



“LET’S GET SPIRITUAL, SPIRITUAL”



(This slide is on the screen as the sermon starts)

I know that if you're under 45 that reference goes right over your head. NO worries.

For the past 2 years, I've been studying with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. So, I feel like I should have an elevator speech about it.

Jewish spirituality is...

First let me tell you what it's not. Jewish spiritual life is not woo-woo, self-absorbed navel-gazing; It's not just for people who can cross their legs and put them behind their heads; It's not practiced alone on a mountaintop.

So now, Jewish Spirituality is...

Before I tell you, I love this 'test' I learned through psychologist and meditation teacher Tara Brach.

Spiritual Fitness

- If you can start the day without caffeine...
- If you can be cheerful, ignoring aches & pains,
- If you can resist complaining & boring other people with your troubles,
- If you can understand when loved ones are too busy to give you time,
- If you can overlook when people take things out on ...
- If you can take criticism & blame without resentment,
- If you can face the world without lies & deceit...
- If you can relax without liquor,
- If you can sleep without the aid of drugs...
- Then you are probably a dog.

But seriously, Jewish Spirituality is...

OH who am I kidding? I don't have an elevator speech for spirituality.

So let me tell you a story instead:

It might have happened thousands of years ago, or it might not have happened at all but it goes like this: a group of people made their way out of a living hell. They were miraculously freed of chains that bound them and they journeyed toward a different place, a better and sweeter and freer place. They wanted to make a beeline for the place, but their fears overwhelmed them and they just couldn't step into a whole, loving, peaceful existence, even though they ached to get there.

So they wandered around for a long time. They messed up over and over again. They got directions and sometimes followed them. They were taught lessons and sometimes listened. A bunch of times they thought they had the answer and then they found out that they didn't really. And life without chains turned out to be hard, really hard. There were lots of losses to grieve and there were frustrations and contradictions. They hurt each other and others hurt them.

And then at a certain point, they heard that if they constructed a building in just such a way, wholeness and peace would come and be with them and maybe they wouldn't feel so much fear and maybe they wouldn't hurt each other so much and maybe they wouldn't feel so broken when roadblocks and missed opportunities and other people disappointed them.

V'asu li mikdash v'shochanti b'tocham - if you will build me a mikdash, a sanctuary, I will dwell among them.

When Torah says "V'asu li mikdash v'shochanti b'tocham - Build me a sanctuary, so that I can dwell with them" it sounds like such a good idea. Those poor wandering people, so traumatized, so damaged, so human, wishing they could reach some place where the hard stuff of life would fall away and there would be just milk and honey... those people who are basically just us, they could build a building and that it would be the house of wholeness and peace - God's house. And all the struggles they had along the way would just disappear.

Unfortunately, human history and our lived experiences tell us that building a house for God isn't really the answer to all of our suffering. Don't get me wrong, synagogues are tremendously important - you won't hear me say otherwise. But...

The early Chasidic teachers knew that a physical building for God was only a piece of the puzzle and what happened inside each of us, in our lived experience was equally, if not more important. (hmm, maybe I'm getting closer to an elevator speech...) They taught that when we read in Torah about the mikdash, we should understand that it is a sanctuary we build in us and of us, our hearts, our minds, our bodies. We ARE the metaphorical but very real place where we can connect with God, (however we understand that deeply challenging word), that place where, when the struggles of life assail us, we can find solace and refuge and meaning because we know in a very deep way that we are not alone even if our conscious minds tell us otherwise.

Tara Brach puts it this way: "... We find refuge when we connect with the innate clarity and intelligence of our true nature...when I sense the silent, inner wakefulness that is here, I come home to a sense of wholeness. I'm at home in my body and heart, at home in the earth and with all beings. [truly being present] creates a boundless sanctuary (what we have called a mikdash) where there's room for everything in my life."

So, I think you're thinking, "Great, Rabbi, how do I do that?" And I'm going to give you a suggestion...in just a minute...because I want to offer you one more aspect to consider with this "I am the mikdash and the mikdash is me" idea.

