Let Them Build Me a Sanctuary, That I Might Dwell Among Them
Seth Rosen, Yom Kippur, October 2008

I would like to begin by thanking Alan Septimus and the Ritual Committee for giving me the great honor of allowing me to stand here, to look out on this sacred community, and to speak to you.

I have, on several prior occasions, been blessed to stand before this congregation on Yom Kippur. For 7 years, as an officer of the congregation, I stood right about here, holding the Torah as Cantor Schiller led the congregation in the haunting Kol Nidre prayer. Those moments held, and continue to hold, great spiritual power for me – looking out at hundreds of members of this community, listening as our at first tentative voices join into one voice and fill this tent with the opening melodies of our Yom Kippur service. Over the last few months, as I anticipated standing here once again – I thought more and more about the power of those moments. Today, I would like share some of those thoughts with you -- about this day, about our coming together at this time and on this spot, about why I believe we are here, and some of the lessons that I believe this coming together is intended to teach us.

To begin, I have chosen a text that is not part of our Yom Kippur torah reading or liturgy, but is linked by midrash and rabbinic commentary to this day. In Exodus, Parshat T’rumah, immediately after the Israelites accept, and Moses consecrates, the covenant with God, God speaks to Moses and instructs him “Let them build me a sanctuary, that I might dwell among them.” It is a central moment in the Exodus story – the details that follow about the specifications for building the structure and the rituals to be observed there take up a full third of the Exodus text. It is undoubtedly meant to be taken as fundamental tenet of the relationship between God and Israel. My question for us today is, as modern Jews, as members of a community that is committed to the principles of Reconstructionist Judaism, as a congregation whose liturgy does not include prayers for the restoration of temple worship in Jerusalem, what exactly does it mean to “build a sanctuary” so that the spirit of God might dwell among us?

In some currents of our tradition, the link between God’s instruction to build a sanctuary and the observance of Yom Kippur is seen as quite literal. A 4th century midrash argues that the instruction to build the sanctuary was given on the 10th of Tishrei – on Yom Kippur. Drawing on this midrashic text, Rashi states categorically that this instruction was given after the sin of the golden calf – although that is not the order in which the story is told in Exodus: “The Torah does not necessarily follow chronological order,” Rashi writes, “The sin of the golden calf happened long before the command to construct the Mishkan...God was conciliated with Israel on Yom Kippur; and the following day they began collecting the voluntary donations for the Mishkan, which was finally erected on the first of Nissan.” In this tradition, the sanctuary is built as a symbol of the power of penitence, of atonement -- of Teshuvah -- and forgiveness – even after the sin of the golden calf, the sanctuary rises as confirmation of God’s presence in Israel’s
midst. In this covenantal relationship between the people and God, God will continue to dwell in the Israelite camp even after the people have so quickly fallen short of their promise to follow the commandments that they swore to obey at Sinai.

Our Torah reading today -- Parchat Achrai-Mot, Chapter 16 of Va-Yikra echoes the evocative power of this sanctuary as a symbol of the power of atonement and of God’s capacity to forgive. Aaron is instructed to enter the sanctuary, and in an awesome spectacle of fire and blood, incense and oxen and goats, to purify the sanctuary, and to perform acts of atonement for the transgressions and sins of the children of Israel. It is a solitary and awesome invocation of God’s power to forgive. We read in verse 17 that no other humans – not even the attending priests – are to be present in the holy sanctuary when Aaron enters to enact this ritual of atonement. “He, alone, is to affect atonement on behalf of himself, on behalf of his household, and on behalf of the whole assembly of the Israelites.” The parsha concludes with the instruction that this shall be a law for all time – that on the tenth day of the seventh month we must all, as members of the community of Israel – the native born and the sojourner in our midst – afflict ourselves and do no work – and the high priest must enter the sanctuary to perform these acts of atonement for the sins of the people.

It is quite a display. One can understand how generation upon generation of Jews have responded in a visceral way to the power of its imagery. On the tenth of Tishrei, God instructs the Israelites to create a holy sanctuary, as a symbol of God’s constancy in the face of our own capacity for sin and transgression, and then Aaron, and after Aaron and for all time, each holy priest who is anointed to follow in his place, is to enter this shrine on the 10th of Tishrei to enact an elaborate and violent ritual of atonement for the sins of the people.

