

(Olam Hesed Yibaneh)

One of the central pillars of the High Holiday Season is the Selichot. The penitential prayers, where we try to strengthen our connection to the Divine, so that we may first acknowledge our sins, our shortcomings of character, in order that we may begin the process of Teshuva, return to a state of Qedusha, holiness. We begin by proclaiming the **שלוש עשרה מידות** the thirteen “attributes” or “values” of Gd, as presented to Moshe when he went back up the mountain to receive the second set of Tablets. You know the list, we sang them during the Torah Service: “Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum V’Chanun....” And the point of acknowledging Gd’s attributes is to remind us that WE, as beings created in Gd’s image are REQUIRED to emulate Gd’s values as much as possible, and by doing so, we will improve our own lives, and those of the people around us, and thus be worthy of forgiveness, as we will have embarked upon the path of Teshuva by improving ourselves.

Does anyone remember which Midah, I discussed last year? Which VALUE I preached about? No? Great! Because it means I can redeliver the sermon I gave last year, instead of writing a new one for 5785! (brings out last year’s sermon) “One of the great themes of the High Holidays is that of Humility...” FIIIIINE, I’ll come up with a new sermon! So let’s talk about a trio of overlapping middot: **חן, וחסד, ורחמים**. This trio of values show up in the Sim Shalom prayer from our Amida “**שִׁים שְׁלוֹם טוֹבָה וּבְרָכָה חֵן וְחֶסֶד וְרַחֲמִים**” Often translated as Grace, Lovingkindness and Mercy, they all represent acts of Divine Love.

Trying to distinguish between the three gets a little dicey, as different scholars will try to differentiate the terms based on different linguistic and biblical theories, which go way beyond the scope of this sermon, but suffice it to say, that these three terms encompass a range of Love, from that based upon obligation, based upon relationship, and baseless, love that is not deserved or warranted, and yet is given freely nonetheless.

Now before you get worried, I'm not here to tell you that you have to learn to love your fellow man and sing Kumbaya, and we'll solve all the World's Problems. Maybe in some ideal world, there is a way to get everyone to love everyone, but as the great Tom Lehrer said: "There are people in this world who do not love their fellow man—and I HATE people like that!" But I will argue that we need to INCREASE our level of Love, not for some unattainable extrinsic goal, but rather for our own selves, to improve our own lives, as well as the lives of those around us.

Today, I want to draw your attention to a character taken from today's Haftorah, who is often overlooked in the grand scheme of things. As Howie Lewin so sweetly chanted this morning, we listened to the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Hannah's own name, derives from Hen, grace, one of those 3 Middot! She is inconsolable at her barren womb (her Rehem, again derived from Rachamim a SECOND of those middot) and prays for a child. She prays wordlessly, and is shamed for it, being accused of being drunk, but she begs for understanding from the High Priest, and eventually her prayer is answered with the birth of her son, Samuel, and then she returns to the Priest to offer her son in Service to God.

Here she prays again, and she notes “רַגְלֵי חֲסִידוֹ יִשְׁמְרוּ” [Gd] guards the steps of Gd’s faithful— Again Hasidav derived from Hesed, and lo and behold all three of the Middot are mentioned; as a bonus we can contrast her with her husband, Elkanna, whose name literally means ‘Jealous God’ and we can see how instead of listening to Hannah, or looking to see what is really bothering her, instead he responds to her with the tone-deaf message of ‘aren’t I better than ten sons?’ So we’ve accomplished our goal, proven our point, and now can continue with Musaf service on page 483. But...you’ve heard the story of Hannah. Countless Rabbis have given you sermons about Kavannah, and davening with intention, and that you don’t need to know the words, you can just pray from your heart, etc. etc. I want to do something new. I want to focus on Eli, the high priest, in Shiloh. We are taught in the book of Samuel, that Eli was both the High Priest as well as a Shofet, a judge, who ruled in Israel for forty years. But it is here that we witness an act of great Hen, Hesed or Rachamim. So here is Hannah praying wordlessly:

