

AN ALTAR OF UNCUT STONES
Yom Kippur Morning 5778 – 2017
Temple Emanu-El, Marblehead, MA

Not long after leaving Egypt, having crossed the Red Sea into freedom and setting out towards the Promised Land of Israel, our ancient ancestors found themselves in need of a new religion. Absent the idolatrous practices they had known for hundreds of years, and which were still the primary expression of religious practice in the ancient Near East, aside from defeating enemies, surviving in the wilderness, and resisting negativity, pessimism, and gloom, our ancestors set about to create novel and meaningful ways of expressing their thanks, praise, and hopes to God. The system of sacrificial meals and rituals they created would continue for more than a thousand years, centered around the altar, the religious “dining room table” upon which the meats would be salted, the oils mixed with fragrance, and the meals and offerings prepared for daily and holyday celebration. The construction of that altar left little room for uncertainty, as the Torah was quite specific that it was to be made of stones in their natural shapes and conditions.

In the Book of Exodus, we read: “If you use stones to build my altar, use only natural, uncut stones. Do not shape the stones with a tool, for that would make the altar unfit for holy use.”ⁱ We get the same command a generation later, in the Book of Deuteronomy, “When you cross over to enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey... upon crossing the Jordan... you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones. Do not wield an iron tool over them; you must build the altar of the Lord of unhewn stones.”ⁱⁱ And even later, in the Book of Joshua, when we read the narrative of the actual crossing into Canaan, we learn that the Israelites did just as they had been commanded: “At that time, Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel on Mt. Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites. He built it according to what is written in the Book of the Teaching of Moses—an altar of uncut stones, upon which no iron tool had been wielded. On it they offered to the LORD burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It seems to have been rather important, for there are still other Biblical references to the specification that the altar be made of stones in their natural state, uncut. So it begs the question of why? After all, it would have been so much easier to create an altar with stones cut from the quarry, or even from river stones shaped into angles and edges to make them fit together more easily, perhaps even more securely. It will come as no surprise that our sages as well as contemporary Biblical scholars weigh in on the question.

One thread of critical scholarship suggests that not using iron implements was a more widespread custom, stemming from the more superstitious belief that that pounding of the metal tools would drive out the presence of the divine beings from their rocky shelter.^{iv} The twelfth-century French sage, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (better known as the RASHBAM, asserts that the prohibition against the use of metal implements was in order to prevent misguided masons and artists from inscribing into the stones on the altar images and names of foreign deities.^v

There are other opinions and conjectures as well. But the insight of a contemporary colleague, Rabbi Marc Gellman in his book of children's stories, God's Mailbox, is to me the most satisfying and instructive. He suggests that what is true about stones is also true about people. Building with uncut stones is harder than building with stones you cut to fit, but it is better because you let each rock keep its own shape and you don't cut off its edges just to make it fit. It is the same with people... God gives each of us special edges and special gifts that are given to no other person in the whole wide world.^{vi}

What we learn from the altar of unhewn stones, as well as from the ongoing wisdom of our traditional wisdom, is that it is the diversity among human beings which evokes the Divine Presence. Inclusion, not uniformity, is the Jewish ideal — not despite of or regardless of our differences, but because of the diversity of human beings can the Divine Presence be known and felt among us. As the Talmud teaches: How different is God from human rulers! For when a king of flesh and blood stamps out coins from a single mold, each comes out looking identical. But the greatness of God is that God took the first human — Adam — and created from that single source a humanity in which every person is born unique, precious, and of ultimate value.^{vii}

Inclusion may well be the primary and most authentic and encompassing value in all of the Torah and Jewish ethics. And the argument can be made that the quest or demand for homogeneity among people lies at the root of the ultimate evil in our world. I want to make that argument using our traditional, ethical sources. In the Bible, the historical, or more likely, the

symbolic representation of evil was to be found in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah — cities so foul and immoral that God obliterated them from the face of the earth.

But the Torah never tells us the specific evils of which the Sodomites were guilty. So it is left to our sages to describe the essential sins of Sodom that led to her annihilation. They taught: “When a stranger appeared in Sodom and Gomorrah, the officials put him in a bed they had placed in the town square. If he was too short for the bed, they would stretch and pull his legs and body until he was the length of the bed. If he was too long for the bed, they cut off his legs to make him fit into it.”^{viii}

I would claim again — an ideal of overarching uniformity is the antithesis of the Jewish value of inclusion, and as a congregation and community we need to both model and enable inclusivity in the institutions of Jewish life in order to live up to this highest ideal. My message, challenge, and appeal on this Yom Kippur therefore, calls us to renew with determination and intention our commitment to expanding our ability to welcome into our community of faith the broadest segments of our Jewish population. My message today is focused on inclusion as a moral value towards which we continue to strive.

Inclusion has been a hallmark of Temple Emanu-El from long before my arrival, and continuing over the past decades. Thanks to devoted and visionary leadership, we were on the leading edge three decades ago and for the years that followed in promoting an Outreach effort directed towards interfaith couples and families. Seventeen years ago, during our last significant renovation campaign, we spent nearly a million dollars to ensure that our building would be fully accessible in keeping with the latest codes and standards — even though, as a religious organization, we were exempt from achieving otherwise standard outcomes. Our school has welcomed special needs students and those with physical handicaps as well, enabling them to study here and celebrate becoming B’nai Mitzvah and Confirmands. Over the past decades, we have been a leading Jewish organizational advocate on behalf of the LGBTQ population, welcoming same-sex couples, gender non-conforming and trans-gender individuals. Having removed physical barriers to participation and social ones as well, we took the plunge to remove economic barriers to membership by eliminating dues as our funding model. In all these ways, as a congregation, we have sought to live up to the vision of the prophet, Isaiah, “My House shall be a house of prayer for all people.”

