

Returning to the Holiness of our Sanctuary

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So, after 14 months, we are back in *shul* on a Shabbat morning for a *Bat-Mitzvah*.

Wow.

*Sheheheyanu V'keyamanu La'zman Haze*h – thank you God for keeping us in life, sustaining and bringing us to this magical moment, this moment of holiness.

Not all of us made it...; but let us still give thanks for what we have.

Not that all of us are gathered here in the *shul* today, but for the 18 of us who are part of this *Bat-Mitzvah*, it is a gift.

Not that this pandemic is over, it is not, but we are moving, hopefully and thankfully, to the next phase.

Not that we can predict now how long it will be until more of us will be here, but we are thinking of what comes next.

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So let us pause and take in this *brakhah* – this blessing. *Mazal tov* to the Kievals on Ava's *Bat-Mitzvah*; they are like the first Jews to return to Israel in larger numbers in the late 19th Century: they are pioneers – *halutzim*. And when you are pioneers, you face challenges as we did preparing for this Shabbat.

But thank you for helping us enter this old/new space where for the first time we have a *minyan* in *shul* in the room on Shabbat.



And my heart goes out to all the families whose *smahot* – whose *B'nei Mitzvah* celebrations were totally changed into experiences from home. All the *kiddushim* we lost (and are still missing); all the Friday night dinners we never had; for our kids, our teens, the tremendous loss of not being able to connect, to come up on the *bimah* for *Adon Olam*, to run around in the halls, to schmooze over *Kiddush*; to not hold celebrations where they could deepen their relationships and create new connections.

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This week's *parashah: Emor* has lessons for this moment. As Ava thoughtfully taught us, there are lessons about exclusion that need to be reframed for our world and modern understandings and from there, the second half of the reading moves into the theme of holiness in time and space.

At the end of chapter 22 (verse 32), we find the following verse:

וְנִקְדָּשְׁתִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי יְהוָה מִקְדָּשְׁכֶם:

God declares: “I will be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people—I am *Adonai* who sanctifies you.”

What does this mean?

God will be holy amidst the people, but God then says that the Divine is the One who makes us holy.

So, which is it?

Do we make God holy or does God make us holy?

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The *Sefat Emet*, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, also known as the *Gerer Rebbe*, who lived in Warsaw at the turn of the 20th Century, points out that the significance of the phrase in our *parashah*: “*B'tokh B'nei Yisrael* – amidst the house of Israel.” Therefore, God is a part of our people, or in the

Gerer Rebbe's words: "hakedushah genuzah bi'khlal Yisrael – God's holiness is hidden in the collective body of Israel."

The sages teach that in the house of Israel means wherever there are ten Jews, a *minyan*, the *Shekhinah*, the *Divine Presence* dwells. Thus, when we form a *minyan*, we bring God's presence into that space.

That is because people who come together, who become one house, their hearts come closer to each other, their souls aspire to become one.

Let's bring this teaching back to our text from the Torah. When we come together as a *minyan*, we feel each other's presence, sensing glimmers of the Divine. And then that Feeling, God's Presence, makes us become aware of the holiness of that moment, of that gathering.

We who are sitting here today, feel that once again.



And somehow, we have been able to create that on Zoom. Even sitting in my office for *B'nei Mitzvah*, a Zoom *shivah*, a Zoom baby naming, I have felt that closeness, some of that intimacy, some of that religious experience of holiness.

We felt that this week at Reena Hodaya's *tekes brit* – naming ceremony.

As was mentioned in our Thursday lunchtime *parashah* class, the late 19th Century philosopher Emile Durkheim, explained that religion is when a group of people comes together to experience a sacred moment.

We may have felt that in our virtual *minyanim*, but it is not the same as being in the same physical space; there is simply no substitute for being together in person as much as we have and will continue to work to do just that.

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Of course, our tradition was also aware that there is also great power in creating sacred time. In fact, it may be even more powerful.

That is why the *parashah* quickly pivots from the laws about building holiness in a holy space where the *Kohanim* help us feel the bonds of community to the sanctity of time.

Just following the aforementioned verse, the Torah announces that we, the people, are to announce sacred time.

We, the people, have the power to transform time. A radical notion to be sure; but the Torah is teaching us that we have the power to make a moment sacred.

When we announce that this is a moment that is different from others, it becomes a holy moment! When we light the candles, on Friday night or lift the *kiddush* cup, we are announcing that the next 25 hours are different from the rest of the week.



This was a revolution in how people could experience time. Because people declared something sacred, it was. And the Torah does not stop there, but says that once a person does this, then God says it is holy.

Just as we saw before with space, the same goes for time. When we form a community, God's holiness can be felt and when we declare time radically different, it can acquire holiness.

But again the Torah emphasizes that this is to take place in community. If you announce to yourself that Shabbat is starting, that's good, but if you announce it in community, that transforms the larger society.

Suddenly Shabbat could be a vehicle of holiness and justice for everyone – even the stranger and those on the margins of society were given this day off to feel this gift of holy time.

So, as we gather this Shabbat, those of us in the *shul* together with all of you in your homes on Zoom, we all join together to feel the *kedushah*, the sanctity of this time.

Weaving together the sanctity of people, space and time, our community begins to emerge, reborn and renewed as a sacred *beit Yisrael* – a holy house of Israel.

May this only grow as we experience what we hope is the twilight of this pandemic.

And wherever you are, let us all say Amen.