וְהִיא כִּי הִרְבְּתָה לְהִתְפַּלֵּל לִפְנֵי ה' וְעָלִי שִׁמְרָ אֶת־פִּיהָ:  
 וְחִנָּה הִיא מְדַבֶּרֶת עַל־לִבָּהּ רַק שִׁפְתֶיהָ נִעוֹת וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמָע וַיַּחֲשֹׁבָה עָלֶי לְשֹׁכְרָה:  
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ עָלִי עַד־מָתִי תִשְׁתַּכְרְיִין הַסִּירִי אֶת־יַיְנְךָ מֵעַלֶיךָ:

As [Hannah] kept on praying before the LORD, Eli watched her mouth.  
 Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk.  
 Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!”

Here is the woman, mumbling in the Sanctuary, and one can imagine the righteous indignation Eli is feeling at this point, as HIS house of worship is being desecrated by this woman and her strange actions.

I recall a story my mother told me of the synagogue she grew up in. It is Purim, and the children are being a little more raucous than usual, and the Rabbi was getting more and more annoyed at this display of impiety, and so he comes to the front of the room and intones the inadvertently funny line of “A little DECORUM on Purim”, and the crowd LOSES it, my Mom never did tell me if he ever regained control of the congregation....

But back to Eli, of COURSE he had the right to ensure that people were acting properly here in Shiloh. He was the Head Priest. As the Shofet, he was the de facto ruler of the people Israel. The head honcho, the big Kehuna. This was HIS house, and damn it, he was going to make sure that people exhibited a “little decorum” even if it was a few centuries before the advent of Purim!

At this point in the story, Hannah responds to the accusation, not with anger, but apologetically:

וַתַּעַן חַנָּה וַתֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲדֹנָי אֲשֶׁה קִשְׁת־רוּחַ אֲנֹכִי נַיִן וְשָׁכַר לֹא שָׁתִיתִי וְאֲשָׁפָה אֶת־נַפְשִׁי לִפְנֵי ה':  
אֶל־תִּתֵּן אֶת־אֲמֹתְךָ לִפְנֵי בֵּת־בְּלִיעֵל כִּי־מֵרֵב שִׁיתִי וְכַעֲסִי דִּבַּרְתִּי עַד־הַנְּהָ:  
וַיַּעַן עָלַי וַיֹּאמֶר לְכִי לְשִׁלּוֹם וְאֶל־יְיָ יִשְׂרָאֵל יִתֵּן אֶת־שִׁלְתְּךָ אֲשֶׁר שָׁאַלְתְּ מִעֲמֹ:  
וַתֹּאמֶר תִּמְצָא שְׂפָתַיךָ חֵן בְּעֵינַיִךָ וְתִלָּךְ הָאִשָּׁה לְדַרְכָּהּ וְתֹאכַל וּפְגִייהָ לֹא־הִיוּ־לָהּ עוֹד:

And Hannah replied, “Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the LORD.

Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress.”

“Then go in peace,” said Eli, “and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him.”

She answered, “You are most kind to your handmaid.” So the woman left, and she ate, and was no longer downcast.

Regardless of her explanations, Eli could have continued to berate her. Alternatively, he could have offered up excuses: 'well, it sure LOOKED like you were drunk!' Instead, he acts with Chen, and not only excuses her conduct, but prays for her, and offers her comfort, in such a way that Hannah's mood improved even BEFORE she is blessed with a son. Eli is able to set Hannah on a path of healing and improvement where her own husband, Elkana was unable or unwilling to, regardless of Hannah being his 'favorite.' Eli ignores the power dynamic of himself as the high muckity-muck priest, and humbles himself to Hannah's level, in order to connect with her, and her grieving heart.

