

## **Adapted from Sermon, 1<sup>st</sup> day of Rosh HaShanah**

**1 Tishri 5766, October 4, 2005**

### **Rabbi Robert Scheinberg, United Synagogue of Hoboken**

During each of my sermons over these High Holidays, I will be making reference to some episode in the history of our congregation over the past 100 years. And I want to call your attention to something in this room that I have never seen in any other synagogue. It's a chart from the year 1914, hanging in the back of our sanctuary, of where the piles are - the wooden poles that were driven into the ground to support the building. The chart reflects that there were 168 of them.

That we have a piling plan, in and of itself is not surprising. But this is the most elaborately decorated piling plan any of us have ever seen. And most of these piles have names around them -- names of people who shared what they had with the community so that this building could be built. As my architectural consultant for these remarks, Russell Kriegel, explained to me, it's the piles that continue to support the weight of this entire building, and the weight of all of us right at this moment.

The piles are not the most glamorous part of a building. You can't see them, and unless you work in construction, you probably have never given them a moment's thought. And yet without them, the building would collapse.

There's a chart in the back of this room that shows that a group of people felt passionately enough about this building even before it was built, that they attached their names to pile #71. Or pile #124. In this centennial year, we're overflowing with gratitude to them. Because, you may not realize it, without these piles, the entire world would come crashing down. (Please note that Russell did not approve that last comment -- though he may agree with me by the time I am done.)

You think I'm overstating the case? Just listen on.

We had a baby naming here just last week, and something happened, that happens often here. One of the relatives, walked into the sanctuary, and just gasped. She said, "This is so beautiful. I haven't seen a synagogue like this since I lived in Brooklyn!" This is almost guaranteed to happen every time we have guests in the building. When you walk in to this sanctuary, you get an immediate sense of history, a connection with the American Jewish immigrant experience, and a connection back to Eastern Europe. It looks the way you might imagine a paradigmatic synagogue is supposed to look. It's one of the things that makes it such a privilege to be the rabbi here. I get to be present to hear those gasps, to hear those reminiscences. This is a quintessential sacred space. But that is NOT the reason that without the piles, the entire world would collapse.

It's been said that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is the one 20th century Jewish theologian who will still be remembered in 500 years. He was a rabbi, a poet, a descendant of a Hasidic family in Warsaw. Perhaps you've seen pictures of him with his wild, prophet-like hair, or heard of his deliberate and poetic manner of speech. The book that first got Americans to sit up and notice Rabbi Heschel was called "*The Sabbath*" -- and especially Heschel's ground-breaking idea in this book, an idea that many people had noticed, but that no one had thought to study in a systematic way. Simply put, Heschel wrote that Jews understand SPACE and TIME differently from just about every other culture in the world.

Picture the great temples of the Mayas and Incas; the great cathedrals of Europe; the temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and others. These are all 'sacred spaces,' or 'holy spaces.' These are places where God is deemed to dwell. If you want to experience God's presence, that's where you should go -- to one of those 'sacred spaces.' And Jews, too, have our share of these places. The Western Wall. The Land of Israel.

Cemeteries. Synagogues. All these places are holy and sacred. But if you look in the Torah, you see, perhaps surprisingly, that SPACE is not the first thing that gets made holy. What is the first time that the concept of 'holiness' or 'sacredness' is introduced in the Torah? "And God blessed the seventh day, and made it holy." (Genesis 2) What gets sanctified first, and most, in Judaism is not space, but TIME. We have our holy buildings, holy places, but our distinctive innovation in the world is the holy hours, and holy days. Heschel refers to Judaism as a "religion of time," aiming at the 'sanctification of time.'" Whereas other nations invested their best creative

energy in holy cathedrals, holy temples, and holy shrines, Judaism built the Sabbath, and the Jewish holiday cycle, which Heschel describes as “cathedrals in time.”

