

God is in *this* place.
Erev Rosh Hashanah 2009
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Shana tova! This High Holiday season marks B'nai Israel's 160th anniversary. 160 Rosh Hashanah services since that day in September in 1849 when a man named Moses Hyman closed the doors of his store for business, and opened up his home to the Jews of Old Sacramento to celebrate the Jewish New Year.

Each new year has brought changes, some sad, some joyful. Each year has marked the passing of time where we welcomed new people into our midst, and sadly said good bye to others who we loved. Over the years we have prayed in different places, in homes, in storefronts, and synagogues, Old Sac, downtown, Land Park, and even the Convention Center when circumstances demanded it.

I look around the room tonight, and I am struck by how different things feel than just a year ago. Like all of you, I mourn the absence of our Chazzan, my partner and my friend. I can still hear his voice fill this room with a sense of majesty and splendor that is impossible to duplicate.

And yet, here we are again, coming together to stand outside of ordinary space and time to create something sacred – and we do this *together*. When we come together as a community we have the opportunity to create an experience that links us with the generations that came before us even as we lay a foundation for the ones who will follow.

We are a people who yearn for the sacred. We strive to create spaces in time that enable us to go outside of the ordinary and recognize the mystery and blessings that life has to offer.

Each generation seeks to create for itself sacred space where we can come together for a purpose greater than simply our own personal needs and wants. Even those Jewish settlers who came trekking around the Horn, or came across the country on horseback during the Gold Rush - men and women seeking a new life filled with possibilities – even as they created a new world for themselves, they did not abandon their Jewish yearning for community or sacred sanctuaries in time and space.

In what was once a wilderness, a lawless frontier, they planted seeds that would blossom into the Jewish community that *we* enjoy. They created a solid foundation upon which we would build our *mishkan* - our sanctuary in the wilderness.

Our *mishkan*, our Tabernacle, or temple, is more than a concrete physical place. Our *mishkan* is made real when we simply recognize that when we come together to create and honor sacred bonds of relationship and obligations towards one another, the space that we occupy becomes holy ground.

The Torah tells a story of our ancestor Jacob. When he was a young man he found himself in exile, he had to flee from his parent's home because of the trickery he had engaged in against his father and his brother.

And in the midst of his fleeing from his home in Beersheva to his Uncle's home in Haran, night fell and he had to encamp in the wilderness. It is easy to imagine that as the young Jacob settled down

to rest, he must have felt terribly alone and scared in what seemed to him to be a God-forsaken piece of land.

The Torah says that “coming upon a certain place, he passed the night there, for the sun was setting; taking one of the stones of the place, he made it his head-rest as he lay down, in that place. (Gen. 28:11)”

“*Mai'avnei ha-Makom*” – the stones of that place. As it turns out, those stones were no ordinary stones, and that place, was no ordinary place.

Because, as he slept, he had an amazing dream. He saw angles going up and down a ladder from where he was up to heaven, and back down again. And at the top of the ladder was God. And in his dream the Holy One said to Jacob “I, Adonai, am the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the land on which you are lying I will give to you and to your descendants. And your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west and the east and the north and the south. Through you and your descendants all the families of the earth shall find blessing. (Gen. 28:13-14)”

And in that moment, as Jacob stood at the foot of the ladder, he was not only standing between heaven and earth, but also between the generations that came before him that had already ascended the heavenly ladder, and the earthly generations that would follow him. He stood in the middle of history, seeing his place, his role in what would happen even as he saw that he could stand in that spot because of the courage and faith of the ones who had already been there. When Jacob awoke he said with awe “Surely God was in this place, and I, I, did not know it. He was awestruck, and said, How awe-inspiring is this place! *This* is none other than the house of God, and *this* is the gate of heaven! (Gen. 28:16)”

Yesh Adonai ba-Makom! – Surely God was in this place! - he exclaimed.

The word Makom has multiple meanings in Hebrew, on the simple level it means place, but it also is one of the names of God. HaMakom – the place of God is in this world, and the world is the place of God. God is here, God is everywhere when we are open to it.

As Jacob discovers, there is no such thing as a “God forsaken place.” No matter where we travel, where our dust settles, the Holy One is here with us if we but open our eyes and look.

Jacob names that place “Beit El” – the House of God. We too stand in a Beit El – a house of God, a gateway to heaven.

And I have seen those *malachim*, those angels that Jacob saw, these Divine messengers that ascend and descend between heaven and earth. I see them in the faces of those who are here, and those who were with us once. I see those angels in the many acts of kindness that happen between each of you when you attend a *shiva minyan*, lean over to tell a stranger what page we are on, I see it when we are truly present with one another.

Each of us has the potential of being one of these Divine messengers when we engage in acts of *g'milut chasadim* – acts of loving kindness, when we bring ourselves to haMakom, when we bring ourselves to the place where we gather together.

When we do these things, we take our place on the ladder between heaven and earth, between the generations that have passed and the ones waiting to be born.

