Spiritual Foundations: Thoughts on Parashat Shemini, April 18, 2009

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"...and all the congregation drew near and stood before the Lord. And Moses said: This is the thing which the Lord commanded you to do, that there may appear unto you the glory of the Lord." (Vayikra 9:5-6)

Moses instructed the priests and the entire people of Israel concerning the procedures of dedicating the Mishkan, the sanctuary of the Lord. If they followed the commandments, they would experience the glory of the Lord. They would feel God's presence and would reach great spiritual heights.

Experiencing "the glory of the Lord" is a powerful, life-transforming phenomenon. One could not go on with life as usual after such an experience. Rather, one became more sensitive to spiritual matters and more attuned to living a righteous life. The Mishkan ritual was not an end in itself, but a means of elevating the lives of the Israelites.

By extension, our experience in our synagogues should also bring us closer to "the glory of the Lord". Through our prayers and meditations, we can reach higher levels of spiritual awareness. These profound moments can and should transform our lives for the better. Not only will we become more spiritually sensitive as individuals, but we also will help create a more spiritually sensitive community.

One of the great intellectual figures of Colonial North America was Jonathan Edwards, a Calvinist minister. As a young theology student, he lived in New York City 1722-23. He wrote the following description of his Jewish neighbor: "I once lived for many months next to a Jew (the houses adjoining one to another) and had much opportunity daily to observe him; who appeared to me the devoutest person that ever I saw in my life; great part of his time being spent in acts of devotion, at his eastern window, which opened next to mine, seeming to be most earnestly engaged, not only in the daytime, but sometimes whole nights."

This anonymous Jew, member of the small New York Jewish community of those days, was obviously a pious person. His devotion not only imbued his own life with spirituality, but impacted on others--even a young Calvinist theology student. He set an example worthy of emulation.

I would surmise that this anonymous Jew played an important role in the subsequent decision of the New York congregation to build its own synagogue building, rather than to continue praying in rented quarters. The congregation (Shearith Israel) dated back to 1654, but only during the 1720s did it feel large enough and confident enough to build a synagogue. On the seventh day of Passover in 1730, Shearith Israel dedicated its Mill Street Synagogue, the first synagogue building erected in North America. All the Jews of New York participated in the effort to build the synagogue--but I believe that our anonymous Jew and others like him helped inspire the community to undertake this sacred project. They were inspired by "the glory of the Lord", and this led them to inspire others to achieve greater spiritual heights.

Our synagogues and our homes are symbols of the ancient Mishkan. They are places where we can elevate ourselves spiritually--and where we can become the kind of people who can inspire great things in others.

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Angel for Shabbat