

**“Build me a Sanctuary!”**  
**Rosh Hashanah 5776**

As we take our first tentative steps on our journey into the New Jewish Year 5776, we do well to bring the maps we require for the trip (or the GPS devices if we prefer). As Jews we have access to a rich array of such maps, a wealth of traditions that can provide us with both directional guidance and travel tips for endowing the journey with value, meaning, and purpose. It is probably accurate to say that the dominant sermonic theme of my nearly four decade career as rabbi has been this: the vast Jewish tradition belongs to those who take hold of it and those who do take hold of it will find not necessarily happiness nor ease but rather ample ways for situating the challenges that inevitably accompany life in a frame of meaning.

The prayer frame of meaning we hold in our hands this year has been entitled *Mishkan Hanefesh, a Tabernacle for the Soul*. It joins the current stable of prayerbooks of Reform Judaism, a stable that already includes *Mishkan T'filah, a Tabernacle of Prayer*, intended for Shabbat, holiday, and daily worship, and *Mishkan Refuah, a Tabernacle of Healing*, intended for settings involving visiting the sick. Permit me to dwell on the term *Mishkan* this Rosh Hashanah evening and to apply it to the notion of taking hold of our tradition. I recently studied for several weeks with Shefa Gold who is mostly known for her compositions of Hebrew chants. Shefa describes **the Book of Exodus as a five-fold guide (or roadmap) for the liberation of the soul**. Her teaching on Exodus as a roadmap for personal liberation assumes that among the most impactful ways one might let Torah teach us is through the approach of reading oneself into its narratives. In trying this approach, we will incorporate the image of the *Mishkan*.

Reading oneself into the book of Exodus, then, one first encounters **at signpost #1**, enslavement, not only the enslavement of the children of Israel but also enslavement as a paradigm. As you no doubt realize, black American slaves, for example, heard the Biblical story of Exodus as their own story; they read in it the hope and expectation that freedom was destined for them as it had been for the children of Israel. Similarly, one could consider all manner of contemporary enslavements within the Exodus paradigm, including the all too prevalent practice in our day of trafficking in human beings; one could certainly have in mind the plight of those currently seeking refuge from the dire and dangerous conditions in Syria. Or, turning the theme of enslavement toward a more personal kind of awareness, the paradigm might arouse us to confront the less healthy patterns of our own behavior, the patterns one might wish to change but which seem to control

one more than one controls them, patterns involving consumption in its various forms or other manner of indulgence or even addictive behavior. How many of us could benefit from a 12-step program for those glued to or enslaved by our light-emitting screens?

**Signpost #2:** After letting Exodus as a roadmap-for-personal-liberation prompt our awareness of contemporary enslavements, we arrive at the second of its five signposts; with liberation uncertain, we enter the sea. Most of us know the Midrash about Nachshon ben Aminadav, a bit player from the tribe of Judah. Despite the uncertainties, Nachshon, takes the first risky plunge into the foaming sea, a determinative plunge that, in the view of the midrash, triggers the miraculous, divine response. That is, from this midrashic perspective, only after the otherwise ordinary Nachshon exhibits extraordinary trust and courage by marching forward until the rising water level reaches the level of his nostrils, only then does the sea open up and permit the path toward freedom to appear.

At so many of the important decision points in life, we stand poised at the shoreline. We see no path forward and the armies of time approach from the rear. What career path shall I pursue? Which job shall I seek? What person do I wish to share my life with? Do I risk bringing children into the world? Shall I work on an imperfect relationship or work on ending it? Shall I take this path or that? Shall I cultivate a disposition of resistance or one of acceptance, knowing that the liberating direction will often appear only after one has taken the plunge? As Calvin [of the much lamented comic strip *Calvin and Hobbs*] declared with dismay as a new school year began: “What! Do you mean school has no Spring Training?” No, it does not. And because there is no spring training in school or in the game of life altogether, the important decisions we make all require a trusting and courageous plunge into the unknown.

**Signpost #3:** The third signpost in Exodus as the fivefold roadmap for personal liberation, signals our arrival at the desert wilderness, the *Midbar*, a spare place, devoid of trappings or excess. The Hebrew word *Midbar* contains the root for speech, *Dibbur*. The solitude, relative barrenness, and stillness of the wilderness permits unusual clarity of speech and unusual acuity of hearing. Liberation of the spirit requires a readiness to listen for the quiet sounds of discernment that may penetrate the stillness. Speaking for myself, I have often noticed over the years how much I require solitude in nature in order to arrive at whatever clarity of which I am capable.

At the same time, the bright, unrelenting desert light shines on every wound and every blemish, exposing every habit of the heart and mind, whether noble or

delinquent. Liberation of the spirit requires the bright light of stark honesty. Wilderness, then, suits well as a setting for removing the layers of pretense. Apropos the notion of wilderness as a venue where one may shed pretense, the deservedly acclaimed film *Birdman* explores the theme of authenticity and the persona we humans tend to wear, persona that mask truth. In the film, Michael Keaton plays an over-the-hill actor having made his mark years before as a flying superhero known as Birdman. The Keaton character now seeks to reestablish his career as a serious actor in a Broadway play; during a well-attended final dress rehearsal, the Keaton character finds himself outside the theater mid-play with his dressing gown caught tightly in the locked door. As the time for his next entry on stage grows near, the Keaton character suddenly sheds the robe and strides up West 44<sup>th</sup> Street, wearing nothing but his underwear. That is, [as I see it,] in the midst of a play, by definition, a fictional depiction within the fictional depiction of the film, the Keaton character strips away the garb of pretence. As he strides toward the theater entrance, many on the street recognize him; some fans shout his name in praise; others call him unflattering names. Normally obsessed with the need for approval, now stripped of external layers, Keaton simply soldiers on to the best and most compelling performance of his career.

