

Ha-Makom –Sacred Space

This Shabbat is a rabbi's dream. My husband's profession as an architect, our Torah portion on the *mishkan* - the portable tabernacle, and Jackson Row and Menorah communities coming together – all intersect and lead us to one word. *Ha-makom*. As you know, this word literally means 'the space'. In Jewish tradition the word is also a name for God – perhaps meaning one who is space – or signifying that there is nothing but God – *alt ziz Godt*, in Yiddish. Not only do I like this name for God as it lends us a way of understanding a non-personal God which may appeal to us, but it also helps us reflect on sacred space. This week's Torah portion begins with the commandment [Ex. 27:20].

וְאֵתָהּ תִצְוֶה אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְיִקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ שֶׁמֶן זַיִת זָךְ קְתִיבָה--לְמָאוֹר: לְהַעֲלֹת נֵר, תָּמִיד
בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד

'And you shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring to you pure olive oil beaten for the light, to cause a lamp to burn continually in the tent of meeting...'

Many commentators have asked why this commandment appears here. One 15th century commentator, Abravanel, asks, why doesn't it appear after the completion of the Tabernacle with the placing of the other vessels and before the consecration of the priesthood? Surely this is a technical ritual rather than a key point of construction? We all know that when building, for example, a new kitchen, the light fittings will be placed towards the end of the process and certainly lit much later on. Why is this light being lit at the beginning? It is, the commentators respond, the symbolic and spiritual importance of light which warrants it being placed so early on in the building. We need light – we need hope and warmth in our sacred spaces. A building without soul, without light, is merely wrapping paper. We need the light to show us what is possible, to remind us of the beginning of the creation story -*yehi or* – let there be light – where we realise that in every moment there is the possibility for creation and renewal. And for this commandment we are told to light the lamp now and for all time. It is remarkable that this is one commandment, associated with the tabernacle and temple that has outlasted them both. Centuries after the destruction of the temple we still have our light burning bright – our *ner tamid*. It is for us to determine what we mean by this commandment – of lighting this light - in our time. What darkness are we eliminating? What lights are we kindling?

I think one of our greatest challenges of our modern time is to fight hard against a particular darkness that we find in conversations over social media, in reading newspaper articles, in conversations with friends and family concerning immigration and refugees. Open and closed borders. Security and threats. Floodgates. Terrorists. This is our darkness – at the heart of so much hate and fear and violence. It is a story of them and us.

Our Torah, our sacred text, realises it is all too easy to see the stranger, the other, in this way. This is why the most oft repeated commandment in the Torah is to love the stranger as we love our

self – 36 times it appears. It is repeated, perhaps to remind us, of the challenge of opening our spaces to the stranger. All communities say – we are welcoming and inclusive. But how true is that? How many strangers to our communities do we invite in? Are our doors really open? To eliminate this darkness what lights can we kindle? One way to light our ever-burning light now, is to banish these tales of separation and fear. We've seen synagogues and churches overcome conversations about possible security threats in order to open their doors to become refugee drop in centres or homeless shelters. These spaces become all the more sacred. They light the lights.

And there is one charity, Refugees at Home, which is leading the way and needs us to contribute. They ask for families, with spare rooms, to host an asylum seeker and refugee – an urgent task as they are entitled to so little. Many asylum seekers are destitute, and if they have accommodation it can be undignified, cockroach infested and entirely unsuitable. And once refugees get their status they have less than a month to find new accommodation. This charity matches hosts with asylum seekers and refugees from anywhere from 1 night to a month.

My family is hosting a refugee for the coming month – a young doctor from Afghanistan who is currently living in a hostel. And, although it should have been an easy decision, it was not. We thought carefully about our security – we don't know them at all, they'll have our keys, share our space, know our alarm code – things will change, our routine will shift, our privacy be affected. It is easy to allow these conversations and fears to dominate and shut doors. It is much harder to open them – to say -come in – to take a leap of faith and to realise that the blessing of the light we have, which we continually attempt to kindle, can light other lights without ever diminishing its own light. From one candle being lit to another the only thing that will ever be extinguished is the dark.

As we contemplate what it means to have sacred space – *ha-makom* – may I encourage you all to consider hosting or donating to Refugees at Home or becoming a home visitor to match families. Perhaps this is one way that we can say we are fulfilling the command to continually kindle lights in our time and we can ensure that our buildings and homes are full of welcome, holiness, divinity and light. Ken yehi ratzon . May this be God's will. Amen.

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