Prayer and Windows: Thoughts for Parashat Noah--by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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God's instructions to Noah for building the ark include: "A light you shall make to the ark," (Bereishith 6:16). Rashi, drawing on rabbinic tradition, offers two explanations of what this "light" was. 1) it was a window; 2) it was a precious stone.

A window provides direct light from the sun; a person inside the ark could see the skies above. A precious stone refracts light; a person inside the ark has light, but has no direct contact with the outside world.

The two opinions cited by Rashi refer to two different spiritual frameworks. Was Noah to have a window through which he could contemplate the heavens and experience the power of God? Or was he to be enclosed in a setting of contemplation that was cut off from the outside world?

In my book, The Rhythms of Jewish Living (Jewish Lights, 2015), I discussed this general issue in a section entitled "Prayer and Windows." Here is an excerpt from that book.

Prayer and Windows

Attitudes on spirituality are suggested by the kind of windows used in places of worship. Windows are the connection between the indoor world and the world outside. The location and transparency of the windows indicate the extent to

which worshippers are expected to relate to the world outdoors while they are engaged in prayer.

The Talmud (Berakhot 34b) records the opinion of Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: “A person should not pray except in a house which has windows.” The proof text is drawn from the Book of Daniel. Since Daniel offered his prayers while looking through a window in the direction of Jerusalem, so this precedent should be followed by subsequent generations. The commentator, Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki (Rashi) explains that “windows cause one to concentrate his heart, since he looks towards the heavens and his heart is humbled.” According to this opinion, a person praying indoors may reach a higher spiritual level by looking out a window to see the heavens.

Yet, windows in synagogues have varied from place to place and generation to generation, reflecting different attitudes towards the outside world. In some synagogues, windows were built high up on the wall, above the height of any person. This was done in order to prevent people from being distracted from their prayers by letting their eyes wander to the outdoors during services. Windows, which serve to bring the outside in, also serve to connect the inside with the outside. If praying requires concentration on the words of the prayer, windows can be distracting. Indeed, a fear of the distraction of windows emerged in many communities. Windows, even when placed high up on the synagogue walls, were considered a necessary evil at worst, or at best a possible aid to prayer only in the event that one was unable to concentrate properly on his own. The commentary, Magen Abraham, on the Shulhan Arukh (O.H. 90:4) states that one’s eyes should be directed downward during prayer. “Nevertheless, when one’s concentration is broken, one can lift the eyes towards the heavens in order to awaken concentration.”

The fear of windows is evident in a feature common to almost all western synagogues: stained glass. The use of stained glass windows has a long history in Christian Europe, with great churches boasting artistic windows, some quite ancient. Apparently, European Jews were impressed by this feature of Christian religious architecture so that synagogues began to have stained glass windows too. Stained glass windows, though they may be very beautiful, were not incorporated into religious architecture merely for the sake of beauty. The desire for artistic beauty could have been satisfied by tapestries, frescoes, wall carvings etc. Although generations of cultural conditioning have made us grow accustomed to stained glass windows in houses of worship, there is no intrinsic

need for them from an aesthetic point of view. The windows reflect a philosophical attitude on prayer and our sense of spirituality.

Normally, windows exist to let the outside world enter the world indoors. Stained glass windows, however, serve the opposite function: they keep the outside world outside. They protect the indoor world from intrusions from the outside.

Stained glass windows create an artificial world of indoor spirituality. Upon entering a synagogue with stained glass windows, for example, we enter a religious realm, a world unto itself without reference to anything outside. It is irrelevant where such a synagogue is actually located: it might be in the middle of New York City or in China or on top of a mountain or along a seashore. To a person inside the synagogue, the outside world is closed out; it cannot penetrate the colored windows. The underlying motivation for creating such windows is the belief, whether acknowledged or not, that prayer can best be experienced in a place which is closed off from the distractions of the outside world. When one enters a synagogue with stained glass windows, one knows immediately that this is a place of worship. The inwardness of the building makes its message known.

But there have been many synagogues where the windows have been clear, where worshippers could see what was going on outside. In such synagogues, people could recite their prayers while also viewing the gardens, trees and other outdoor scenery. The synagogue of Rabbi Yosef Karo in Safed, for example, has clear windows through which one can see the wonderful mountainous scenery of the Galilee.

The windows in our synagogues are also windows to our souls. They represent our attitudes towards the outside world, and towards the inside world, and towards the world inside each of us.