In many ways, inclusion has become second-nature to how we operate as a congregation, and now I would ask that we renew that effort with intention and clarity in partnership with the Ruderman Synagogue Inclusion Project, through the auspices of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies. The goal of the Project is to support synagogues like ours in creating communities where people of all abilities are valued equally and participate fully. As a Project partner synagogue, we would be afforded access to local and national inclusion experts, events and opportunities to network and share best practices with other synagogues, and to be eligible for consultation and other resources to develop innovative strategies for our inclusion efforts.

Just to be completely transparent, sister congregations here in the area, such as Temple Sinai, Chabad and Shirat Hayam are already participating in the Project. Some time ago, the Ruderman folks reached out to me, recognizing our acclaimed work in years past, and inviting us to be part of and to take a leadership role the effort. I was hesitant to sign on, however, for a number of reasons — knowing all that we were already doing in this area of Temple life, and that the effort would require assembling a team of dedicated leaders to help work with me, Liz and our Board to implement the goals we set forth. As our Neighborhood programming was flourishing, as we were taking on a major renovation and Capital Campaign effort, and having made the commitment of helping to settle an asylum-seeking family through the Refugee-Immigration Mission, I was concerned about adding on yet another significant program to our overflowing calendar of needs which would require additional volunteer involvement.

When I met recently with the staff member from the project, she shared with me how pleased they will be to welcome us as a congregational partner going forward. They were curious, however, and appropriately so, for our own Board of Trustees, while approving our participating in the Project, also wanted to know why this was the time for moving ahead, for saying “Yes!” to the invitation.

I have long admired and wholeheartedly support the Inclusion Project, as it certainly lines up well with our mission and vision here at Temple Emanu-El. But it was events over the summer that inspired and prompted me to make the call. Seeing the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, filled with white-supremacist marchers spewing hatred, anti-Semitism, and vile racist slogans, and one counter-demonstrator rammed to her death; seeing the glass wall of the Holocaust Memorial in Boston shattered not once, but twice; and witnessing the brash and newly emboldened alt-Right, KKK and neo-Nazi hate groups — compelled me to say “Count us in.”

You see, the essential message of these hate-groups ultimately comes down to a philosophy which first dehumanizes, then excludes, and ultimately promotes violence to their targets: primarily Jews, African-Americans, immigrants, Muslims, gay, lesbian, and transgender. And as history taught us in Nazi Germany, those with special needs, the developmentally disabled, or physically handicapped will in time likewise be among those deemed less-than fully human, valued or worthy by the haters, racists and bigots.

To be perfectly honest, I believe that the response from our national leadership to this summer's hate-rallies was sluggish, woefully inadequate and morally deficient. Our response, therefore, in addition to vigilance, coalition-building with other at-risk groups, and working with law enforcement officials, should be one of heightened, intentional, and institutionally driven efforts to promote an inclusive environment for the broadest spectrum of our Jewish community.

Not every Jewish child can fit identically into our educational model. Not every Jewish adult can be pigeon-holed into a predetermined way of belonging and identifying as a Jew. Not every family faces the same challenges, or comes with the same circumstances and needs. Not every illness is visible, nor is everyone's pain ultimately healed.

We're going to assemble a team of Temple members inspired by the opportunities presented through the Ruderman Project, and I hope that you'll be in touch with me or with Liz or Jaime if you're interested in taking on the effort. We'll be working with local and national consultants to ascertain better those who might be marginalized by our synagogues and other local institutions, and finding innovative ways of bringing them into our core. The first training session will be held in December.

When explaining the reason behind the Torah's command to use uncut, unpolished, unhewn stones in building the altar, the medieval commentary of RASHI suggests: Iron came into the world for the sake of making swords, for use in warfare. It would be wrong, he insists, to use that which came into the world to shorten, diminish, devalue and destroy human life in the building of that which comes into the world, to lengthen, strengthen, improve and elevate human life — the altar of God. Is that not our mission as well, as a congregation and community of faith?

In the days of our Biblical ancestors, it would have been so tempting to simply cut and slice the stones used for building God's altar. But in so doing, they would have been assembled into a bland and featureless object hardly worthy of inviting the Divine Presence. I believe that

when God commanded the Israelites to build their altars of unhewn stones, it was a message to us as well — to continue embracing, valuing and promoting a culture of inclusion, which likewise will improve, strengthen and elevate the lives of us all. Only then will the spirit of God continue to distill among us, within these walls, and within our hearts.

ⁱ Exodus 20:25.

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 27:3f.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joshua 8:30-31.

^{iv} The Interpreters Bible.

^v Cited in JPS Torah Commentary.

^{vi} Marc Gellman, God's Mailbox, Morrow Junior Books, New York, 1996, p. 103.

^{vii} Talmud, Sanhedrin 4:5.

^{viii} Talmud, Sanhedrin 109a.