

Let Them Build Me A Sanctuary

A sermon delivered by
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The year was 1972. I was a student at the Hebrew Union College, but this particular year I was studying at HUC's Jerusalem campus, spending a year with my bride in the most magical, spiritual city in the world. What an incredible year it was for us; we were young, in love, and every day we walked the streets of the city that is known as the navel of the world, the very place where heaven and earth touch. It truly was a wonderful time for Joan and me.

That same year, back at the Cincinnati campus, a new president was to be installed. After spending nearly six years in Cincinnati I was going to miss one of the great moments in Reform Jewish history when the president of our seminary would walk down the aisle of the historic Plum Street Temple and have the mantle of leadership placed on his shoulders. And it would be that very same President, Alfred Gottshalk, who only two years later would place his hands on my shoulders and ordain me as a Rabbi in Israel, in that very same Plum Street Temple.

I was truly sorry that I missed that moment. I am told that dignitaries from all over the world came to Cincinnati to be there for that auspicious occasion. Rabbis and Priests and Ministers and Lay Leaders would descend upon the Queen City, the birth place of Reform Judaism in America, to attend the special moment of installation. A special service was prepared with beautiful readings; new music was commissioned to be sung by a choir that would inspire the entire congregation. It must have been a majestic moment for all who were in attendance.

Fortunately, a special commemorative recording was made of that service. Upon my return to the campus I was privileged to obtain a copy of it. Over the years I have listened to it and enjoyed the richness of the music, the sense of dignity and majesty of that service. It has often inspired me in my liturgical pursuits and some of the very same music we use here in our own congregation on the High Holy Days.

There is one particular music selection that I love. I won't sing it for you tonight but I do want to share with you the text, the words of that selection. It comes right from our prayerbook, our liturgy. It reads: Ashreynu, Mah tov chelkeynu, u-mah na-im go-ra-leynu, u-mah yafah yerushateynu; How greatly are we blessed! How good is our portion! How pleasant our lot! How beautiful our heritage!

Ashreynu: How greatly are we blessed!

My friends, you and I are truly blessed. This building that possesses such history has enabled us to be blessed now for some seventy-five years. In America, that is a long time for a building. In so many places, buildings of that age are torn down; they make way for new ones that have no sense of history, no perspective, no awareness of timelessness. Right across the street, the Redshaw School is being replaced. It has lost its usefulness and so it will be dismantled, brick by brick, the end of an era, the end of memories and stories of students and teachers sharing together over the course of the years.

But here, this precious edifice remains. Its walls certainly have stories to tell. Just a few years ago it was suffering from the weight of time, the walls cracking, water damage in so many places, the lighting insufficient for congregants to be able to read the words of the prayerbook. How greatly blessed are we that tonight as we sit in our beloved sanctuary, we can feel the sense of renewal, the sense of the sacred, the notion that the divine is certainly among us.

Mah tov chelkeynu; How good is our portion!

When I look around the sanctuary I see old and new brought together to form a smooth connection between past and future. In this place we are sitting in old pews that have again become young. What stories they can tell! How many generations have sat on these seats, with or without cushions. How many parents have spoken words of kindness to their children, how many children have placed their gum under the pews, how many loved ones have been comforted while sitting in these seats?

For some, the seats have served as anchors in the sea of life. So many have told me that every time they enter the sanctuary they look to sit in the same place. They are disappointed when someone else has already taken “their seat.” The seats themselves do not have names inscribed upon them, yet they bear the imprint of families and Temple members who sit there year after year after year.

When I first came to the Temple I was astounded by how everyone seemed to sit in the same places on the High Holy Days. It meant that when I looked out in to the sanctuary I knew who was missing, who was there, who was engaged, who had died. I could tell who had reached the age of being able to attend “grown up” services” and who was away at college. For over thirty years I have watched the changes in so many families’ lives as you and they have moved through the seats in the pews.

u-mah na-im go-ra-leynu; How pleasant our lot!

There is a sense of renewal here. Just walking into the building, one’s eyes look upward. The dust has been removed, the construction essentially completed. Every room has a feeling of newness, of promise. Last week, when we began religious school, every

one of the students, and parents, too, entered the new amphitheatre. You could feel the excitement and power in the room. I looked out and beheld the faces of the children. They were eager and enthusiastic. I knew that in the coming weeks they would occupy every space in this venue, singing and praying and cheering. Already it has begun to feel the power of our young. Tomorrow morning they will come here and make it theirs again. And then tomorrow evening many will enter for the puppet show, and then again on Sunday we will gather there and hear the first of our Keepers of Jewish Excellence lectures. We won't have to crane our necks to see; the sound system will work well so that all can hear.

u-mah yafah yerushateynu; How beautiful our heritage!

