

Holy Spaces, Holy Connections - T'rumah 5783

I have always loved spending time outdoors, and particularly in beautiful wilderness spaces. I find that they help me tap into a sense of wonder and appreciation of the world we live in. I have a distinct memory of a trip that I went on as a teenager with my school, where we camped outside in the winter. True, it was in some very nice insulated tents with wooden floors, but we did travel by cross country skis and dogsleds. Each morning, we would gather together, right by our campsite, on a frozen lake. We were a Jewish group, so we would each take out our tallit and tefillin and daven together. Don't worry, we put our coats on over our arms as soon as the tefillin were on. We would sing the psalms of pesukei d'zimra, praising the natural beauty of the world, in the middle of a frozen lake, surrounded by evergreen trees, removed from the distractions of civilization. The combination of the pristine surroundings with our coming together in that moment as a group

of Jews reciting our traditional prayers, was a profound experience. It was a moment of awe, and appreciation, and belonging, in a beautiful place, that I will always take with me.



Now, it is not necessary to be in the middle of a frozen lake in a place that is inaccessible except by skis or dogsled in order to have a spiritual experience. After all, there are beautiful places all around us, and we can find opportunities for moments of connection and meaning practically anywhere. As Jews, our tradition tends to place a stronger focus on sacred time than on sacred space, meaning that we can have spiritual moments wherever we may be. But I think all of us have found that, at the same time, some spaces may feel more conducive than others to a profound, connected, or spiritual experience.

The rabbis, too, try to reconcile their conviction that God can be accessed anywhere with their experience of certain places as being more “spiritual” than others. The subject

comes up when they discuss this week's Torah portion, Trumah, in which God commands Moses to instruct the people to build a mishkan, a portable tabernacle, which will allow God to dwell among the people.

A midrash says: When the Holy Blessed One said to Moses, "Make me a dwelling-place," Moses was shocked and taken aback. Moses said, "The Glory of the Holy Blessed One fills the whole universe, and God says: 'Make me a dwelling-place'?"

In other words, Moses knows that God exists everywhere. Given that, he says, what does it mean for God to dwell in one particular place? It doesn't make sense that we would need a *particular* place to find God. So how does the midrash answer that question?

In the midrash, God says, I am God, I am different from humans! I can exist everywhere at once, and I can also concentrate my presence to fit a very small space, even as small as one square cubit!¹

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer comments on this midrash,² offering his interpretation of why God would want to concentrate God's presence in a small space. It is hard to find moments of connection, moments of faith, moments of spirituality. It is hard to experience an amorphous God, even if God is everywhere. And so by creating spaces where humans can more easily access the divine, God gives us a gift. God is making it easier for us to connect more strongly to God's presence.

Now, if you are comfortable thinking about God as a presence in the world, this may be a meaningful notion. But can this be meaningful even if we don't have a sense of God in that way, or even if we don't believe in God at all? What else might it mean to have a holy space, or a place where we may have spiritual experiences?

¹ Sh'mot Rabbah 34:1; Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 2:10

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https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/KaunferParashatTerumah5783.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205783&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=247048434&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-en1Ywnyyn7glT8TaAfhR-2IM3Ceu6xWVDAXrk14L2iRyIjMvniLLBmpSEM0Qpt_VPP3-uBhVcvGpwHlloUWwu_IPtg&utm_content=247048434&utm_source=hs_email



Former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Arnie Eisen, studied American Jews who go to shul. He learned something fascinating. He found that of those who go to synagogue, many believe in God. However, many people who believe in God and attend synagogue regularly don't connect the two. Jews come to shul for many reasons, but even those who believe in God don't tend to list God as one of them.

One person who was interviewed, named Lee, says: "People ask me why, if I'm not religious, I go to shul... it's the only time of the week that I truly get lost in thought for three hours and let my mind wander and get caught up in the melodies... My week is not complete unless I go to shul on Saturday morning."

Lee says he's not religious, but this experience sounds like a profound one, where Lee is able to connect with himself and his community. Some might even call it a spiritual experience.

On this snowy and cold weekend, when those of us who are here in person put in some extra effort to get here, and where those joining us remotely have also made a point of being here, I think it's worth reflecting on the question. Why do we come here to shul? Do we think of this place as special in some way? How or why?



Things that might make places feel holy-

- *Place to feel safe*
- *Wonder at natural world*
- *Connection to people past or present*

As we have seen, we have different reasons for wanting to be here. And yet, collectively, this place connects us. It connects us to ourselves, to each other, to Jews around the world, and to Jews across time. The synagogue, like the Mishkan long ago, is a place of connection, something we all need in the world we are in.

Part of what was so meaningful about my experience on that frozen lake wasn't just the sense of awe that I had at being in such a pristine and stunning place. It was also having the opportunity to gather and take note of that beauty in a Jewish way. I was in the middle of nowhere, but connected not only to the group I was with, but to our tradition.

I want to conclude with a line from *The Jew Within*, the book that contains the study that Dr Eisen co-authored.

“The synagogue is not the main arena of Jewish life for most moderately affiliated Jews. Nor is it the place in which they tend to seek God or find God. It is, however, the place where [each of us can have our] own time - alone but [also] in community. [We] remain the selves [we] are, while attached to generations and millennia... This is a precious sanctuary indeed.”

Shabbat Shalom.