This story reminds us that God, or the Sacred, or that which is Holy, can be found anywhere if we but open our eyes.

Tradition teaches us that Jacob's dream was but one of the many sacred encounters that happened on that spot. There are some that teach that was also the place where Abraham and Isaac went up the mountain at God's command. So often without realizing it we retrace the steps our parents took, only to discover our own truth, our own revelations, along that same path.

The Rabbis tell yet another story about that same place where Jacob laid his head. They say that some years after Jacob passed through that way, there were two brothers that lived there, one on each side of that mountain.

One brother was rich but had no children, the other had many children but was very poor.

One day the rich brother thought, "I have so much and my brother has so little, tonight, in the middle of the night, I'll sneak across the mountain and bring my brother some of my crops.

And on that very day, on other side of the mountain, the poor brother said to himself, I derive so much happiness from my children, tonight, in the middle of the night, I am going bring my brother some of my crops so he could have a little extra joy in this world.

And so it happened that every night each of the brothers secretly crossed the mountain to bring their brother food. Every morning each brother would inspect their stock only to learn that nothing was missing. Neither one could explain the phenomena but they thanked G-d for the Holy One's kindness and continued in their acts of good will towards one another.

After years of this routine, one night, a schedule change occurred. Instead of the two brothers missing each other in the night, there on top of the mountain the two brothers met. They looked at each other in surprise and then simultaneously realized what had been happening for all those years. They both embraced one another there on top of the mountain as they cried for joy.

We don't know the names of these two brothers, but the Rabbis teach that it was on that mountain top, because the selfless love expressed by those two brothers that G-d decided that the Beit HaMikdash, the Holy Temple, would be built there, on that spot where the brothers embraced.

Jacob called that place Beit El – the House of God, later, it became the site of the Beit HaMikdash, or the Temple. When the first Jews came to Sacramento, and they shook the dust off of their shoes, and settled in, they built B'nai Israel, or what came to be known here in Sacramento, simply as "the temple." This is a spot that has been consecrated again and again by acts of loving kindness like that shown by the two brothers on Mt. Moriah.

This space has become a place for us where we can encounter the Holy, a place where brothers and sisters come together to share what we each have with open hearts with one another. It is also a place where the lonely wanderer like Jacob can open their eyes and discover that what appeared to be a barren spot is filled with God's messengers engaged in holy acts.

And it is a place for us to stand, as Jacob did, at the foot of a ladder between the generations.

Sometimes when we pray I like to look up at those old ark doors that adorned our sanctuary for so many years. And I try to catch a glimpse of those who are opening the heavenly gates for us.

I once imagined I saw Moses Hyman smiling as he looked down at us and saw how full the room was, how different it is from when he led services.

And was that Dalton Feldstein and Leonard Friedman paying attention to our President as he gave the announcements?

And I wonder, was that really Sophie Price or was it Sylvia Shemansky quietly saying the words of the candle blessing as our Sisterhood President said them?

And this year, this year I am eager to see if at Kol Nidre I will hear Carl's voice coming through the doors of the ark letting us know that while he is not down here with us, he is still ushering our prayers through the heavenly gates, just from a different place on the ladder.

So what is our connection to that first Rosh Hashanah service led by Moses Hyman? Is it the physical space that we occupy? No, it is the sacred gathering together of people that is the connection from place to place, and from year to year. And even as the people change - we are links in that same chain - all rungs in that same ladder connecting heaven to earth.

The sacred is here waiting to be revealed - God is in *this* place, as long as we are willing to open our eyes to the possibility. When we come together to be engaged in each others lives, in the life of our community, we create something that is eternal that outlasts each of us, and we create sacred space and holy ground.

Each generation is responsible for building and rebuilding the mishkan, for discovering for themselves that the ground they walk on is sacred. Just as in the Biblical stories we see that each generation must build and consecrate for themselves a holy space so that they have a place to go to invite a sense of the sacred into their midst - the task is never done.

The B'nai Israel of Sacramento have celebrated 160 Rosh Hashanahs together. Through the years, we have gathered to pray in many places. And each year, the faces have changed, different voices have been heard, we have seen years filled with crises, and other years abundant in blessings. Our founders would surely have been surprised to know that we would evolve from Orthodox to Reform, and one day have a *rebbitzin* who sports a goatee. But through it all, we continue to come together, again and again, reconsecrating the sacred space we share with one another.

But no matter where we pray, or what individual is on the *bimah*, or who is sitting in the congregation - when we come together as B'nai Israel - we are occupying sacred space.

May we be ever strengthened by knowing that we are B'nai Yisrael - the children of Israel, the children of Jacob. May we always remember that whatever stone we might lay our heads upon, wherever our dust might settle, the place that we stand upon *together* becomes a gateway to heaven, and may we fulfill the blessing from Jacob's dream that through us and our descendants all the families of the earth shall find blessing, and find peace.

Shana tova u'metukah - may this be a sweet and joyous year for our congregation, for our community, and for our world. *Ken yehi ratzon* - may this be God's will.

