

“The Importance of Place (Tisha B’Av)”

Rosh Hashanah Sermon

Rabbi Erica Asch

Temple Beth El

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To state the obvious, we are not in the place we thought we would be.
We feel unsettled.
It looks so different.
And yet it is also, familiar.
The same words.
Comforting melodies.
Familiar faces.

As we stand here at the beginning of this new year, we are nearing the top of the liturgical mountain. The days of Elul and these services of Rosh Hashanah propel us through the ten days to Yom Kippur, the time we have been working towards spiritually. A somber day, to be sure, but also a deeply satisfying day.

And similarly, we as a community are nearing the end of years of work and sweat. We have put our time and money into our new space, just as we put our time and money into making ourselves and our world better. So this is an appropriate time to take a step back and ask ourselves some bigger questions. Why are buildings important? What does it mean to be in *a* sanctuary? What does it mean to be in *our* sanctuary?

This year, my sermons are examining how other holidays in Judaism give us new insights into the themes of the High Holidays. Last night, I spoke about Tu BiSh’vat and how the remaking of this holiday by the mystics 500 years ago can show us how to make our own holiday experiences meaningful. Today, I’ll focus on the idea of physical space by examining the holiday of Tisha B’Av.

The sanctuaries we build today are meant to mirror the physical space of the Temple that was established in the 10th century BCE in Jerusalem. The Temple stood for about 1000 years before it was destroyed by the Romans in 70CE. A thousand years -- that’s more than four times longer than the United States has existed!

Unbeknownst to many of us, we have reminders of that Temple all around us. Yes, we have imported the most important reminders here to the Unitarian Church. The eternal light, the ner tamid, comes from a commandment in Exodus to keep a light burning in the Tabernacle. It reminds us of the sacred fires that were kept continually burning on the altar. The raised bimah reminds us of the raised altar. The bimah traditionally (and in our new space!) faces east towards Jerusalem. The curtain over the ark symbolizes the curtain outside the inner sanctum in the Temple. These structural elements, which we might not even consciously notice, are meant to remind us of the original Temple in Jerusalem. Our new building will combine some of our traditional elements--our original and refinished ark and the eternal light --with some new elements--a reoriented and accessible bimah facing east.

The holiday where we think about space and place most deeply is Tisha B’Av, which commemorates the destruction of the first and second Temples. With the destruction of the first Temple, our ancestors had to flee to Babylon. Given all the time and effort it took us to move seven blocks north and two blocks west, into our temporary sanctuary, we can imagine how traumatic it was for our ancestors to have to move hundreds of miles across deserts and through

hostile kingdoms. They had no Google spreadsheets, no dedicated moving crew, no time and date on the calendar or helpful neighbors to lend a hand. They fled for their lives with very little and stayed in Babylon for years before trekking back to Jerusalem to begin the long process of rebuilding the second Temple. When they came back, they did not find electrical fires as we did, but they certainly found mold and roofs that needed repair. Examining this holiday of loss and longing gives us insight into our own building and what we gain and lose as we transform our physical space.

We call the place where we worship by many names. In the ancient times of our wandering, the *mishkan* was the name for the wilderness tabernacle where we worshiped. *Mishkan* means “dwelling” or “resting” place. Located in the center of the community, it was where God’s presence would descend. Without the physical structure, God could not appear to the priests. When we journeyed to Jerusalem, we built the Temple, called *beit hamikdash*, or Holy House in Hebrew. This was also a place where God dwelt. The physical space was so important that the Israelites were commanded to travel there three times a year, on the festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Our ancient ancestors were not able to fulfill their worship obligations without being physically in Jerusalem at the Temple.

With the destruction, this all changes. Living in exile, we are not able to journey to the Temple in Jerusalem. We stop sacrificing animals. We create our own sanctuaries in the lands where we dwell--Babylon, Egypt, Spain, Russia, France, Morocco. The English word “sanctuary” connotes a place of refuge and safety. It provides us comfort and a sense of familiarity.

