

“FIVE SACRED SPACES”
Part One
“The Ha-Ari Synagogue
Tsefat, Israel”

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Rabbi or Doctor; Doctor or Rabbi? That was the dilemma I pondered as an eleven year old. Now, were we not longtime friends, I would never tell you this, because normal eleven year olds are not obsessed with their career options. But there I was in 1959 wavering between either of these two: Rabbi or Doctor; Doctor or Rabbi.

Rabbi won out because I figured there were a great many others who would be drawn to medicine and who would make fine physicians, but not as many were likely to choose to become “physicians” to the Jewish spirit and to work toward a healthy Jewish future. That was that, and I am happy to tell you that I have never regretted my choice.

I proceeded to design a synagogue to be built in our basement. And with my father’s carpentry assistance (he also helped me with my Soap Box Derby Racer years later, but that is another story), the synagogue was completed:

Ark, eternal light, pulpit – and piped-in organ music from the “High Fi” upstairs.

Living in Glen Burnie, a distinctly non-Jewish suburb of Baltimore, the hardest thing to come by were Jews in the pews, a challenge I didn’t realize then I would face for the rest of my life! But not to worry, I filled the folding chairs with my Christian neighborhood friends.

“Where have you been?”, their Catholic and Protestant parents asked them. “Over at Eddie’s at Temple.” Looking back on it now, I realize that having started my rabbinate in the basement, I had no where to go but up!

Did you know that even the historians are not sure when the first synagogues were built? Most say the sixth century B.C.E. during the Babylonian Exile. The Talmud actually refers to a synagogue on the Temple Mount before the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 C.E. So synagogues have been the places where the ideas and teachings of our Judaism developed into a compelling faith of undeterred hopefulness.

I invite you to join me during these High Holy Days as we visit together “Five Sacred Spaces”; five utterly important synagogues, each one of which offers us possibly life saving insights which are just waiting to be embraced in our everyday lives.

I have been blessed to visit all five of these Sacred Spaces, most of them since last Rosh HaShanah. Four are pictured in the High Holy Day handout. Look at the first one. Some of us were just there in March during our Temple’s Journey to Israel. I know that others of you have been there too, in the holy city of Tsefat (Safed in English) the city of Jewish Mysticism. Tsefat is 145 miles from Jerusalem and about 100 miles north of Tel Aviv.

Notice the magnificent Ark of the Law which crowns the Ha-Ari Synagogue of the Ashkenazim. The impressive Ark you see in the picture is set in the southern wall facing Jerusalem. Jews began coming to Tsefat in the late 15th century after their infamous expulsion from Spain.

And here in this synagogue, in the late 16th century, Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as Ha-Ari (the Lion) the foremost exponent of Kabbalah, would gather with his disciples to welcome Shabbat, the

first ones to sing that very hymn which we still sing every Shabbat, L'ChaDodi. It was first sung in Tsefat and now all over the world.

The “bible” of the Kabbalasts, the Zohar, was written in part by the 12th century scholar Rabbi Moses de Leon. By no means am I a scholar of the Zohar. And yet, some of its teachings uniquely address both our time and circumstance.

Hence, the first of “Five Sacred Spaces”: The Ha-Ari Synagogue of Tsefat. It is where the stories and teachings of Kabbalah rekindled abiding hope and joy within wounded hearts which so hungered for a good word.

Look again at this Ark. It bespeaks unbridled joy and celebration. In fact, it stands too high for the building, and the top of the Ark bends forward as if to declare, here is a message of such profound meaning it could never be contained by any earthly ceiling.

The word “Kabbalah” literally means Receiving, and its followers claim to possess the world’s oldest wisdom, capable of unlocking the deepest mysteries of life. They insist that their teachings explain both the spiritual and physical laws which govern the human soul. But here’s the catch! Those who receive must be willing to listen with their hearts as well as their minds.

You and I happen to have a whole lot in common with those Jews who made their way to Tsefat in the late 15th century. They were exiles from their homes and possessions, and many of us have also survived an exile four years ago. They lost everything they owned but their faith, and, many of us did too. And then there is the “second storm” – this worldwide economic emergency of 2009 from which we are still reeling. Another disaster, which affects people rich and poor, this one is very much like Katrina.

In one way or another, everyone in this room has been hurt, as the rich aren’t even getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Some of us may even be balanced on the precipice of financial ruin. And anyone with a 401(k) or IRA has lost up to half of his or her savings, shaking the foundations of the future and ripping-apart for many long anticipated plans for a secure and leisurely retirement.

I need not remind you that since last Rosh HaShanah Eve, we have all become familiar with the infamous name of Bernie Madoff. Frankly, I refuse to invest too much of our time on this holy night addressing his monstrous character. To some degree, I find myself in agreement with the distinguished journalist, philanthropist and real estate baron, Mortimer Zuckerman, who despite watching \$30 million of his Charitable Foundations evaporate in a Madoff swindle, declared last January, that we American Jews ought not be so self-conscious as to feel we must collectively account for this sociopath...The Madoff super sin of greed is universally condemned by our Judaism.

Still, despite Mr. Zuckerman’s high mindedness, it is incontestable that Madoff’s historic Ponsi swindle will only aid and abet the Jew haters and the century’s old anti-Semitic stereotypes.

The Madoff betrayal was never brought home more personally for many of us than when we learned that the widow of our beloved friend, the late leader of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Rabbi Alex Schindler, would be forced to auction two pieces of sacred Judaica in order to help ends meet.

