

“FIVE SACRED SPACES”
Part Two
“THE SYNAGOGUE OF OSTIA ANTICA”

Rosh Ha-Shana Day 5770
September 19, 2009

Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn
Congregation Temple Sinai
New Orleans, Louisiana

My dear friends and gentle hearts...

Last night on Rosh HaShanah Eve, we greeted our New Year with a visit to the mystical city of Tsefat, which lies about 145 miles North of Jerusalem. There, we entered the first of “Five Sacred Spaces” – The Ha-Ari Synagogue where the renowned scholar Rabbi Isaac Luria once taught and prayed.

It was the late 16th century, the Golden Age of Kabbalah – and without even help from Madona! And, as we stood in that small synagogue admiring its brightly painted tall Ark, we asked ourselves what insights Kabbalah would offer us in this time of economic crisis, ethical compromise, and worldwide uncertainty.

Come with me to our Second Sacred Space – the synagogue of the Roman port city of Ostia Antica, only 19 miles from Rome, and until the accumulated river silt of the centuries moved it one or two miles inland, it was the major Roman landing site for cargo boats. As we walk along Ostia’s main street, the Decumanus Maximus, our feet settle into deep ruts left by the four wheeled carts used to ferry merchandise and baggage between Rome and the port of Ostia.

We have to walk three miles to cross the ruins, the fantastic sculpture, mosaics and fabulous frescoes of this working class Roman port city. We pass through its forum, and its impressive pagan temples, right on through the ancient Marine Gate which once overlooked the harbor. Now, look straight ahead and there, closest to the sea wall, is the Synagogue. It was uncovered by archeologists only in 1961. The Synagogue of Ostia Antica is the oldest in Italy.

This Synagogue was built by refugees from the destroyed city of Jerusalem, those Jews whose eyes once beheld the majestic Temple of Herod, but who now work on barges plying the Tiber River. These Jews find comfort and strength here in one of the first post Second Temple synagogues of the Diaspora.

Earlier Jews arrived in 63 CE, deported as slaves by General Pompey. Others of these Ostian Jews had been redeemed by their kinsmen, their freedom bought from Roman owners who frankly found the Jews quite unfit as slaves because of their dietary requirements and their refusal to work on Shabbat.

Separate, purposely far apart from the work-a-day life, the brothels and pagan practices of the Roman populace of Ostia, these Jews gather in this Sacred Space to read their Torah which was kept in the handsome Ark surmounted by decorative columns which display engravings of the menorah, shofar, the lulav and etrog. (see the picture)

Believe it or not, on the Synagogue floor there is a mosaic plaque which reminds us 21 centuries later that – “Mindus Faustus constructed the Ark of the Sacred Law at his own expense.” Not a bad return on his investment! 21 centuries of recognition!

The Jews of Ostia Antica gathered here for communal meals, to bake their mitzvah in their Kosher oven, and to bathe in their mikvah. (There was a water collecting cistern). It is all there in that beautiful synagogue – the essential ingredients for Jewish survival in a perplexing and changing world we know as the Diaspora.

According to the Jewish agency there are 13.3 million people around the world who define themselves as Jewish and belong to no other faith.

There are 5.55 million Jews in Israel – 41.3% of World Jewry. And that means that 7.75 million Jews live in the Diaspora, with 5.3 million Jews in the U.S., followed by France, Canada, Britain, Russia, Argentina, Germany and Australia.

According to the study there is one Jew in Afghanistan! And you think you've got problems! I mean imagine how that fellow felt on the day of the roll call.

Clearly then dear friends, the fate of the Diaspora, the descendants of those Jews who built that synagogue on the far bank of Tiber River in Ostia, is destined to be told by the most numerous, best educated and most wealthy community outside of Israel – you, and me, our children and grandchildren and their children.

For all of our efforts and considerable investment, the Liberal Jewish Movement in Israel is still fighting an uphill, but determined battle to win the hearts and minds of fellow Israelis who have yet to grasp the majesty and dynamism of Reform Judaism.