2024 sure has been a year. We've seen a dramatic rise in partisanship and hate, in Islamophobia and Antisemitism, where we see the divides between the "Us" and the "Them" only grow for all sorts of axes: political, religious, philosophical, heck even between Us noble Mets fans, and those dirty, dirty, Atlanta Braves Fans! But my message ISN'T that love will set us free. That if only we could love each other strongly enough, we would bring about World Peace! I mean, maybe that's theoretically possible, but could there exist enough lovingkindness in this world to encompass even Phillie Phanatic Fans??

Rather, I wish to warn you, to NOT LET OUR DIFFERENCES damage our own qualities of חן,

ורחמים, וחסד. Let me quote to you from C.S. Lewis

“Suppose one reads a story of filthy atrocities in the paper. Then suppose that something turns up suggesting that the story might not be quite true, or not quite so bad as it was made out. Is one's first feeling, 'Thank God, even they aren't quite so bad as that,' or is it a feeling of disappointment, and even a determination to cling to the first story for the sheer pleasure of thinking your enemies are as bad as possible? If it is the second then it is, I am afraid, the first step in a process which, if followed to the end, will make us into devils. You see, one is beginning to wish that black was a little blacker. If we give that wish its head, later on we shall wish to see grey as black, and then to see white itself as black. Finally we shall insist on seeing everything -- God and our friends and ourselves included -- as bad, and not be able to stop doing it: we shall be fixed for ever in a universe of pure hatred.”

Come to think of it: it's a good thing I still have last year's sermon here with its message of the importance of humility, because it is through humility that we can keep ourselves from losing our other virtues. So even if you think or KNOW that you're right, and other person is wrong, don't let that belief keep you from seeing the good in them, and the good in the world itself.

May we all strive to replicate Gd's capacity for חסד ורחמים חן and may Gd grant us the same.

May we be blessed, as Eli blessed Hannah to “Lechi L'Shalom” to Go in Peace, to a happy, and

healthy 5785—Shana Tova!

This is a sermon about Sacred Space, where to find it, and how to experience it:

It was an iconic scene for me. Half-dome, Yosemite National Park. That quartz monzonite batholith, a solidified magma chamber carved over millenia by erosion. For many, this image, along with El Capitan, evokes the famous picture taken in 1927 by Ansel Adams, or the paintings taken in 1855 by Thomas Ayres that led to President Abraham Lincoln setting aside this valley in perpetuity as a natural park. To me, it also evoked Sierra-On-Line: A 1980's and 90's software company that developed many of the video games that marked my adolescence, and used half-dome as their logo that shone in green phosphorus from old CRT-monitors. It shone in my own personal memory as well, from trips taken with MY parents forty years ago. So why did I return? I have my memories, I have the photos, the paintings, heck I can even still load up Kings Quest on an emulator should I want to relive some of my misspent youth! So why did I drag my family with me halfway across the country, to stay at an overpriced lodge on the valley floor? [PAUSE]

**The Miwok people who inhabited this land before us, viewed it as sacred ground.**

But what is Sacred Ground, really? Well, let's go back to the earliest description from the Torah; the book of Exodus, Chapter 3. When we last met our hero, Moses, he was on the lam—both figuratively from Pharaoh due to his killing of the Egyptian taskmaster, as well as literally with Jethro's flock of lambs. Moses was shepherding the sheep when God spoke to him from a burning bush, telling him "Go down, Moses, Way down in Egypt land. Tell ol' Pharaoh: Let My People Go!" Well. Not exactly. Let's look at the verse:

וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ ה' אֵלָיו בְּלַבַּת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסֵּנֶה בֹּעֵר בְּאֵשׁ וְהַסֵּנֶה אֵינּוּ אֶכְלָל:  
 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרֶה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הַמְרָאָה הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת מִדֹּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה  
 וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי סָר לְרֵאיוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֶל־לֵקִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲגִנִי:  
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּקְרַב הֵלֶם שֶׁל־נַעֲלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמַּת־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא:

A messenger of Adonai appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" When Adonai saw that he had turned aside to look, Gd called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." And [Gd] said, "Do not come closer! Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground!"

