Sacred Places: Thoughts for Parashat Shemini

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By

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The Torah devotes many verses to describing the building and dedication of the Mishkan, the Israelite's sanctuary during their 40 years in the wilderness. The Mishkan and its service served as the prototype for the later Temples built in Jerusalem in ancient Israel.

The emphasis on the Mishkan underscores an important aspect of religious life. While God cannot be limited to a particular space, yet, human beings can set aside a place and recognize it to be sacred, a point of connection between humans and the Almighty. Human understanding cannot confront the vastness of God without being overcome with overwhelming fear and trembling. But a sacred space, being limited and comprehensible, enables us to feel a sense of personal connection with God.

Of course, the entire universe is sacred since it is a manifestation of God's will and power. Yet, by designating a special sanctity to specific places, the religious person creates a new spiritual reality, a new gate to heaven. Sacred and non-sacred space may appear objectively to be the same; but within the mind of a religious person, they are different kinds of worlds.

Buildings dedicated to prayer and the study of Torah are considered by Judaism to be sacred places. The world inside these structures is qualitatively different from the world outside.

The Shulhan Arukh has a special section on the sanctity of the synagogue (Orah Hayyim 151). The laws indicate the separateness and specialness that mark this sacred space. It is forbidden to act in a light-headed fashion in synagogues and study halls. Silly laughter, extraneous conversation, eating and drinking are forbidden in the synagogue. One is not supposed to use the synagogue as a short-cut, or as a place to protect oneself from the sun or rain—synagogues are holy precincts not to be used for one's personal comfort and convenience.

People who understand the profound significance of the sanctity of the synagogue enter its precincts with awe and reverence. They pray quietly and thoughtfully. They dress and act with the gravity appropriate to being in the presence of God in a uniquely sacred space. They appreciate the precious spiritual opportunity presented to them by worshiping in a holy place.

The Torah records the dream of our forefather Jacob, in which he saw a ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending its rungs. When he awoke from his dream, Jacob said: "Surely the Lord is in the place, and I knew it not." Jacob was amazed by his new-found insight: "How full of awe is this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven" (Bereishith 28-16-19).

The ladder in Jacob's dream symbolizes the connection between the physical world and the spiritual world, between the finitude of matter and the infinity of spirit. These two seemingly opposite domains are connected and related to each other.

Synagogues, like the ladder in Jacob's dream, serve to connect heaven and earth. They are sacred spaces that are meant to inspire us with the eternal grandeur of the Almighty and to stir within us spiritual longings and dreams.

But the sanctity of synagogues—and all other holy places—is only experienced by those who are spiritually awake. To all others, synagogues are simply buildings like all other buildings.

Sanctity is very much in the eyes of the beholder.

Angel for Shabbat