

Terumah 5776 - God's Presence and the Western Wall - The Neshamah Center



Make a sanctuary for me that I may dwell among them. Exodus 25:8

I went to the Western Wall this morning (Wednesday, February 10, 2016) to welcome the new Jewish month (Adar), to support my daughter who is active with Women of the Wall, and to pray.

I had a hard time praying this morning. I feel like all of our arguments – between the ultra-orthodox, Women of the Wall, and now the “original” Women of the Wall – have driven the holy presence into exile.

What is holy space?

The Talmud teaches that holiness radiates outward from where the holy of holies once stood to the Temple Mount to Jerusalem to Israel and onto the rest of the world. When we pray, that’s the direction we turn. Outside Israel we face Israel. In Israel we face Jerusalem. In Jerusalem we face the Temple Mount. At the Temple Mount – and when praying at the Western Wall, the Kotel – we face where the Holy of Holies once stood. And even if we don’t know exactly where the Holy of Holies was, it is there that we direct our hearts.

On the other hand, the prophet Isaiah said, “The whole world is full of God’s glory.” So which is it? Is this place where I am sitting as I write this, (or more accurately, dictating into my phone) “holier” than my home 3 miles away? Holier than Tel Aviv? Holier than Mecca?

Both teachings are true. At least for Jews; people of other faiths have other focal points of holiness.

Feeling God's presence is NOT an external thing based on geography. There's a famous story of the Kotzker Rebbe (Menachem Mendl of Kotzk, Poland 19th c.) who asked his students "where is God's presence found?" Being eager students, they replied with the line from Isaiah, "the whole world is full of God's glory!" "No," the Kotzker replied, "God's presence is found wherever we open our hearts to Him."

I believe "holy space" can help us connect with God NOT because God's presence is literally more manifest in some places than others, but rather because as humans we react to the space around us, and in some places we can feel God's presence more profoundly. That's one of the reasons we create synagogues – to have a place where we know we are shifting gears, changing our focus, directing our hearts to God. A place where we can separate from the noise and commotion of the world around us. That's why mystics hear God's voice in the desert, in the wilderness, and not so much in the noise of the city.

A particular space is not a NECESSARY requirement for encountering God. My most intense experiences of connecting with God have happened in nature, in a hospice, behind the wheel of a car, and once, in a synagogue. But space can help.

What makes the Kotel so special is not that there's more "God" there. It's that the Temple has been the focal point of Jewish prayer for 3,000 years. We've made it special. But just as we can make it special, we can make it "unspecial." We can sanctify the space or we can profane the space. We can find God there, or we can drive God away with our pettiness, bickering, fighting.

Isaiah Horovitz (17th c. Europe/Israel) taught,

It is when the Israelites conduct themselves in a spirit of sanctity that the promise of Exodus 25:8, "They shall make a Sanctuary for Me and I will dwell amongst them," will be fulfilled. The people themselves are the Sanctuary within whom God's promises to reside provided that they lead consecrated lives.

What does it mean to conduct one's self in a spirit of sanctity? What does it mean to lead a "consecrated life?"

Our tradition is full of teachings about the importance of putting the commandments between people ahead of the commandments between man and God. Abraham breaks off a conversation with God to attend to some strangers who show up at the door of his tent. Courtesy and kindness are modeled for us as the ideal, the behavior to which we should aspire.

Which brings us back to the Kotel. And why I do NOT support the "original" Women of the Wall. I'm tired of fighting over space.

A deal has been struck that will create a new area permanent home at the Kotel for pluralistic prayer. You can read more with my views on the deal in my article "[Better Seats at the Back of the Bus](#)" on the Jerusalem Post website. The deal provides for a prayer space along the Western Wall NOT under the rules and direction of an ultra-Orthodox rabbi. A place where anyone can come pray however they want – women wearing religious garb such as tallit and tefillin, mixed minyans, minyans of women, minyans of men. A place open to all as long you don't try and interfere with other people praying how they want to pray.

The "original" Women of the Wall reject this deal and insist that they MUST be allowed to offer their prayers at the existing women's section. It's not good enough to have space at the Wall; it has to be at a particular place on the Wall.

I think it was important that forms of Judaism other than ultra-Orthodox have a place at the Kotel. I think that's a battle that was worth fighting for, because it is a place that is holy to all Jews. And as long as the new plan actually happens, and the new space is equally prominent to the existing space, we will have won a major battle.

But it breaks my heart that some of my friends don't see this new deal as a "victory," and they reject it. So they continue to fight for the right of women to pray in one exact spot along the Wall. And I was left feeling like all the fighting and arguing has driven God's presence away. I did not feel God's presence while I was trying to pray at the Kotel. All I felt were echoes of arguments.

Now that there is a solution in the works that will allow all Jews to pray at the Western Wall in the fashion in which they prefer, it's time to work on healing. It's time to work on love and courtesy and trying to restore a sense of being one people. We need to open our hearts, even at the Western Wall, and let God's presence in. That's way more important to feeling God's presence than which exact spot along the Wall you pray.

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