In Jewish tradition, if you want to sense God’s presence, the question is not: what PLACE can you go to to meet God. Rather, the question is: what TIME can you focus yourself, so God will meet you. It could be a special time of day, like a sunrise or sunset. It could be a special time of week - like Shabbat. It could be a special time of year - like a particular holiday, or season of the year. Or it could be a special time of one’s life, like the moment of marriage, or the moment of childbirth. Or a moment of illness. Or -- it could be just ANY moment - that we are able to free ourselves from distractions and experience God’s presence.

If you know Jewish history, it’s not so surprising that we tended to build our greatest cathedrals in time, rather than in space. What are the things you need if you’re going to build Chartres Cathedral, for example? First of all, you need to own land. Second, you need a group of people who can stay in the same place for over a hundred years, so the building takes shape gradually, with generations of people working on it. So is it any surprise that Jews didn’t build cathedrals?!

So what did we build instead? Some of you who were here last Yom Kippur may remember that I translated the words and abbreviations that the founders of this congregation decided to put on the facade of the building. The facade reads, “*kuf - kuf - kochav yisrael.*” *Kochav yisrael* means ‘Star of Israel,’ which was the original name of the synagogue; but the ‘*kuf*’ ‘*kuf*’ is an abbreviation, meaning ‘*kehillah kedosha,*’ ‘holy community.’ Instead of cathedrals, that’s what we built. Holy communities.

You walk into a cathedral, and the holiness of the STRUCTURE is overwhelming. You walk into a *Kehillah Kedoshah* - and the holiness of the COMMUNITY is what’s overwhelming.

It’s a place for the community to come together, and to commemorate sacred moments together. It’s a place to engage in sacred activities together. Activities like prayer. Study. Celebration. Mourning. Hospitality. Acts of *Chesed* - acts of loving kindness. And since God dwells in moments, God dwells in the *kehillah kedoshah* to the extent that Godly things are happening there.

I think of Heschel’s comments on sacred places and sacred moments because we are at a very interesting crossroads this year at the United Synagogue of Hoboken. On the one hand, as a culmination of our centennial year, we are embarking on the most extensive renovation of our building since its founding. Our building is our treasure, our legacy that we have received from prior generations, and we are investing much time and effort and funds to restore it and to beautify it. In the future, that is what we will think about when we look back on the Jewish year 5766 in this community. And at the same time, when we look back on this coming year, we will remember this as the year of Exile - the year when, because of the length of time necessary for the renovations, we will be spending several months worshipping elsewhere, whether in the Social Hall, or in rented space, or most likely in some combination of the two. This makes us especially attuned to what makes a space ‘sacred.’

The most important Jewish “sacred space” in our history was the Temple that stood in Jerusalem for hundreds of years, and was destroyed about two thousand years ago. The Temple was built directly on bedrock, so there was a large rock that supported the weight of the Temple. The sages of our tradition were bold enough to give this rock the name “*Even Shetiyah,*” which means “foundation stone.” By which they meant: “This rock doesn’t only bear the weight of the Temple. In fact, it bears the weight of the entire world.”

The architectural engineers among us might regard that as a dubious claim. But it’s not an engineering claim. It’s a values claim. Because you have to look at the values, the teachings, the way of life that emanated from that spot. And you can understand how they could believe that there was one spot that supported the whole world.

I have made a claim today that is just as bold. Those founders of this community, who dedicated those piles, understood that upon those piles rested the entire weight of this building, and the weight of everything that happens here. But that’s only the beginning. Because those piles support far more weight than that.

Years ago, a man named Samuel Zucker endowed pile #124. And what does pile #124 support? Picture a man and woman who met in this synagogue, several years ago. They fall in love. They get married. They move away from Hoboken and become leaders in another synagogue. They try to export some of the qualities they loved most about this synagogue - how comfortable it is. How welcoming and embracing. How inviting of communal participation.

They are now raising two beautiful children to be proud of their Jewish identity. The four of them, their Jewish home, even their new synagogue, are all resting, in part, on pile #124.