I must confess, though, for all of the power of this imagery, this Torah reading has for a long time struck me as discordant with my own experience as a member of this community on Yom Kippur. Not just the absence of the goats and the oxen and the blood and the fire, of course (although that would be pretty cool), but in the contrast between the overwhelming isolation of the high priest’s Yom Kippur observance as described in Achrei Mot and the overwhelming feeling of community and connection that I described at the beginning of this talk. Certainly, there are evocations of the priestly ritual in our liturgy. In a short while, Cantor Schiller will begin the Musaf service by chanting the Hineni, a traditional confession of fallibility, recited as the cantor steps forward to seek forgiveness on her own behalf and on behalf of the community. She will chant the Alenu, and she will kneel and then touch her forehead to the ground in an act of humility and atonement for the community gathered behind her. These are powerful and beautiful moments that touch us and evoke the imagery of the ancient rituals described in the Torah reading.
With all respect, however, they do not, to my mind, capture the essence of what brings us here today or of the power of Yom Kippur. If we are swept away by the image of the solitary figure seeking forgiveness on behalf of the community, we are in serious danger of missing the mark. This is, after all, what is sometimes snidely referred to as the “annual convention of the Jewish people.” We all know what conventions are like. We spent half of August watching them on television. Our experience of Yom Kippur is not this haunting image of isolation – it’s more like a stadium full of people drawn from every walk of life, chanting rhythmically about their commitment to change. Our experience on Yom Kippur is perhaps more accurately captured, not by the Torah portion that we read, but by text that our Machzor offers as an alternative reading for Yom Kippur, and that we read together on the Shabbat just before Rosh Hashanah – from Nitzavin, Chapter 29 of D’Varim, Deuteronomy – “You stand here today, all of you, before the presence of your God, your leaders, your tribes, your elders and your officials every person of the people of Israel, your children, your spouses, and the sojourner in your midst, from your woodchopper to your water hauler, all of you, prepared to enter into covenant with the eternal, your god, into the oath that the eternal one establishes with you today.”

That’s our Yom Kippur. We are all present – no matter what the level of religious observance in our daily lives; no matter how often we come to shul during the year; whatever the personal basis is for our connection to Bet Am Shalom; whether we are active members of Bet Am Shalom on any other day -- we feel the need to be here today. And in the very best moments of the day we are all truly present for and with one another. We chant the Al Chait, “Al chait she-chatanu” – for the wrongs that we have done – Al chait she-chatanu -- over and again. “Ashamnu, Bawgadnu” we have acted wrongly, we have lied. Later, during Ne’ilah, we will chant these collective confessions again and we will sit in this tent as the darkness envelopes us. We will recall the vivid image of the gates closing, wishing each other one more year, one more opportunity to get things right.

This is a day of individual reflection and atonement – “at one ment” – but it is also overwhelmingly a day of community. In “A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice,” Rabbi Michael Strassfeld of our sister congregation, The Society for the Advancement of Judaism writes:

Central to the Yom Kippur liturgy is the frequent recitation of the confessional in which we list a whole variety of sins for which we are asking forgiveness. It is striking that the list of sins does not contain ritual sins. We do not ask forgiveness for not attending synagogue regularly or not keeping Shabbat, we confess for transgressions against the community and transgressions in our hearts. More striking still, the confessional is in the plural – yet, it is clear that none of us have committed all these sins. Why should we confess even to transgressions of which we are innocent?
First, the plural form reminds us that we are part of the community – simultaneously of our congregation and the people of Israel. We are responsible for one another, not just for ourselves alone. On Yom Kippur we stand together as a community of sinners, not just some righteous and some wicked. All of us recite the same list of sins. No one’s list is shorter than anyone else’s. Together we seek forgiveness and strive to change. Second, it is only as a community that we can affect the social changes necessary to better all our lives. Our concern on Yom Kippur is not just for the self. … Even though we spend hours looking inward [and] examining who we are, we cannot forget to look at the world around us. ”

Let's go back to the text with which I began. “Let them build me a sanctuary, that I might dwell among them.” As I mentioned, one midrashic interpretation, which was embraced in the Middle Ages by Rashi, is that the instruction to build the sanctuary was a reaction to the sin of the golden calf – an ever present symbol of God’s forgiveness and God’s commitment to the covenant. Another interpretation, embraced by the Rambam, is that the instruction to build the sanctuary was not a reaction, but was always intended as part of the natural order – God’s intent was always to dwell among us. The sanctuary is not intended as a reminder, or a threat, to keep us from sinning. Rather, the covenant that we enter into -- with God and with one another – is to bring God – to bring those qualities that we refer to a “godly” -- to bear on the world around us. To be the people who take on that work. After the formal establishment of the covenant, it was time for the people to get to work – to create an environment in which God’s presence could be made manifest on earth through the labors of the assembled community. In the 17th Century, Rabbi Avraham ben Mordecai Azulai wrote: “…it is obvious that God’s whole desire and longing is to cause the Shechinah [– the spirit of God —] to dwell in the world. And when Israel came to believe after they had made the calf that there could no longer be any indwelling of the Shechinah, they were then commanded with the work of the Tabernacle, and they knew that they had been forgiven.”

“You build me a Sanctuary, that I might dwell among them” God does not dwell in the sanctuary but among the people. “Let them build me a sanctuary” God is not in the sanctuary, but in the act of building. We are instructed to get to work, to strive, to work together toward the goal of making god’s presence manifest in the real world in which we live.