According to rabbinic lore, we are told that in the time of the Second Temple, at the Entrance to the Sanctuary, there stood a trellised vine laden with gold, for whoever presented a leaf, a berry, or a cluster of golden grapes would bring it and hang it there. Rabbi Eliezer ben Zadok claimed that on one occasion three hundred Kohanim were needed to clear it because so many brought so much.

As I look out into our sanctuary, I see over the threshold, just above the front doors, a vine, filled with clusters of golden grapes. That vine has been above those doors since the sanctuary, our Temple's second sanctuary, was built. Only few of us had ever noticed it until now. The architect surely must have understood its meaning when he chose to place it there. He knew that in the Book of Isaiah, Israel is referred to as "the vineyard of the Lord." He must have known that the vine with its clustered grapes was the symbol of the covenant between God and the Jewish People, for the vine and its grapes serve as the fructifying agent that enables this earth to blossom and flower and grow as God's divinely inspired creation. You and I have been given an extraordinary heritage of faith, the Jewish faith, which enables us to become God's hands and arms on earth. You and I, through our study of Torah, have been given a wonderful heritage of learning whose purpose is to become *am kodesh*, a sacred people, translating the divine message of goodness and mercy into holy acts of *Hesed* and *Gemilut Hasadim*, the performance of loving kindness and sacred deeds on behalf of all humanity.

Perhaps the architect understood this when he placed the vine and grapes above the threshold. I believe he understood that Anshe Emeth, our congregation, would be the bearers of golden grapes, symbolic representations of that which brings sweetness and kindness to the world. Maybe he understood that this congregation would be the place from which all goodness in our community would flow; that all who entered would know that this is a place where people can feel safe and secure and nurtured and protected from the swirling winds of evil that surround us; that all who passed by this precious edifice would be touched by its spirit and moved to acts of goodness in every home, on every street, and throughout our community.

I believe that the leaders and members of our Temple back in the 1920's, together with the architect and the builder, wanted to send a powerful message that this place, this

Temple, this place we call Anshe Emeth, is a place known for its generosity of spirit and its commitment to social justice, that this congregation is known as a community true to its word, true to its covenant with God, and true to its purpose, always challenging itself to bring light to dark places, to bring healing where there is sickness, to bring shelter to those who are homeless, to protect the needy, the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. I believe that they understood our sacred calling, to be a strong voice for goodness in a world where goodness has been drowned out by the forces and acts of evil. And I can think of no greater heritage than this to be ours.

When we considered the changes that would be made here in the sanctuary, we wanted to create a living memorial to the past. We studied the architecture of the great synagogues of Europe; we looked at pictures of Temple buildings, some of which still stand and others that were destroyed in the fires of Christallnacht, that night in our history when all of European Jewry, its buildings and communities, were consumed in the flames of evil. We wanted to connect the glory of the past with the promise of tomorrow. How truly wonderful this sanctuary looks and feels today; its warmth, its beauty, its sense of intimacy. I truly hope that we have built a *mishkan*, a place worthy of the divine presence. And how grateful we are to all those who lovingly helped bring shape and form and elegance to the spirit of our beloved sanctuary. To Lanny Livingston, whose heart and mind and eyes and devotion have been singular of purpose as she lovingly brought it all together, we will always be grateful for what you have done on our behalf.

Added for the first time, high above the bimah, are the Hebrew letters of words inscribed in our Torah, the words known as “the watchword of our faith.” They are the words of the Sh’ma, a declaration that the People of Israel, you and I, are in covenant with the God of history, the God who fashioned the world, the God whose very singleness represents order and purpose. Each time we look at the words inscribed above may they translate into our hearts the dedication and vision of those who came before us. Every time that we gaze upward and see the inscription so proudly yet humbly hovering over us, may we be inspired to become “a light unto the nations.” And every time that the words of the sh’ma depart from our lips, may they be transformed from deeds of faith and deeds of kindness into a well-spring of goodness from which all of humankind can drink and taste the precious gift and blessing of life.