with a larger whole. Two thousand years ago, the Jewish world lost its central gathering place. The place where public religious rituals occurred, where the entire Israelite community converged on

holidays, was destroyed. Jerusalem was decimated. The Temple in Jerusalem was gone.

At that point, the Jews could have done what other communities around them had done when their temples were destroyed. They could have said-- if our worship place is gone, then we're done existing as a group. We can't bring our sacrifices, we can't bring our pilgrimages-- our way of coming together as a community is over, so Judaism is over.

Sure, there were some ways that people could worship and celebrate holidays in their local communities, but I can imagine many people saying that without the central features of Jewish worship as they understood it, Judaism can't be practiced! I can imagine them saying: Judaism that takes place in the absence of sacrificial, centralized, worship in the Temple, isn't real Judaism! After celebrating Pesah, and Sukkot, and Shavuot, with thousands of people altogether, how could it ever be satisfying to celebrate with only the people in my town, or my family? That sense of awe, that sense of connection to the people as whole -- how could it ever be replicated? Whatever we do now can't be as good as what we had, so why do it?

The Prophet Ezekiel articulates this response with the phrase , מקדש , מנע, which to him means, a diminished sanctuary. When God is describing the hardships experienced by the Children of Israel, God says "I have

indeed removed the Children of Israel far among the nations and have scattered them among the countries, and I have become to them a Mikdash Me'at, a diminished sanctuary, in the countries where they have gone." The sanctuary that was the Temple is gone, and only a diminished one is left.

In its original context, a Mikdash me'at was a bad thing! It described a diminished sense of holiness, distance from God! It's a reminder of loss, that the best we can do is always less than what we used to have. We can relate. How can I have a seder without any guests? How can I celebrate a special occasion without going to a restaurant? How can our children enjoy the summer without going to camp? Is it really the High Holy Days if I can't run into all of the people I see each year?

Centuries later, the rabbis of the Talmud didn't take this route. They looked at loss, and they created opportunity. We have new ways of practicing, the rabbis said, new ways of coming together, new ways of finding meaning. They repurposed the phrase *Mikdash Me'at*-- in this new version, it means not a diminished sanctuary, but a miniature one!

What is this miniature sanctuary? The Talmud tells us that synagogues and study halls are examples of mikdash me'at, and later

sources suggest that the home is a Mikdash Me'at as well. In other words, our current communal and personal spaces, dispersed throughout the world, fulfill the needs that used to be met by the one centralized Temple.

An example of how they put this into practice can be found in a ritual that many of us partake in each week. When we eat challah at Shabbat and holiday meals, it is customary to sprinkle salt on the challah. In his gloss on the law code the Shulhan Arukh, the medieval rabbi Moshe Isserles says that we use salt because our tables are similar to the altar at the Temple in Jerusalem. Just as sacrifices were sprinkled with salt, we now salt our challah, thus elevating our festive meals into sacred acts. To eat my Shabbat challah, I don't need to be in Jerusalem, and I don't need a priest. I can engage in that symbolic holy act anywhere.

If we can create Mikdash Me'at wherever we go, we don't need THE Temple -- we can take the Temple, or what it represents, with us wherever we go. The fact that we can pray anywhere, engage in Jewish rituals anywhere, without being tied to a

Temple isn't only a loss-- it's also an asset. And in fact, this elevates the importance of the types of behaviors



that we engage in in lieu of Temple worship.

To be transparent, the rabbis weren't such fans of the Temple when it existed, and there were synagogues and study halls long before the Temple was destroyed. So I admit that this shift was already occurring even before the destruction, and it wasn't just a response to disaster. However, it wasn't a foregone conclusion that study halls and synagogues would become the new primary centers of Jewish life. And the fact remains that the shift to a home-based Judaism gave us the strength as a people to continue to exist for thousands of years.

The rabbis' vision and creativity in helping us make that shift gave us the spiritual resources to find meaning in new ways, without being mediated by a separate caste of priests. If I can have a mikdash me'at in my home, then I connect with God on my own! Nobody else gets to stand between me and the experience of holiness! And furthermore, if my home is a miniature Temple, then that means that my own house is a special, even sacred place! I have just elevated the space where I live to be a space of sanctity, of connecting with God and with others. Bringing those activities into my home changes the nature of my home. It means that even

my mundane activities can have cosmic significance, and can be part of making my life more meaningful.