Just the opposite is the case in our country of course. Reform Judaism is the largest denomination of affiliated American Judaism. The economic reversals and corresponding organizational and structural crises of this past year, notwithstanding Reform Judaism, continues to touch millions of hearts and souls, transforming lives for the better.

So you can imagine how surprised I was last May to read this prediction made by the distinguished Rabbi, Norman Lamm, the Chancellor of the Yeshiva University who stated in an interview:

“With a heavy heart we will soon say
Kaddish on the Reform and Conservative
movements. The future of American Jewry
is in the hands of Haredim and Modern Orthodox.”

And I say, God forbid! The distinguished American Jewish historian, Jonathan Sarna, replied to Dr. Lamm's prediction concluding:

“If anything, saying Kaddish for other religious movements has often been the first sign of a movement's own impending decline.”

In these years since Katrina our Jewish Federation has done an extraordinary job (professional and lay leaders) of renewing our Jewish Community in so many crucial areas.

I congratulate us all! But whenever I hear the strategic or future planners of our own New Orleans Federation placing as a top priority the securing of the Modern Orthodox in our New Orleans Jewish community, my determined response is “No, No, No, not unless you also assign equal priority to the support, the security and the continuance of Reform and Conservative Judaism as well.”

A few months ago one of this century’s most visionary and philanthropic Jews, Edgar Bronfman, came to our city. As so often happens, I was booked elsewhere on the night of his address, but our Temple President was kind enough to purchase a copy of Mr. Bronfman’s new book for me: *Hope, Not Fear: A Path to Jewish Renaissance*.

I sat down and read it right away and I have to tell you that 90 of his 222 pages were filled with passion, earnest creativity and inspiring snippets of his numerous interviews with many of the outstanding thinkers and academics of the Jewish world today. I reimbursed Jay for the \$24.95 plus tax, but you have no need to buy your own copy of Bronfman’s book, because I am going to tell you all the best parts of the 90 pages that are of interest. Here is his thesis with which I am 100% in agreement.

“What North American Jews need now is hope, not fear...We need to celebrate the joy in Judaism, even as we recognize our responsibility to alleviate suffering and to help heal a broken world.”

Bronfman calls for a Jewish renaissance, which means opening up new ways for us to connect to our proud tradition, its pains and its triumphs, and uncritically embrace one another, so that, as Bronfman puts it:

“We foster a flowering of a newly energetic Jewish life.”

He writes:

“One thing is perfectly clear: The only way Judaism will survive in the Diaspora is through Jewish education...We must help Jews, young and old, to build a sense of connection to the Jewish people. We must help them to understand the joy that can be found in Judaism,...”

Cognizant of post-Katrina realities of our New Orleans Jewish community, those with open eyes and brains that work quickly understand that collaboration is the operative word and the key to our New Orleans Jewish Community Renaissance.

And so Temple Sinai is the most dedicated to the Bagrut Program of creative Jewish education which brings together eighth and ninth grade students from Reform, Conservative and Orthodox congregations – north and south shore, riverside and lakeside, for study and learning but also for the opportunity to know one another. This innovative and unique program is made possible because of the generosity and strategic insight of the Goldring Family and we thank them most sincerely.

The spirit of cooperation and innovation continues every Wednesday with the Uptown Hebrew School.

Continuing this determination on the part of Temple Sinai's Clergy, Officers and Board, is the terribly exciting opportunity we have been granted by my brother, Dr. Stanley Cohn, and by our Past President Sandra Katz Levy and her children, Lauren and Jonathan, and by the Sherman Raphael Fund of our Temple's Brotherhood endowed by our beloved member Audrey Raphael. All of these wonderful people have enabled our Temple Sinai to now become the exclusive "home" of the nationally renowned, 92nd Street Y distinguished Lecture Series broadcast live throughout America by satellite.

There will be both a Fall and a Spring series and a new level of exciting Jewish lifelong learning is the undergirding theme of our efforts.