So let me tell you about pile #42, endowed by Mrs. Julia Eichler. Picture a child at age 13, standing up here, reaching the age of mitzvot, and reading from the Torah for the first time. She decides that her first act as a Jewish adult should be the quintessentially Jewish adult act of giving tzedakah. Not just dropping coins in the tzedakah box like kids do, but writing a pretty generous check - to an organization that provides meals for destitute Ethiopian children awaiting immigration to Israel. The entire building in Ethiopia where those children live is supported by pile #42. As is every FUTURE act of Tzedakah that this girl will perform throughout her life.

Picture a group of volunteers, getting up extra-early on a Sunday morning, trudging over to Newark to build a home, with Habitat for Humanity. That home rests not only on its own piles, but on ours.

Picture 20 people gathered together in a Hoboken apartment for a communal Shabbat dinner, or havdalah, as happens several times a month in our community. The gathering is not in our building, but it rests on our piles.

A homebound elderly woman receives a visit from a synagogue volunteer who checks in with her on regular intervals. A pre-school family decides to experiment with lighting Shabbat candles at home. A man decides that he's going to study the weekly torah portion on a regular basis. A woman in a hospital takes solace in knowing that she's included in our Prayers for the Sick. A family experiences the outpouring of love and support and healing that characterizes a communal response to a funeral and Shiva. A young couple finds solace and rest and community in weekly Shabbat services. I deliver a contribution of funds to help the Jewish pre-school in Odessa, in Ukraine, to do a similar job of enhancing Jewish identity as we are doing here.

These events take place around the world - but our piles bear their weight. Like the ripples created when we cast a stone in the water, everything we do within this building has effects that travel throughout the world. There is SO MUCH resting on what we accomplish here. And THIS is why I can claim that without our piles, the world would collapse.

The leaders of this community reflected true genius, I feel, when they chose, as the logo for our centennial, the image of the open doors of our synagogue building. Of course, the open doors remind us of our reputation as a friendly community, where everyone is welcome. But they also remind us that the *Kehillah Kedoshah* functions on both sides of our front door. Our doors are open, so people feel welcome to enter. But our doors are also open, to encourage us to leave - and to use what we have learned here, to transform the world. Because the purpose of a sacred space is to inspire us to go out and sanctify time. Perhaps this is a meaning of the verse from the Shema, when we say *be-shivtecha be-veitecha uv'lechtecha va-derech*. "You shall speak words of torah, both when you sit in your home, and when you walk out on the road." Our building is rightly our focus. But the truest test of a *Kehillah Kedoshah* is what people are inspired to do outside of its doors.

Let me conclude with one more story that helps us understand our identity as a synagogue community. It's a story from the horrors of Hurricane Katrina. It happens that the Episcopal Church in Gulfport, Mississippi was right on the beach - a picturesque, colonial-style church facing the Gulf of Mexico, almost as old as this building. You can see photos on the web; it's like the entire church just vanished from its site. The only thing left is the slab on which the church once stood.

Well, the worshippers at St Mark's Church in Gulfport gathered together on the Sunday after the hurricane - right on the slab. And the pastor, who started there in 1969 and has been there for his entire career, is speaking. And he tells them to look around themselves. To look in their mind's eye, and to picture a white wood frame building, with green shutters - red carpet inside, white colonial pews and red velvet seats. And you hear his voice starting to break as he's picturing this building that has been lost forever. And then he says - "That's NOT St. Mark's Church But look beside you. Those people all around you - covered with mud, arms around each other, that's St. Mark's Church."

I would modify this story slightly for our congregation. Picture a traditional Eastern European synagogue building, with a magnificent wooden ark and two onion domes. (And a very perplexing eagle!) That is PART of the United Synagogue of Hoboken.

Now fill that building with people, with relationships, with holy moments, with mitzvot. Fill it to overflowing, so those relationships, those holy moments, and those mitzvot spread throughout the world. THAT'S the United Synagogue of Hoboken.

Happy birthday. And in the coming new year, may your home, and your year, be overflowing with holy moments.