So what does this mean for us? Here we are, sitting at home, in front of our computers, praying, welcoming in the new year together. As recently as February, none of us imagined that our High Holy Day services would be like this, with each of us in our own homes, and I would presume to guess that most of us are hoping deeply that we will never have another High Holy Days like this one again. Can we really have a meaningful experience this way? **Can we create a *Mikdash Me'at*, a miniature Temple, or, I might say, a miniature synagogue, in our homes?**

One of the things about the institution of the synagogue that is so special is not just that it is a place for us to pray to God. The thing that draws many of us to synagogues is each other. In Hebrew, the word for synagogue is בית כנסת-- a gathering space. We come to shul to come together in community. In community, we support each other through challenging times, and celebrate milestones. In community, we celebrate Shabbat and holidays, we learn, we find meaning in our lives, and we do it together. If we want to bring the synagogue into our homes, we need to bring community into our homes as well.



Dr. David Rock, co-founder and CEO of the NeuroLeadership Institute, has been consulting with workplaces for years about how to improve workplace culture and productivity when some workers are working remotely. One of the challenges that many employers face is called “distance bias.” When a person feels distant to us, we judge their intelligence as lower, and their leadership qualities more lacking. That means that we assess a person who is on the phone more harshly than someone who is on Zoom, and someone on Zoom more harshly than someone in the room with us. This, of course, is why we feel more connected to people who are showing their video on Zoom than people who hide it. But there is a way to make ourselves feel closer to each other even from afar. Dr Rock suggests giving your coworkers a tour of your house. If you show somebody your home, your pets, your kitchen, or even if you pick a virtual background that is uniquely you, you humanize yourself, you make that person feel closer to you, and you make it more likely that they will take you seriously.

We are not coworkers, but I think these lessons apply to community members as well. As sad as it is not to be in the same room with each other, there is an intimacy to seeing each others’ homes, pets, and lives.

We have a chance to understand each other, and feel intimately connected to each other, with many people with whom we would never have had that opportunity previously.

I'd like to close with a quick exercise that would not be possible if we were all in the Temple Emunah sanctuary. I want you to look around you and find an object in the room with you right now that means

something to you. Maybe it's a pair of candlesticks you inherited from your grandmother, or a honey dish you got for your wedding. Maybe it's a kiddush cup you picked out on a trip to Israel, or a photograph of a moment you never want to forget. I'm going to give you 15 seconds to grab that object and hold it up in front of the camera.

I'd like everyone to look around at the objects people chose. Find one object that you want to ask about. Remember whose object it was, and reach out to that person at some point in the next week. Use this moment to learn something new about someone, to strengthen an old connection, or to build a new one.

For the rabbis, creating a mikdash me'at meant bringing the sanctity of the Temple in Jerusalem into their homes, synagogues, and study halls.



Today, our synagogues and study halls have also come into our homes. For us, it is the connections we make in those spaces that we want to bring home with us. When we pray at home over Zoom, and when we engage in community gatherings and activities over Zoom, we not only benefit from that particular activity, but we also share our home with others. There's a difference between having a Shabbat dinner together with someone at their house or having it at the shul. Both are delightful, but they're not the same. Normally, only a select few of the people we are in community with actually ever enter our homes, and vice versa. Today, however, that balance has shifted. When we join a public event, we do so from our own private spaces. When I joined in that dancing session over Zoom, it meant a lot to see where other people were Zooming in from. When I've watched living room concerts, I've experienced a certain amount of awe and appreciation in being invited into a musician's personal living space. When we gather on Zoom, we share a piece of ourselves that we don't usually get to see about each other.

This High Holy Days is like no other. We are losing a lot this year. We are not gathering in a room with 1200 people. We won't have full tables, bursting with family and friends sharing festive meals. Many of us might not

even hear the shofar in person, at least not during services, or not in the company of our community. When we pray those familiar, resonant prayers, we won't even be able to fully hear each other as we sing together. And yet, we are here together, sharing the experience of the same service, looking at each other's faces. Amidst all the loss, there is a new intimacy that we can gain with each other this year. This Rosh Hashanah, which is different from all others, we turn our homes into synagogues, and share our homes with each other. In doing so, we find a new way to bring holiness, and community, back into our lives. Maybe our way of experiencing Mikdash Me'at in this pandemic is by using this time of physical separation to deepen our emotional connections to each other, and our empathy for one another, as we all learn to cope with our new, altered reality.

Shanah Tova.