A few things stand out to me in the story that, honestly, I had glossed over before. First, an angel appears, and yet Moses doesn't focus on or respond in any way to that fact. He's more concerned about the bush. The S'neh. That word, S'neh, appears three times in the verse. How can a bush be more interesting than an Angel? After noticing that the fire wasn't actually consuming the bush, he STILL doesn't address the Angel, but rather decides he needs to further investigate this conflagration instead. And only at THIS moment, does Gd need to wake Moses from his reverie by calling out his name twice מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה, so that Gd could engage with him. But what was it about this particular bush, or particular mountain that made it "Admat Kodesh"- "Sacred Ground"? Before Moshe came there, he was aimless. But here the trajectory of his life is changed, and he leaves the encounter a different person than when he first entered. Strengthened, invigorated, transformed, because he has touched Sacred Ground.

But this is not ACTUALLY the first Sacred Ground in the Torah. Although it is not described as such in the text, it is obvious that Abraham interacted with Admat HaQodesh in Moriah, it is the very location of the Qodesh haQadashim, the Holy of Holies of our Beit haMiqdash, the Holy Temple! But the difference here is that Abraham had to CREATE this Sacred Space.



We read in today's Torah portion: Abraham is put to the test: to take Isaac to the land of Moriah, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains that Gd would indicate. Now I'm sure you've heard this story before. We read it every year, on this second day of Rosh Hashanna. The verse states: **וְלֵךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה** Some of you may recognize that phrase: Lech Lecha-Go for yourself, as the first command given by Gd to Abraham, (or rather Avram as he was known then.)

Lech Lecha from your native land, to a place I will show you, and here, too, Gd commands Abraham to Lech Lecha to Moriah. Why didn't Gd command him to offer up Isaac right where he was? He was not living near Moriah. The text tells us that he had to travel for three days, and only then did he see the mountain "Afar off." Now, I'm not exactly an expert, but when you see a mountain "afar off", you're not reaching it any time soon. Last year, when we visited the Rockies, we saw the mountains "afar off" from our rental SUV, and it still took us hours, on well-maintained highways to reach them. I shudder to think of what it would have looked like travelling by foot with a donkey loaded with supplies, and no GPS to speak of! Heck, not even a Rand McNally Atlas, for those of you who still remember the Long Long Ago, in the Beforetimes, when you didn't even have MapQuest! They reach the mountain, and now they can't even use the donkey anymore, and must carry the wood, the fire, the knife up to the top of the mountain. We can only imagine the PHYSICAL struggle Abraham endured to reach that Sacred Ground.

So here they stand: Abraham and Isaac, on Mount Moriah. If the point of the exercise was to change them, to teach Abraham the lesson that human sacrifice is NEVER acceptable, that the ends do NOT justify the means. Gd needed to break Abraham's reverie in the same way Gd did to Moses by having his name called out twice "Avraham! Avraham!" before Abraham responded with the same word Moses would later: "Hineni" 'I am here' Hineni, is not about informing Gd of where he is—I mean, Gd obviously knows where both Abraham and Moses are, and this without the benefit of GPS or Apple Tags.

"Hineni"--This is what created the Sacred Space. It is by opening his eyes to the world around him, or as the text states:

וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה־אֵיל

And Abraham LIFTED his eyes and SAW, and behold there was a ram.

The ram was there all along, but Abraham wasn't conscious of it. Just like many of us go about our days, unconscious to the world and the people around us. It was only by raising his consciousness to truly see the universe and its inherent majesty, that Abraham transformed the land, and transformed himself. He needed to wake up from the blind faith which might have led him to kill his own child, to open his eyes to what Gd truly wanted from him, and from all of us. In the end, Abraham helped CREATE the sacred space, and this location became the very Holy of Holies of Solomon's Temple. God's Home.