We have already begun our Introduction to Judaism Class which is open to every one of you on Sunday mornings from 9:15 to 10:30. You know you've always wanted to learn more and now there is a chair waiting with your name on it! We can squeeze a few more chairs into the Marion Steeg Library!

Yes, education is a crucial component of our Temple Sinai's 21st Century Jewish Renaissance but there's another component of arguably even greater importance: outreach.

II. OUTREACH TO INTERMARRIEDS

No congregation in all of America has a better track record on Outreach to Interfaith married couples than does Temple Sinai. I say this with complete assurance because you know that we are officiating at B'nai Mitzvah, confirmation and weddings of the children of interfaith married couples I first married when I came to this congregation 23 years ago.

We at Temple Sinai have never been hysterical, hostile or accusatory in our response to Interfaith marriage. Instead, Temple Sinai's clergy and Lay leadership have opened our doors with heartfelt welcome, anticipating by years the national Reform movement's programs with our own creative Temple Sinai study groups, chavurot, materials, counseling and family education.

I have never understood why an interfaith couple would even consider joining a synagogue whose rabbi would refuse to marry them on the Bema of that Temple. I have never understood

how, after that couple was married by a Christian priest or minister or even by a Justice of the peace, that same rabbi and congregation could summon the brazen Chutzpah to call the now newlyweds and invite them to pay membership dues.

In his book, Mr. Bronfman asks:

“...The real concern is not how we deal with intermarriage but how we create a Jewish community that is compelling enough and welcoming enough to make people commit to it.”

“Intermarriage doesn’t automatically mean I’m no longer a Jew! It’s more than possible to gain a Jew and, more important, another generation of Jewish children.”

Candidly, you know what we at Temple Sinai have not done however? We have failed to say “Thank you!”

You are each a crucial part of our Temple Sinai family, and not only do we rejoice in the love that you share with your Jewish partner, for those of you who are parents, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts and the depths of our souls, for the generous effort and selflessness which you display in raising your sons and daughters as Jews. Yours is a precious gift to the life of the Jewish People.

We respect and love you just as you are, and just as you work and lead our committees and Temple fundraisers, as you attend our worship, as you Pass the Torah to your children during B’nai Mitzvah ceremonies, and sit with justifiable pride when your spouse is installed as a Board member or as an Officer.

What needs to be said further is that the red carpet is already rolled out for you should you at sometime in the future, make the decision to become a Jew by Choice. Don’t imagine that you have never been asked whether or not you are so inclined. I am asking you right now! I am issuing that invitation to you right THIS MINUTE!

As I returned from my journey to the Synagogue of Ostia Antica, built by our Jewish brothers and sisters 2100 years ago, I marveled at their faith.

Many of them had seen the burning of the ancient Temple, the deaths of thousands, the destruction of Jerusalem. Pondering all of this, I remembered a story that my friend Dr. Neil Baum had shared with me many years ago.

It is the story of a man who was wandering in the desert and had been without water for many hours. He came upon an old fashioned pump with a handle and beside the pump there was a jar filled with water. As he started to pick up the jar to quench his thirst, he saw a sign which read:

“Use this water to prime the pump. After you have achieved the prime, refill the jar and leave it for the people behind you.”

The pump looked old and rusty. As a matter of fact, so old that it didn't look like it could even hold a prime. The man faced a crucial decision. He could take care of his needs and drink the water or he could believe the sign and prime the pump, trusting that there was water in the well and using it not only to quench his own thirst, but also to take care of those who would surely come behind him.

And there is the point of course. Ultimately, each one of us must decide as to the role we will play in the on-going journey of our Jewish faith. As sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah, and the countless ones who followed them throughout the ages, will our actions, our attitudes and our Jewish consciousness help to prime the pump for those who will follow us?

Or will we sit down, consume the water, slake our thirst and let the others manage for themselves?

Make no mistake!

Trusting enough to prime the pump is a mitzvah of faith! But such are the blessed ones who shall give birth to the future.

Amen!