

The Meaning of a Sanctuary, after a Year away from Ours

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The Israelites are tired of waiting. Rashi theorizes that, before going up Mount Sinai to talk with God, Moses had promised them that he would return before noon “at the end of period of forty days.” The people, though, count the day that he went up the mountain as day one, which Moses did not intend.ⁱ The people are impatient, and they despair of his returning without waiting even one extra day.

The consequences of the Israelites’ impatience are grave. They gather to confront Aaron, Moses’s brother, demanding that he make a god for them. Aaron obliges, casting a molten calf, which the Israelites encircle in festive worship.ⁱⁱ God is wrought up with anger, threatening to kill all the idolatrous Israelites—that is, everyone except Moses.ⁱⁱⁱ Moses, too, is enraged, flinging the tablets of the commandments to the ground as soon as he sees Israelites rejoicing around the Golden Calf.^{iv}

While Moses talks God out of the most severe punishment,^v and God eventually forgives most of the people and offers a second set of tablets,^{vi} the sin is treated as heinous: Moses “took the calf that they had made and burned it; he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the Israelites drink it.”^{vii} And God “sent a plague upon the people, for what they did with the calf that Aaron made.”^{viii}

The Israelites’ sin is often derided as shocking faithlessness. After all, they have recently witnessed the ten plagues and the parting of the sea. Should Moses’s apparent delay in coming down from the mountain send them into despair that can only be addressed by idolatrous ecstasy?

Wishing to extend more mercy to the Israelites than God and Moses can muster in the moment, we may note that Moses has left them with no instructions about how to serve God during his absence. Up on the mountain, meanwhile, Moses has received blueprints for the construction of a tabernacle, the portable shrine where the Israelites will worship God throughout their desert wanderings. But the people don’t know that yet.

God has commanded Moses: “Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.”^{ix} Note that God does not suggest that the divine presence will live in the Sanctuary—but instead, among the Israelites, contingent on their building the tabernacle. The tabernacle itself is not to be worshiped. It is not an

idol. Its sacred function is to gather the people in service to God, inviting the divine presence to inspire them.

Unlike the Israelites who build the Golden Calf, we at Congregation B'nai Israel are blessed with a magnificent sanctuary—two, in fact. Architects and artisans worthy of their biblical predecessors have created sacred spaces with compelling imagery and materials that inspire us whenever we gather there.

I officiated in those spaces for nearly seven years before the pandemic forced us online. Some of you had worshiped in our Sanctuary and Chapel for forty-five years by last spring. If you are like me, even after many years, you continue to notice nuances of the extraordinary way that the Sanctuary Ark doors and tapestry interact to reinforce images of the tablets of the commandments. Our worship there is enhanced by the majestic windows, opening us up to the natural world as the seasons change and evocatively turning into mirrors at night, inviting us to look inside our souls.

Like the ancient Israelites waiting for Moses, we wonder when we will be able to return to our Sanctuary, to our Chapel. Those sacred spaces are holy to us, and nothing can replace them. We even miss the crows!

The difference between those ancient Israelites and us is that we have been more patient—or, at least, we have behaved *as if* we were patient, logging on to Zoom each week to join in worship, seeking and finding meaning in the time we set aside to join our community in prayer. We have not built a golden calf. Instead, we have constructed an alternative sacred space, gathering in cyberspace, with *kavanah*, the intention to direct our hearts in prayer, together.

Perhaps we should not be surprised. Our Temple Sanctuary and Chapel fulfill their mission even when we are unable to be inside them together—having built a Sanctuary to God, God responds by dwelling among us, wherever we gather.

Rabbi Mona Alfi shares the words of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who emphasizes the importance of assembling in community: “The presence of the multitude in public worship creates an atmosphere that profoundly influences the individual participant. It stirs up emotions of gratitude and confidence that one could not experience in isolation.”^x

Reflecting on Kaplan’s words, Rabbi Ron Segal asks: “Can a ‘multitude’ comprised of silent individuals, visible in small boxes filling our computer screens, still engender an atmosphere rich with emotion, gratitude and confidence.” His answer is a conditional “yes,” that we can achieve what Kaplan envisions, even via

Zoom, when “individuals actively engage and participate in the worship...and not simply log in to check a box or listen passively while trying to work simultaneously on other tasks.”^{xi}

Mordecai Kaplan could not have imagined a group of Jewish worshipers coming together in cyberspace, each from their own homes. Still, we have proved him right. If we can direct our attention to the words and the music, the songs and the prayers, we may draw inspiration from the presence of all who worship with us. The isolation that many of us feel so acutely during the pandemic is assuaged by our community gathering for Shabbat. We are, in these moments together on Zoom, no longer isolated, but in community.

Kaplan’s contemporary, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, argued that Shabbat and our holy days are our sanctuaries, writing, “Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, ... to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of the 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.”^{xii}

We might add that even the global pandemic, which has robbed us of being together in person in our cherished synagogue home, has not destroyed our sanctuary of Shabbat, extinguished our ability to worship together, nor taken away God’s power to dwell among us when we gather for sacred service.

Our task is to be more patient than the ancient Israelites, who turned to idolatry when Moses was delayed by mere hours. Our duty is to remain focused on our holy endeavors, despite the distractions that tempt us when worshiping from home. Our challenge is to continue to draw spiritual sustenance from the physical sanctuary to which we eagerly anticipate returning when the pandemic subsides. Until then, may each of us be a sanctuary, for ourselves and for one another, as we sustain our community and our faith together, however we gather.

Amen.

ⁱ Rashi to Exodus 32:1.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 32:1-6.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 32:10.

^{iv} Exodus 32:19.

^v Exodus 32:11-14.

^{vi} Exodus 34:1.

^{vii} Exodus 32:20.

^{viii} Exodus 32:35.

^{ix} Exodus 25:8.

^x Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, *A Year with Mordecai Kaplan*, p. 73, cited by Rabbi Ron Segal in the name of Rabbi Mona Alfi, “Convention 2021: Enter with Intention,” *Ravblog*, March 3, 2021, [Convention 2021: Enter with Intention \(ccarnet.org\)](https://www.ccarnet.org/convention-2021-enter-with-intention).

^{xi} Rabbi Ron Segal, “Convention 2021: Enter with Intention,” *Ravblog*, March 3, 2021, [Convention 2021: Enter with Intention \(ccarnet.org\)](https://www.ccarnet.org/convention-2021-enter-with-intention).

^{xii} Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951, p. 8.