

Building a Home for God

Dedication of Sacred Space, Temple Kol Ami, Thornhill, Ontario

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Rabbi Micah Streiffer

The journey begins with a song.

Ashira l'Adonai ki ga'oh ga'ah

Let me sing out before God, who has triumphed gloriously

... sang Moses. Moses, who struggled with words. Moses, who was slow of speech, was moved in that moment not only to speech, but to song!

Ozi v'zimrat Yah vayhi li Yishuah!

God is my strength and my might, and has become my deliverance

And then, tradition says, one by one, verse by verse, the Israelites joined in until 600,000 strong were singing on the shore of the sea:

Zeh eli v'anveihu, elohei avi v'aromememnu.

This is my God, whom I will glorify.

They sang out in praise and thanksgiving – for their freedom, for start of their new journey, for the opportunity to build a life and a community and a home together.

There is no more appropriate moment in the Jewish calendar for us to gather and dedicate our Sacred Space than this Shabbat Shirah, this Sabbath of Song. On this Shabbat where we read about our ancestors' celebration of freedom and identity, we also have reason to sing out in praise.

It is just a little bit ironic that as *we* celebrate the end of our congregation's wanderings, we read in the Torah about the beginning of our people's wanderings in the desert. But the Song of the Sea is about much more than the Exodus; it's about the journey toward the Promised Land. In fact, what's most striking about this song of freedom is that it hardly mentions freedom at all. Instead, the Song of the Sea is about God. It's a song of praise, an affirmation of God's presence in the lives of ordinary people as they marked an extraordinary moment.

This is also an extraordinary moment. We may not be standing in the middle of the parted sea, but we are standing on the shores of a dream-made-reality. We are standing on the shores of a new era in our congregation's history. And so it's appropriate to mark this moment with words from Shirat Hayam, the Song of the Sea.

And so we reach back into the text, and we try to ascertain: how did our ancestors feel in that moment of moments? What did they think or do? And we find that they gathered all their might and all their joy, and cried out: *Zeh eli v'anveinu* - This is my God, whom I will glorify.

That's not the most famous phrase from the Song of the Sea. It's not *Mi Chamocha ba'eilim Adonai* and it's not *Adonai yimloch l'olam va'ed*. But it is what our ancestors said in their moment of greatest joy: *Zeh eli v'anveihu* - This is my God, whom I will glorify. A clear, and simple, and powerful statement of praise to the God who had led them on their journey.

And what's particularly wonderful about those words is that we don't actually know what they mean. The Hebrew word *anveihu* - which is translated as "glorify" - is so ancient and so unique that its original meaning has been lost to history. And the rabbis of the Talmud have a debate over three alternative meanings. Some say that *Zeh eli v'anveihu*, means "This is my God, whom I will make beautiful." For others, it means "This is my God, to whom I will take a journey," and still others translate, "This is my God, for whom I will build a home." The good news for us is that we don't have to choose. Because all three of those very powerful statements can teach us something about what it means to build and dedicate a sanctuary.

Zeh eli v'anveihu - This is my God, whom I will make beautiful.

Now at first glance, that doesn't even make sense! How is it possible for people to make God beautiful? The answer, we're told, is that we glorify God by doing mitzvot in the most beautiful way possible. As the midrash says, "I shall glorify God by preparing a beautiful sukkah and a beautiful tallit."

We know that ritual is immensely important in Judaism, and tradition has always taught us to perform Jewish acts in ways that honour God and bring beauty into the world. It's called *hiddur mitzvah*, beautifying the commandments. You don't *have* to light eight candles on Chanukah, but eight are nicer than one. You don't *have* to dress the Torah scrolls in fine clothing, but when you do it honours Torah and tradition and God. It's a lesson that we learned as far back as our time in the desert.

The story is told that when God first commanded us to build the mishkan – the portable sanctuary in the desert – God also took some time to decide whom to appoint at the helm of that project. Who should be the chair of the original Sacred Space Committee, if you will. “This one,” said God, “has the ability to inspire others. But this one is a master builder. This one an administrator and this one a delegator. An organizer or an orator.” But in the end, God chose none of them to build the sanctuary. It says in Torah:

רֵאֵה קִרְאֹתִי בְּשֵׁם בְּצַלְאֵל

Behold, I have chosen Bezalel, of the tribe of Judah. (Exodus 31:2)

Bezalel was an artist; a craftsman, who had been endowed with a divine spirit to create beautiful things; he would build a fine home with beauty worthy of God’s name.