That, of course, is what our sanctuary did for us for so many years. We, like our ancient ancestors, journeyed from near and far to come to our sanctuary. It had a feeling of familiarity to it, even those aspects that did not work so well. At our annual meeting, as we officially moved out of our space, many of us shared some of our fondest memories of the old place. One congregant said they would miss the couch in the foyer. Now, to an outside observer, the couch looked a little run down, a bit outdated, a comfortable if somewhat disheveled place to sit. But to us....to us, the couch was a homey touch originally envisioned by Charlotte Goos. She enlisted the help of Sy and Harriet Katz in picking it out and installing it in its space. It was a place for naps for at least two rabbis, a place to schmooze and for a surprising number of Hebrew School students, a place to escape from lessons and to hang out. That piece of furniture was full of memories.

The physical space had its quirks. The golem in the basement. The heat on the bimah during services. The memorable Rosh Hashanah of the bees. One person said, “I’ll miss the 1950’s (chesnut-brown-wood-paneled) shul vibe.” The physical building, envisioned and built by our founders, served us well for many years. And it was clearly time for a change.

We will gain so much in our new space. Not only will we be facing towards Jerusalem, which makes my rabbi heart happy, but we will have a newly accessible bimah that is lower to the floor and has a spacious ramp. It is vital for us that everyone will be able to access our bimah, come up for an aliyah and bless the Torah, and also read from the Torah on our newly accessible reading table. Many of us have watched over the years as people have had very close calls on our quite steep steps. We have a congregation that is open, welcoming, and accessible to all, and now we will have a space to match.

Having a lower, more accessible bimah will also give our services a more intimate feel. As you Shabbat regulars know, we rarely used the bimah because I usually lead services from the floor during the year. Now we will be able to use it year round. Additionally, the seating will

be in a semi-circle, letting all of you still gaze out the window at the turkeys, but also giving you the chance to look at one another instead of just at the rabbi.

Our reorientation will also give us more seating, the opportunity for a beautiful stained glass window, and a new, much more sound-proof barrier between the sanctuary and function space. This will lead to much faster and easier set up of food--and I know that will make everyone happy.

Speaking of food, we also have a brand new kitchen with new appliances, cabinets, and counters -- and without the golem that would make weird noises at inopportune moments. We have accessible bathrooms, a more spacious entryway, and doors leading to a small deck out back. I won't go into all the details, but I do invite you to visit in person after the service and Lipman Kiddush to see all the changes in process.

With all those amazing changes, I have to mention one more vital fact about our renovation. It was long overdue. In Judaism, the highest value is *pikuach nefesh*, saving a life. When we started working on the building we found many unexpected hazards that threatened our health and our lives. We found that the roof over the bimah was structurally unstable. There was black mold in the walls. Most disturbing, an electrical fire had charred a piece of wood in the walls, burned it black. The fire only burned out because of the moisture that had accumulated in the wood. We are lucky our building is still standing at all! These unexpected findings caused construction delays and costs that were much higher than anticipated. But we are so lucky we are doing this renovation now and are able to correct those problems before anyone was hurt or our building was more severely damaged. We, unlike our ancestors, did not have to cope with the unexpected loss of our synagogue.

Our ancestors did not choose to move — they were forced to leave. The destruction of the second Temple was a huge calamity, so huge that we still remember it 2000 years later. Our liturgy and rituals point back to the Temple. And yet, for all the horror, our forced exile from Jerusalem also led to many positive changes. We had to reinvent an entirely new Judaism focused not on animal sacrifices in Jerusalem but on prayer. It was only after the exile that the rabbis of the Talmud created that laws of rabbinic Judaism we know today. Our Judaism-- Shabbat, holidays, dietary laws, tzedakah, written law--did not emerge until *after* we left our building, the Temple. And our modern Judaism, with women and people of all sexual orientations fully participating in Jewish life, with a concern for those beyond our Jewish community, with an acknowledgment of the need to balance modern values with traditional observances, would also not have been possible had we not lost our original Temple.