No Rabbi's sermon on this Rosh HaShanah Eve is likely to overlook Madoff, for he is the elephant in the room, but we shall not allow him to rob us of our larger vision. From the Madoff Scandal and the much larger international economic reversal of fortune, come with me to that synagogue in Tsefat, where the disciples of Ha-Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria would gather to renew their faith. For there is much to learn and, in the inimitable words of White House Chief of Staff and fellow Jew, Rahim Emanuel, let us "Never let a good crisis go to waste."

I. FEAR

In these fearsome times of tribulations, when from our young president on down, experts in every field seem, more and more, at a loss to explain, let alone reverse our ill-fortune, the ancient insights of Kabbalah urge us to remain steadfast, calm and fearless.

Summarizing Kabbalistic teachings on the subject of fear in his book, *True Prosperity*, another Yehuda Berg begins with a story. Two mental patients, intent on escaping, decide that one of them will gather their provisions while the other will investigate the wall surrounding the hospital and devise their escape strategy. If lower than six feet, the first man told his partner, "we'll have to jump it." Higher? "We'll have to tunnel underneath."

At the appointed hour, the first man gathered the food and supplies, but discovered his partner weeping:

"We're never going to get out", he cried,
"there's no wall!"

The mystics taught us that that wall is our fear! Fearing every transition from certainty to uncertainty, we risk devoting all we have to protecting ourselves against loss. The more we fear, the more frightening life turns out to be.

As I told our confirmands last spring, there are three absolutely certain ways we can all overcome our fears. Those among them who stayed awake could list them for you right now!

Simply put: want what you have; do what you can, and be who you are and you will conquer your fears.

II. The Riches of Time

Here is a second lesson from Kabbalah for our own times.

Money, in and of itself, is not now, nor has it ever been nor will it ever be, the cornerstone of our security. Again Yehuda Berg from his text of Kabbalah in the book *True Prosperity*:

Money comes and money goes.
You can always make more, but when
time slips away, it's never coming back again.
Kabbalah tells us that time is our most
precious non-renewable natural resource
So...are you being productive with your time?
Are you defining (your) priorities and
sticking to them...?

Think of it dear friends, from the very first of Genesis, the Torah underscores that you and I have freewill to make our choices in life. Are we choosing well? Now that's a perfect question for a Rosh HaShanah Eve if ever I heard one! Remember how in The Garden of Eden God searches for Adam, asking Ah-yeh-cha? /Where are you Adam? But Adam was hiding. He was wasting time in Paradise! And God knew it all the while.

This teenage cancer patient ought to bring us to our senses. Listen to her poem: "Slowdance."

...Don't dance so fast.
Time is short.
The music won't last...
Ever told your child,
We'll do it tomorrow?...

(Ever) Let a good friendship die
cause you never had time...
You'd better slow down.
Don't dance so fast.
Life is not a race.
Do it slower.
Hear the music
Before the song is over.

III. The Presents We Can Give

So we see that Kabbalah has much to teach us first about our fears, and second about the Riches of Our Time here on earth. And finally, what about The Presents We Can Give. Kabbalistic teachings insist that trying times are a sure sign that a new direction and a guiding light is trying to be revealed. Troubled circumstances need to call us out of ourselves to focus upon others and to realize that it is not about what "I want."

These tough economic reversals demand that we turn our mirrors into windows. I was looking through my notes and discovered the press story from last November about that poor fellow who was trampled to death in a Long Island Wal-Mart by frenzied shoppers panicked that they would miss out on a discounted television? Do you remember that story? Since then, a whole lot of Americans have been coming to realize that we can indeed live on less and perhaps even more happily than before.

In his 2007 commencement address at the College of Charleston billionaire Philanthropist Jerry Zucker shared this with the graduating class. One year later Jerry died at home of cancer. He remarked:

My father, of blessed memory, when asked
about his age, which he would not give,
would often say no one should be judged
by their years, only by their deeds...
meaning that humankind had been given
intelligence above all other animals in order
to complete the creation.

That's why National Health Care is the Jewish thing to do – the American right thing to do – Shame on you Mary if you vote against it. Shame on you David Vitter whatever you do!

Have you read about Dave Bruno? Talk about helping to complete and polish the rough spots of God's Creation. Bruno, lives in San Diego and became overwhelmed by his family's possessions, and he has ignited a national movement to whittle down our personal belongings to a mere 100 things: hence his "100 Thing Challenge." Could you do it? Could I do it? That's right, it doesn't take long before we realize that trickier questions present themselves! What counts as a single item? Are shoes single or a collective? What about books? How about if the item in question is shared with other family members? The point is clear, however, "enough is enough" says your Rabbi whose suitcase is always overweight! And I am going to work on that this year! I promise you.

People all over this nation are discovering that perhaps there is a silver lining to this severe recession. Nineteen years ago, Ben Zoma knew the secret:

MeeZeh-hoo Ahsheer? Who is rich?
And the answer, Ha-Samayach B'chelko.
Who is rich?
The one who is satisfied with what he has.

The Ari used to teach his disciples in that little synagogue in Tsefat that everything is exactly the opposite of how it appears. That's right: Reality is counter intuitive! When something starts off fraught with problems and difficulties and daunting uncertainties, it is actually a good sign that the end will prove to be a phenomenal success. Good news indeed for the prospects for this New Year!

The Kabbalah addresses us right where we live – countering our fears, clarifying the value of our time, urging us to dare to make a difference by completing one little piece of God’s creation. All in all there is much comfort in its teachings. They go well I think with these words of advice uncovered in the 18th century:

“...whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.
Therefore, be at peace with God...
Be careful, but strive to be happy.”

Such are the lessons we take along with us as we close the door of the Ha-Ari Synagogue of Tsefat. One wonders how many New Years it has witnessed? How many Jewish souls, just like ours, to whom it has challenged - Take Heart! Fear Not! Hallelujah!

Amen!