Now let me take you to a more recent past: It's Pandemic, and the shul has closed its doors. The seemingly interminable "two week shutdown" has extended to the whole summer, and our community is only maintained through screens and cameras, and a little known app named Zoom. Ahhh, to go back in time and invest in THAT one! Regardless, with the holidays approaching, we struggled: do we simply offer a virtual service, or do we create a space as safe as we could, so that we could all pray together in this sanctuary. We installed plexiglass screens separating the Bima from the Kahal, we put up a plastic box around the Torah table, like some Maxwell Smart "Cone of Silence" lest any droplet attempt to cross the threshold. We measured the room, and taped off various socially-distanced 'pods' of varying numbers of seats depending on the size of the family bubble. We taped off rectangles, and brought out the tape measures. We lysol'ed the Mahzorim! We timed and trimmed our prayers and our sermons to decrease the potential viral load people were exposed to. And that was only half the work, because even though we were focused on the people in the room, we also focused on the people on the Zoom. Those who could not join us in person. We ran Cat-5 cable to various machines in this room: desktops scavenged from the now unused Media lab to ensure multiple angles to show both Rabbi Silverman and myself, as well as a shot of the congregation to ensure people felt connected to this holy congregation. The space was unrecognizable from February 2020, but it was still Sacred Ground. We had MADE it so, by opening our eyes to the needs of our community, both real and virtual. We were protecting our Sacred Space

Gen-Z'ers urge each other to get off the Internet with the phrase "Touch Grass" Similar to "Get your head out of the clouds" or "get some fresh air", it implies the need to connect with reality, on a tactile level—to physically interact with non-virtual reality in order to 'get our head on straight.' I believe that's exactly what's happening in these two examples of Sacred Ground, because in both cases, our hero is urged to "remove your sandals." Now most of our commentators seem to focus on the idea that the sandals might contain impurities that might 'ruin' the Sacred Ground—I mean, let's be real, being surrounded by a bunch of sheep, it's likely Moses must have stepped in SOMETHING, but I don't think that's Gd's real concern here. If Admat Qodesh, was SO fragile, and SO delicate, that a few specks of grime stuck to the bottom of Moses's or Joshua's shoes were gonna ruin it, that would seem to me to be poor design. No. I think God wanted both Moses and Joshua to "Touch Grass" to REALLY connect with this Sacred Ground; to exist in the moment, and fully experience this holy place on a full sensory level. And perhaps, to bring some of that Sacredness with them for the rest of their lives.

So why did I drag my family with me halfway across the country, to stay at an overpriced lodge on the valley floor? Because we need to physically BE in the Sacred Space. There is transformative value in experiencing a Sacred Space. By engaging with it, we are reinvigorated and rejuvenated. And it's the same reason you step into this Sanctuary year after year for the High Holidays. Being here, with your family, with your greater ENJC family, in this room, on these pews, these folding chairs, this is a Sacred Space, and we must TOUCH it. Those who came before us, MADE this space sacred. From the design of the stained glass windows, to the creation of the Holy Ark, and our Mobius-strip Ner Tamid, down to the selection of the pews

and the carpet. Each of these actions helped make this space holy. But you too, can make a space sacred. By your very presence, you have the opportunity to enhance the sacredness inherent in this place, as well as creating brand new sacred spaces in your own homes. You can incorporate Jewish traditions to change a Dining Room into a Shabbat Meal Sacred Space. You can change your Study into a place for Studying Torah. You can change your Living Room into a Sacred Space for truly connecting with friends and family.

As Jacob proclaimed upon awaking from his dream with the ladder where Gd interacted with him for the first time:

“אֵינְךָ יְיָ ה' בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי:  
 ”מֵהַנִּזְרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵין זֶה כִּי אִם-בַּיִת אֶל־לֵהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם:  
 Surely Adonai is present in this place, and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.

How often are we missing out on experiencing Sacred Space, just by being unaware that we're standing on it. As Madge would say in those Palmolive commercials: “You're soaking in it!”

Admat Qodesh is all around you. All you have to do is open your eyes, and let it wash over you.

Be PRESENT in this Sacred Space. Shana Tova!