That, I believe, is the link between our Yom Kippur and the biblical instruction that is said to have been delivered on the first Yom Kippur. Despite all of our imperfections, all of our offenses and slights to one another, what we are really here for – not here in the cosmic sense but here in the here sitting in a tent on Soundview Avenue sense — is to join together, to strengthen one another, and get on with the work, which we can only accomplish together – the work of bringing those godly qualities-- justice and mercy, caring for the most vulnerable among us and protecting and restoring the natural world that is in our care – to bear in our mundane, imperfect world. If Aaron’s Yom Kippur ritual was to be a solitary act, the act of building the sanctuary...
must be performed by the entire community—each, according to his or her own ability, is instructed to contribute toward the building of a holy community and in the work of this world.

Yom Kippur teaches us that ultimately we must look beyond the human frailty of each individual, and find a way to become one community, united in our commitment to bettering the world. We read that in the Haftarah this morning: “Behold, you fast in strife and quarrelling, with a meanly clenched fist you strike. Today, you do not fast in such a way as to make your voice heard on high…Is not the fast that I desire the unlocking of chains of wickedness, the loosening of exploitation, the freeing of all those oppressed, the breaking of the yoke of servitude.”

This theme is reflected in the narrative arc of the Torah. We begin with Genesis, story after story of families torn apart by jealousies, suspicion and greed. Cain kills Abel; Noah’s son Ham is exiled; Abraham breaks with Lot; Lot’s family ends in ruin; Ishmael is exiled from Abraham’s house; Esau is tricked out of his birthright and the brothers Jacob and Esau are separated out of fear and anger until they reach a cold peace. The story ends only when what is seemingly the most dysfunctional family of all—the sons of Jacob—are reconciled with one another in Egypt. Reuven Kimmelman points out:

The Joseph story is exceptional in that it moves from fratricidal intent through reconciliation to fraternal solidarity. This family may again spawn conflict, but sibling rivalry can be surmounted by pangs of remorse, possibly by feelings of repentance, and even by guarded reconciliation at least long enough to hold them together to forge their divine mission. Since the family of Jacob is the only one in Genesis that remains fully intact, it merits becoming the people of Israel whose national history is related in Exodus. Their national is history is not one without conflict, competition or civil strife, but one which realizes that their covenant with destiny and common fate overrides any conflict of the moment.

Then we turn the page, and there is no path to glory—there arises in Egypt a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph—the descendents of Jacob are plunged into slavery and then liberated. They come out a band of semi-comical grumblers, plagued by fear, they don’t like the food, they don’t trust God or one another. The Exodus generation proves itself incapable of uniting to conquer the land they have been promised. First, they must learn to become a people. They must have the strength and cohesiveness to built the great nation they have been promised. After 40 years, a new generation grows to maturity and the day comes when Moses brings them to the edge of the wilderness, Joshua is anointed to lead them and….the Torah ends. We rewind the scroll and go back to an earth that is void and without form. The Torah doesn’t show us the payoff, the delivery on God’s promise to Abraham, so we go back and read the story of the struggle again.
The Torah is telling us that redemption is not in the achievement of some promised perfect world, but in the striving to reach it. In learning to find that common spark of humanity in one another, and joining together for the business of trying to facilitate God’s presence on earth. The achievement of some idealized perfect world is a dream; our real job is to find in and with one another the strength to take on the struggle.

We gather here on Yom Kippur, all of us, to review our failings, to get over them, and to renew our covenant with one another to get on with the task. It is important that we are all here. But it is by no means sufficient that we are all here. We must resolve to build and sustain our community, by reaching out to one another, sustaining one another, and affording to one another opportunities to learn and to perform acts of social justice and charity and building that will make our religious convictions a vehicle for improving the world.

It is, of course, overly simplistic, more than a tad pretentious -- and oh, so tempting -- to compare the construction of the Exodus sanctuary to the construction of the multi-purpose sanctuary that rises on the hill behind us -- and I think I should get some credit for resisting until now. So many of the people in this tent devoted so much of their time, their energy, their creativity, their skills -- and their money -- to its planning and construction - not compelled by a mysterious voice from beyond, but by our own conviction that this community needed to build for itself a spiritual home worthy of this wonderful congregation. We did it. It was in many ways exhausting. But we are not done. We have built -- a tool. A tool whose purpose is to help us create an environment in which the spirit of godliness can be brought into the world. The object of building a tool is not to have a tool, to admire how beautiful it is or even to talk about how it might have been built differently. The object of building a tool is to use it, to get on with the work that this tool makes possible. This day, this gathering of all of us together, reminds us how to do that work, and why. We must create an environment in which each of us can learn and grow and thrive - not as some idealized holy community, but as a community of real people with real flaws, who will fail to live each moment of each day to the highest of our ideals, who will miss the mark, and who, each year, will come together to face our failings, ask one another for forgiveness, and renew our covenant with one another. This day of renewal is not an end, but another tool - an opportunity to fortify one another so that we have the strength to reach out beyond ourselves, beyond our little old house in White Plains -- to fulfill our sacred obligation to strive for a more perfect world. We will not, of course, succeed. But God is in the striving. My wish for all of us is that we will gather again next year, reassess our failings, and renew our covenant to strive again. G’mar chatimah tovah.