Rabbi Sholom Berezovsky of Baranovitch taught that the Biblical mikdash was constructed to be portable. It was dismantled and reassembled each time the people moved. So, he says: "We put so much energy into building our own inner sanctuary/ mikdash, so that Shekinah (the intimate presence of God) might dwell in us - but then, after all this effort we make a mistake and the whole thing comes apart. When that happens, our job is to turn around, take heart, and set out to rebuild our spiritual home. Even if it comes apart again, we must build it once again... Whenever we fall, and our spiritual world collapses around us - which is like the dismantling of the mikdash - we must raise it up anew. ... (Netivot Shalom, Shemini, CLP3 Retreat 4)

So, lets do a little bit of building together. If you're willing,

Stand up and take your shoes off
Feel your feet, the way you connect to the ground, the earth
Imagine that your body could be a building, a spiritual home (we are actually built this way) to connect deeply with life

See if you can feel the support of your legs, as if they were the foundation, the floors that support your mikdash
Feel the sacred architecture of it
Stand nice and tall, lengthen your spine
Keep your knees bent and stay soft

Bring one hand to your heart and one to your belly
Feel the breath, literally the inspiration, the life, the neshama come in and flow out Take a few easy breaths there - what a gift that you don't even have to do anything

Now bring both hands, one on top of the other, to the center of your mikdash, your heart space
Feel the presence of love in the center this body, this existence
Imagine the ones who have loved you in your life and hold them here

From that center of your existence, open your windows, let some air and light in
Extend your arms
Reach up through crown of your head, let the sides of your neck be nice and long

Now stretch your arms up, and gently look up to the sky,
Take in the grandness, the vastness of eternity, the amazing possibility of all that is

See if you can find ease in that length,
If it feels good, make a gentle frame for your head by catching your elbows - because in that vastness, we humans need the stability of walls to help us feel safe

You can let your arms come back down to your sides

Close your eyes if that's comfortable and inhabit this house of your body
From the solid foundation of your legs, through the center of the home to the roof that extends into the vast realm of possibility

Now, we've learned that this mikdash comes down and has to be rebuilt over and over so..

Drop your chin to your chest
Slowly roll down, a third or a halfway down letting your arms hang heavy and
soften your knees so there's no strain
Inhale as you roll back up
Exhale to roll down
Inhale to roll back up
Do that a few times
This mikdash breaks down and we build it back up over and over
We break down because...life
We build back up because....life

Place your hands on heart or one on belly, acknowledging this sacred house
Its floors hold us up
Its walls give form to our souls and our spirits.
Its ceiling keeps us grounded and lets us reach toward eternity.
Its door lets us connect with other living beings
Its windows ensure that we won't stay wrapped up in our narrowness.

Finally, let's bring the inner vibration of our own mikdash to one another in a prayer of wholeness and of peace:
chant shalom x3

You can sit down.

That was just a nibble of one spiritual technology that is useful in making of ourselves and of our lives a mikdash. There are other technologies: prayer and song and meditation and Torah study and creativity of many kinds. If you're intrigued, there are great ways to learn right here where we live. We at BHC have a number of classes where we're exploring these ideas. The Soul Center is doing wonderful work; I am leading a spirituality and yoga journey to Israel in the spring with my friend and teacher Tami Jacobs; and you can learn online at Jewishspirituality.org where the teachers are deeply learned in Torah and in life.

Our tradition teaches that when we build and rebuild our mikdash within, our efforts naturally flow outward as well. This spiritual work matters not only because it will help us all lead more peacefully, less stressed out and materialistically, more balanced lives - wouldn't that be nice? It matters also because the verse says, V'asu li mikdsah v'shochanti b'tocham - make me a mikdash and I will dwell among them. It doesn't say that God will dwell in it, it says God will dwell among them. Maybe, just maybe, if we could live in this way, then we would make it possible for God to dwell among us. Maybe we could take kindness and compassion that we develop for ourselves and turn it outward to all the other living beings on the planet. Maybe our self-awareness would mean that we would do less unintentional harm in the world. And maybe we if truly connected our bodies, minds and souls we would learn the kind of wisdom that eludes us when we live from just one piece of our humanity. I have to believe that would be a world God would want to hang out in.

I'll close with this prayer written by Rabbi Naomi Levy until we gather again next Rosh Hashana Under the Stars: May you

break out of your narrow vision, your narrow arguments and resentments; May you enter the place where your soul dwells and respond with spaciousness to all that comes your way. May you forgive, repair, soften, see. May you open up. The gift of a great expanse is yours to have. It already resides within you. Amen.