Being out of a building can open us up to possibilities. The possibility that God appears not only in the *mishkan* in the desert or in the Temple in Jerusalem, but everywhere. Our ancestor Jacob exclaims after he has his dream of the angels, *achain yesh Adonai b'makom hazeh v'anochi lo yadati*, Behold, God is present in this place and I did not know it (Genesis 28:16).” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches that Shabbat, our most important holiday, is a palace in time. He writes, “Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn (Heschel, *The Sabbath*, page 8).” God is with us even when we are in exile. The loss of place is a reminder of God's ever-present nature.

Not only is God everywhere, but the Jewish community also travels with us wherever we go. That is the message my mother gave to me when I stood on the bimah at Beth Israel Congregation in San Diego for my bat mitzvah. My dad told a joke about the fact that it was a

good thing I didn't look like him as a baby--yes I still remember that---but my mom's story is a far better sermon illustration. She told me that no matter where I would travel, I could always find a Jewish community. And I have found that to be true throughout my life. When I traveled down to Sunflower County, Mississippi, to teach school right after college, I attended the local Jewish synagogue my first Shabbat there. I walked into the imposing building and noticed that everyone there was over 50 and most people were over 75. They were using the Union Prayerbook, which was replaced in 1975. It was very far from my college experience of community. But, after services, I was approached by everyone who wanted to know everything about me. People starting calling others who were not at services. "Richard, there's a new Jew in town, come and meet her." Congregants drove to the synagogue and that group of people became my community for the two years I lived there.

Many visitors to Temple Beth El here have had the same experience I did. We have welcomed so many people through our big, beautiful, wooden (and heavy!) doors. Some have stayed, some were just passing through, but we have offered Jewish community, good stories, delicious food, and warmth to all who entered our sanctuary.

When you reflected on our building, so many of you listed these intangibles that were important to you. One person wrote, "Our shul--building old, outdated, memories warm, enriching." Another wrote, "Acceptance, friendship, discovery, connection, delight, enactment." A third shared, "Spirituality, love, family, Temple Beth El." A fourth summed it up well, "When a building becomes a home." Our building was a home not just because of the physical structure, but because of the memories we created in that space. Baby namings, b'nai mitzvah, funerals, holiday celebrations, and more, took place at Temple Beth El. And when we move into our renovated space in just a few weeks, we will walk through those same, but newly refurbished, doors and begin to make memories in our new space.

Our ancestors, the founders of this congregation, gave us a great gift. They established Jewish life in Augusta and Gardiner. They built a building that has served us well for 62 years. They nurtured our community, welcomed people in, affiliated with the Reform Movement and hired our first rabbi. The Lipmans, who founded this congregation. The Slosbergs and Danas who were central to the founding of the Gardiner synagogue. The Cohens, Weisses, Katzes (Bennett and Edith), the Gooses, the Schatzes and Katzes (Harriet and Syd). One congregant shared, "In loving memory of Belle, Lila and Rose." So many families who helped to make this community what it is today. No matter how long we have been a part of this community, we owe a debt of gratitude to those who came before us and created the strong community we are a part of today. And, if you are newer to our community and do not know all the names I just mentioned, find someone new to sit with at lunch, someone who looks like they have been around for awhile, and ask to hear some stories about the founding families.

As we know, the story does not end here. In undertaking this construction project, we are securing the legacy of this community for generations to come. The Talmud (Taanit 23a) states, "My ancestors planted for me. Likewise, I am planting for my children." "Our ancestors planted for us. Likewise we are planting for our children." The building will be completed shortly. We will raise the money we need. And, we will leave a lasting legacy for the generations to come.

Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashanah remind us of the cycles of time. As we begin a new year, as we anticipate our move into our new building, we recognize, once more, the centrality of community. We appreciate the importance of inhabiting a space that honors the past while being preserved for the future. We are connected backwards in time to our ancient ancestors. We read of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar. We remember our founders. We recall the hardships that beset

our ancient ancestors -- the destruction and exile from their land. We recall the difficulties our own synagogue has faced. And, we remember that out of exile came the birth of rabbinic Judaism, which gave our people new traditions and new life. So too will our newly renovated Temple create new traditions and new memories for future generations of Jews in central Maine.