The third signpost, thus, invites us into a desert wilderness where, stripped of pretense, vision becomes clear, hearing acute, our innermost selves revealed and vulnerable and as ready as possible for what life has in store.

**Signpost #4:** At the fourth signpost in the Book of Exodus read as a roadmap for liberation of the soul, we arrive at Sinai, opening up to insight, greater wisdom and also greater humility. Coming to Sinai, we experience the disappointment of our inevitable inability to remain consistently at the place of keenest perception. While at Sinai, we attain our greatest human wisdom and give in to our irreducible imperfection as again and again we slip into old habits, failing to escape the urge to build yet another golden calf, failing to turn away from false objects of worship. Sinai, it turns out, gives us the curriculum for becoming our better selves but cannot force us to study or practice it, cannot perform the transformation of humans into angels or saints. Sinai cannot even prevent us from making of our very desire to heed its teachings yet another golden calf. Religion can always become yet another idol. Hence, the fourth signpost signals wisdom accompanied by the humility of those aware of their own imperfections.

**Signpost #5:** Finally, we arrive at Exodus, chapter 25, verse 8, reaching the fifth and final signpost on the roadmap to liberation of the soul with the words: “*Va-Asu Li Mikdash V’shachanti B’tocham* (Ex 25:8) – Make for Me a Holy Place

(a Sanctuary) and I will dwell (or rest) among you.” Accordingly, we find the general instruction received by our mythic ancestors to build a portable, physical structure that would enable the divine presence to be experienced in the camp. That portable venue – here designated as *Mikdash* – from the word *Kadosh* meaning holy – would soon be referred to as the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle or Dwelling Place. The final 16 chapters of the Book of Exodus consist mostly of detailed instructions for its construction and decoration and for the ritual practices that would take place therein. Many scholars of the Bible regard these descriptions of the tabernacle as representations of the actual dimensions of the Solomonic Temple that later stood on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Be that as it may, and returning to the idea of Exodus as roadmap for the liberation of the soul, the commentary on this verse in the *Etz Chayim* Chumash seems germane when it insists about the tabernacle: “God’s presence is not bound up in a building. It is found in the hearts and souls of the people who fashion and sanctify the building.”

Along similar lines, Rabbi Art Green offers a concise summary of the Hassidic interpretation of the *Mishkan* when he writes [In *The Language of Truth*, his translation of and commentary on the Hasidic Master, *Sefat Emet*]:

Every soul is a chamber for God, a vessel that contains the divine light. This is the message the Hasidic masters repeatedly associate with the tabernacle [the *Mishkan*] and all the details of its making; in all these ways are we to fashion our inner chambers, to make them a proper dwelling place for God. In our souls we light a lamp for God, set a table, raise up an altar. Truly God needs no intermediary. The divine light seeks out only the soul and would be pleased to dwell directly within us.

To put the Hassidic imagery in my own words: as a signpost on the roadmap toward personal liberation, the description of the onetime construction of a *Mishkan* by which our ancestors could experience divine presence becomes an eternal invitation to transform the soul of a person, ourselves, each one of us, into such a tabernacle. That is to say, the fifth and final signpost on the roadmap leads us back to ourselves. It leads us as well to a 1900-year old Talmudic argument in which Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ben Azzai debate the topic *What is the most central and important teaching in Judaism?* Answered Rabbi Akiva, quoting Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” an idea picked in the 1960’s by four young Brits who taught that love is, in fact, all you need.

But Ben Azzai had issues with elevating “love your neighbor” to highest importance on two counts. First, in all practicality, how can one command the emotion of love? And secondly, who gets to say who is a neighbor? Maybe I

regard as my neighbor only those who are kin to me or only those I already favor? For his choice of most important Torah teaching Ben Azzai selected Genesis 5:1-2: “This is the book of human generations: on the day that God created human beings, God created them in the image of God (*B’Tzelem Elohim*); male and female God created them and called them human on the day they were created.” Ben Azzai’s principle requires no commandment to embody an emotion and concedes no slicing and dicing on the identification of who counts as a neighbor. Since every human being, Gentile and Jew, female and male, LGBTQ or straight, brown, black, white or green, young or old, each and every one is descended from Adam and Eve, everyone is therefore created in the divine image.

And regarding images and along the same lines, do you know why graven images are forbidden by the Torah and why Judaism [from the Torah through the Talmud] has had something of an obsessive concern with idolatry? You might think [as per Art Green, *Ten Best Ideas*, p. 12] it is because since God has no image, we humans are forbidden to try and depict God with an image. “No,” said Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. That is not the reason for the obsessive rejection. “It is precisely because God has an image that idols are forbidden. You are the image of God. Every human being is God’s image. But the only way you can shape that image is by using the medium of your entire life. To take anything less than a full, living, breathing human being and try to create God’s image out of it—that diminishes the divine and is considered idolatry.”

That is to say, Torah teaches us that we cannot make God’s image and therefore should not try because you/I/we are God’s image. Because we are made in God’s image, we become our most noble and authentic selves when we work diligently on the construction of the *Mishkan* of our souls, the *Mishkan* of ourselves, the *Mishkan* of our habits of mind and heart, our qualities of character, the *Mishkan* of our dealings with those we love and those we happen to encounter on our daily rounds, including the richly endowed and the neediest in our midst, and with the globe upon whose surface we tread and with the creatures with whom we share that selfsame globe.

*Va’asu Li Mikdash V’shachanti B’tocham—Make for me a holy place and I will dwell among you.* The details of construction matter. But, for starters, as we engage a new year of constructing the tabernacle of our souls, we will all do well to begin with the core conviction that all humans are, like us, fashioned in the divine image and, therefore, eminently worthy of being regarded and treated with great dignity. May it be so.