

SERMON FOR SHABBAT VAYISHLACH

November 19, 2010

Last week, the portion of the Torah that we read was called Vayeitzei. It began with Jacob leaving Beersheva in flight, fearing the revenge of his brother, Esau, and traveling northward toward Haran. Along the way, he camps out and dreams of a ladder, with angels going up and down its rungs. When he awakens, he says (28: 16-17): "Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it.. ..How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven."

We can imagine how unnerved and overwhelmed Jacob must have been by his unusual experience. Even if this had only been a dream, a dream occasioned by indigestion and a significant case of guilty conscience, it was real to Jacob. The reality of the vision awed him and began a process in which his life started to change and mature.

Over time, Jews no longer camped out in the wilderness and sought the presence of God in night-time dreams. When the Temple was erected in Jerusalem, the Bible tells us that this was the place that God elected to proclaim His most holy name; it was now the home of the deity. And when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, it was elsewhere that Jews laid down their souls and probed their hearts and minds to come into the presence of the Eternal. In their homes and in their synagogues, they opened themselves to the experience of the holy. Many of their gathering places they named Beit El, the House of God; that was the name of this congregation until just five years ago. It is still a significant denominator of what this place of holiness is all about.

I want to remind you, this evening, of a few of the characteristics of this place, of this synagogue, that are special and sacred.

This place is, first and foremost, a place of acceptance. When people come into its doors, it matters not whether they are rich or poor, famous men and women or ordinary citizens, possessed of titles before their names and degrees appended to their appellations, dressed fit to kill or clad in daytime street attire. In this building and in this Sanctuary, every person is equal. Each of us is created, so our tradition afEms, b'tzelem

Elohim, in the image of God. Each of us shares in full measure the holiness that emanates from the essence of the Holy One of Israel.

There is a particularly malignant concept that sometimes echoes through some parts of the congregation. "All members of the community are equal," we are told, "but some are more equal than others - because they contribute significantly more to the upkeep of the congregation than others." It would be foolish for any of us to denigrate someone because he or she or they were able and willing to support the synagogue in a particularly generous fashion. But, if you were ever led to think that the canard of favoritism based on wealth is true, I hope you looked in the kitchen last Saturday evening or Sunday morning and noted that people of every age, every gender and, especially, of every economic level were pitching in with their hands and their hearts to make Food Fest a big success. The holder of the knife may have been wealthy or not, but in the presence of the corned beef sandwich and on a team with other congregants, this person was simply a member of a group working for the common welfare of all.

Congregation Beth Israel is a place where every human being is treasured for the simple fact of his or her humanness. That alone ought to make this a sacred space; there are few other locations in a community where that same value is practiced so carefully as in our synagogue. But there are other aspects of what we stand for that also add to the holiness of this place. When I stand on the pulpit, as I do right now, and look out to the people who have come into our holy space, I realize that each of you comes with a particular set of concerns. Some of you are joyous and elated; good things have happened in your lives during the last week, and you have come here, in part, to celebrate with friends and to thank God for the positive features of life. Others of you are simply tired; it is a good place to rest.

I once preached a sermon on the story of Abraham taking Isaac up to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him according to God's command. They carried three things with them: fire, a knife and some wood. I suggested that these three items represent three kinds of congregants at services. The fire is a metaphor for the person who comes, so to speak, "on fire" to change the world through social action. The knife, we might think, is an image that calls to mind the person who has come to fence with the rabbi over the intellectual content of the sermon. But the wood. What could it represent? I told that congregation that it reminded me that some congregants come like the proverbial bump on the log, to rest, perhaps to sleep, certainly to find a time when the cares of the world can be lifted gently off their shoulders and their minds and their hearts.

And some people come to services with heavy spirits, with sadness and grief and problems that oppress their souls. For them, too, this needs to be a place where the weights that lie upon them can be eased and where the challenges that otherwise might seem insurmountable can be made bearable. For a synagogue to be a therapeutic place where mental and physical woes, where spiritual problems and the cares of life can be alleviated - this is indeed a holy mission and one for which this place and the people who come here are ideally suited.

If you look at the prayer book, you will see a third function of holiness that we play in the synagogue. That is the function of conscience. It is within these walls that we continue to remind each other of the moral and ethical values that form the core of our Jewish sensibility. What we stand for is written large in the words of the siddur; particularly this evening, we read and prayed about justice and love, about peace and redeeming a world that suffers from grievous and terrible ills. We spoke of a time, perhaps in the distant future, when the world will be put right and when the divine oneness of which we sing will in reality become a fact.

To nurture the conscience of a people, to hope to stimulate a congregation to walk in the paths of holiness, that is one of the core functions of a synagogue - it is one of the things we strive to do.

Let me add but one more task, a function connected to the development of a moral and ethical sensibility. Our tradition teaches us to change the world. We call this *tikkun olam*, repairing a broken world. But you and I know that the task of changing the entire world is too vast, far beyond even our most exalted and sacred dreams. The rabbinic tradition tells us "*tafasta myruba, lo tafasta.*" If you try to grasp at too much, you end up with nothing in your grasp. Though our ambition is for a messianic future, our reality tells us that it would be impossible for us to achieve it all at once. Does that mean that we should abandon the quest? Hardly!

Instead of changing the entire world, our goal is to create a mini-messianic universe, to demonstrate within these walls what it might be like if the ideal future were in fact to arrive. A synagogue in Hebrew is called *Kahal Kadosh*, a sacred, a holy congregation. It is to create a model of the ultimate ideal society that ought to be our own ultimate goal. That is a difficult enough task, but it is a holy and a sacred mission that we have adopted as our own.

To become holy in deed as well as in principle is a difficult ambition. Yet it is precisely to that end that we exist. We know we are human and that we are finite in both vision and ability, limited in what we can achieve and what we can dream. Yet dream we do and strive for holiness. It is to that sacred task that this congregation exists, and it is to that holy mission that each of us is called. As we gather each Shabbat, we invite ourselves and each other over and over again to recommit ourselves to that purpose. To become a holy congregation filled with sacred people is the root of a sacred calling for our lives.

AMEN