

What Makes a Place Holy?
Shabbat Chayyei Sarah 5778

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A young man I know, an Arkansas native, recently moved to San Antonio, where I used to live. After being there a few months, he had a request: Could I recommend a restaurant like Senor Tequila, where he could find Mexican food like he was used to back home in Arkansas?

I had to laugh. My guess is that, when the Nodelmans go to New York, they do not ask, “Where can we find good corned beef like we get in Little Rock?” Similarly, I don’t recommend that anybody request “Texas-style pulled pork” in Arkansas.

Bemused by my young friend’s request, though, I had missed the point. Yes, he now lives in a city renowned for its Mexican food. No, Arkansas is not a Mecca of Mexican cuisine. Still, he really did want Arkansas Mexican food. He was missing a taste of home.

Many of us have moved from one place to another at some point in our lives. Even if we’ve happily adapted to our new home town, we may still yearn for certain people and places, sights and smells, of our former residence. When the boys and I land in San Antonio, we head directly from the airport to our favorite Mexican restaurant. When we come home to Little Rock, we are grateful that Congregation B’nai Israel is waiting for us. The Jewish community of Little Rock, of all places, has become our sacred home.

Last June, Dylan arrived at Henry S. Jacobs Camp in Utica, Mississippi, where he was greeted with the words, “Welcome home!” In that moment, Jacobs Camp felt like anything but home. To the contrary, paramount in any first-time camper’s mind is the harsh reality of leaving home for an extended period of time. Soon enough, though, as Dylan will recount tomorrow, camp becomes home, a sacred place, without replacing his family home or congregation here in Central Arkansas.

Our Torah portion, *Parashat Chayyei Sarah*, is replete with meditation on the meaning of home, on what makes a place sacred.

At the portion’s outset, we read of the death of our matriarch, Sarah. Abraham’s first order of business is to secure a burial place for her. We may

wonder why he has to do that. After all, God has promised the entire land to Abraham. Can't he just bury Sarah anywhere he wants?

Abraham approaches the Hittites, who own the cave where he wants to inter Sarah's remains. He describes himself as "a resident alien," even after more than six decades among them. The Hittites, though, call Abraham "a prince among us." They offer the cave for free, but Abraham declines, insisting on paying full price. Our tradition considers the acquisition important: The first time our people actually owns a parcel of the land God has promised.

Our sages don't ask, but we may, why doesn't Abraham seem to consider taking Sarah's remains "home" for burial, back to Haran or Ur? After all, shortly after burying Sarah in Canaan, the patriarch sends his servant back that way to find a wife for Isaac. "Under no circumstances," Abraham proclaims, is Isaac to be married to a local. Similarly, "under no circumstances" is Isaac to be brought back to Haran to court a prospective wife.

The land, apparently, is sacred to Abraham. Its people, though, are not. Abraham and Isaac dwell among tribes that are foreign to them. They feel a stronger kinship with their own far-away relatives than they do with their neighbors, even though their distant family members are idolaters.

Our ancient rabbis wrote at length about the holiness of the land of Israel. One text suggests concentric circles of holiness. Israel is more sacred than any other land. Its walled cities, more holy than other places in Israel. Jerusalem is exalted among walled cities. The Temple Mount is the most holy place in Jerusalem, but even it has outer and inner rings of sacredness: "The Holy of Holies has greater sanctity [than any other place, even in the Temple,] because no one may enter there except the High Priest on the Day of Atonement at the time of the service."ⁱ Each place's greater holiness is signified by the increasing sanctity of the rituals carried out in each location.

That holiness is best described when the Children of Israel are commanded to build the Tabernacle, the portable Temple that they carried with them for forty years in the wilderness: "Let them build Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them."ⁱⁱ God seeks to meet the people. The holy place is the location that people consecrate as their meeting place with God. The more inspiring and special the worship, the greater the holiness of the place where it happens.

Note, though, that the Tabernacle was not in Jerusalem. It was carried in the wilderness, from place to place. Wherever the Israelites went, they met God

at the Tabernacle. God's presence is symbolized by a cloud, resting upon the Tabernacle for as long as the Israelites are meant to stay in a certain place. Then, when the people are to journey onward, the cloud lifts, and God's presence accompanies the people to the next place that they may consecrate in worship.

Judaism, then, would seem to be as ambivalent as Abraham: Is the land itself holy, or is holiness found wherever the people meet God? The answer, though, comes without ambivalence: Any place can become holy, if we will gather with our community for sacred purpose there.

A century and a half ago, when a new Jewish community began to coalesce in a city or town on America's frontier, the first land it would purchase would be for a cemetery. Worship or education could take place anywhere – a home, perhaps, or a rented space. Burial requires consecrated ground, a permanent location. Like Abraham before them, American Jewish pioneers put down their roots first by purchasing a cemetery, a place to bury their dead, a place made holy by the sacred services the people would gather to hold there, by the lives memorialized there, by the tears shed.

Next, a sanctuary might be constructed. With the greatest care, this Temple building, its predecessor at Capitol and Broadway, and others before that, were appointed with holy objects. The furnishings do not make this place holy, not even its Torah scrolls. Congregation B'nai Israel becomes holy when we gather to serve God, building community in covenant with the Holy One of Blessing.

Other places, too, become holy because we gather there for sacred purpose. Next June, friends rush the Nodelman car outside the Jacobs Camp gate on opening day. They will shout, "Welcome home!" In 2018, unlike 2017, Dylan will know exactly what they mean, as he returns to a place made sacred by bonds of friendship forged with equal sanctity on the basketball court and in the lakeside chapel.

Judaism teaches that each of our homes is a *mikdash me'at*, a small sanctuary, made holy by sacred bonds of families of every kind. Like the altar in the ancient Temple, the dinner table, the family room couch, or the back porch can become the holy of holies. There, we experience life's greatest joys and challenges with people we love, even if we live alone and the people who make our homes come alive are guests.

For some people, the world's best Mexican food is indeed in Little Rock, because here it is shared with those we love, creating a lifetime of memories. For

the same reason, the most outstanding beef ribs are not in an Arkansas barbecue joint but at Jacobs Camp, and my Jewish grandmother from Mississippi made the world's best coffee cake.

Let each of us strive to find and to create places of the greatest holiness. If we are blessed, the holy of holies will be in our very own homes. Let us build sanctuaries wherever we go, and then God will surely dwell among us.

Amen.

ⁱ Mishna Kelim 1:6-9.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 25:8.