Tonight, we also sit in a home worthy of God’s name. This sanctuary is a place of beauty, both physical and spiritual. It is filled with the symbols, the words, the songs of our people. Every piece of it exquisitely considered and thought out, so as to create a space that would be inspiring yet accessible, transcendent yet intimate, fulfilling the words in this week’s Torah portion: This is my God, whom I shall make beautiful.

But a sanctuary is more than a beautiful room.

Zeh eli v’anveihu – This is my God, toward whom I will journey.

When the people of Israel celebrated at the Sea, Miriam and the women picked up their timbrels and danced. The rabbis ask the obvious question: where on earth did they get timbrels in the middle of the desert? The answer is that the women had been so certain that God would perform miracles for them, that they had brought their musical instruments with them from Egypt for the celebration.

It’s the ultimate statement of faith – to be so committed to your community and to God, that you’re willing to lug around, from place to place, the items that you use to connect with God. For them it was a timbrel in the desert. For us, a Torah scroll or a box of prayerbooks, carried from a school to a church to a backyard. Or maybe a blueprint for sacred space, or a vision of a home where our congregation can live.

Tonight, we recognize our journey- like that of the Israelites - as a journey of faith - faith in God and faith in the congregation. And we recognize that throughout this journey, there have been people willing to carry with them the items of their faith: the Torah scrolls and prayerbooks that we needed to study and learn; the songs and melodies that we needed to pray, the hopes and dreams that we needed to build for the future. Carried on the backs and in the hearts of members of our community, until finally, *finally*, they could be brought to this place, where they would find fulfillment and fruition and rest from their journey.

But a sanctuary is more than a beautiful room. And a sanctuary is more than the items we bring to that room.

Zeh eli v'anveihu - This is my God, for whom I will build a home.

In having made that journey, a sacred community was formed. A sacred community that needs a sacred home. What does it mean to build a home for God?

I've told before the story of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kotzk, the Chassidic master known as the Kotzker Rebbe, who liked to ask his students difficult questions to make them think. Once, while sitting at the Shabbat dinner table, he asked, "Where does God live?" The rebbe's students were taken aback: "Rabbi, that's blasphemy! How could you imply that God needs a dwelling place?!" So the rabbi answered his own question: "God lives wherever we let God in."

The Mishnah teaches that when two people sit and exchange words of Torah, God's presence rests between them (Avot 3:2). The Talmud adds that when ten people gather in prayer, God descends to be with them. And we also know that when people come together to repair the world, God's presence is there as well.

Rabbi Harold Shulweis writes, "God is not in me, not in you, but in the space between us."

What is a home for God? It is a place where people's actions invite God into the world. It is a Beit T'fillah, a House of Prayer where we can *shiru L'Adonai shir chadash* - sing out to God a new song. It is a Beit midrash, a House of Study, where we learn and grow by studying *Torah Ohr*, the guiding light of Torah. And it is a Beit Kn'esset, a place of community, where a *Sukkat Shalom* - a shelter of peace and safety - is spread over us all. It is a place where words are turned to deeds, where teachings are turned to actions.

Tonight, surrounded by tradition, we dedicate this space with songs and words. And in the days and months and years to come, may we dedicate it as well with what we do inside its walls. May we dedicate this place with the prayers that we share, with the learning that we

do, and with the community that we build, with the traditions we teach and the mouths we feed and the lives that we touch.

And may this place, this beautiful place filled with beautiful items and words and people, become the place from which we go out into the world to bring God into the world. Then it is truly our sanctuary, and then it is truly our sacred space, and then we can truly sing out: *Zeh eli v'anveihu*: This is my God, whom I will glorify!

The journey begins with a song.

But the song is just that: a beginning. As our people marched off into the wilderness, they knew that there was work to be done. After all, they were staring down 40 years of wandering; they needed to create institutions – of religion and justice; they needed to turn a mixed multitude into a people. But for that one night, timbrels in hand, they raised their voices in celebration and thanksgiving.

Oh, we know there's work to be done. Programs to create, members to engage, partnerships to strengthen. And tomorrow, we will march off together into the wilderness of our new journey. But as we do so, may tonight's songs still ring in our ears. May we carry the joy, the pride, the hope of this moment into every other moment that we share together.

Zeh eli v'anveihu – This is our God, whom we will glorify, to whom we must continue to journey, and for whom we have built a home. May it always be a home in which *Kol Ami*, the Voices of our People, can be heard in prayer and song and study. And may it always be a home in which *Kol Ami*, in which all of our people, can find their path to God.

Amen.