

Everybody, check out your seat; How's the climate ? Do you know your neighbors, and do you like them? How's the lighting, proximity to the exit? My guess is that by now you've probably gotten the High Holiday seat-preference email; it's an old favorite that I enjoy receiving during this season; there are choices regarding the specific type of gossip you enjoy sharing, which free professional advice you're searching for, sleeping needs, or I-phone check-in needs - especially during the sermon, and, one of my favorites, which people you absolutely cannot sit near. Tonight is about seating. It really is an important subject. After all, one of God's most important names is המקום, literally, The Place.

I've been rereading a powerful collection of essays penned some twenty years ago by Rabbi Harold Schulweis. He claimed that our tradition wasn't quite as invested in sacred space as other faiths. True, we can point to the Temple Mount and to the Western Wall, or to the meeting hall in Tel Aviv where the Israel declaration its independence. Yes, Jews have built ornate synagogues and majestic cemeteries through the centuries. But we generally avoided elaborate shrines or statues; after all, God has no physical form. And the Psalmist declared: **the whole earth**: Mountains, valleys, wealthy neighborhoods, ramshackle hovels, sinners, saints, everyone we meet at work or at the movies or the restaurant or the hospital or grocery store - מלא כל הארץ כבודו - **everyplace and everyone** is filled with God's glory; everything resides in המקום, The Place.

So many centuries bear witness to the tragic legacy of human lust for planting the flag on new territory mixing with the desire for calling one plot of land or another "holy." Worshippers from rival sects blowing up each other's holy places, attacking each other at funerals or on sacred pilgrimage during sacred days. A midrash suggests that the fatal encounter between Cain and Abel began with an argument about the site of the future Holy Temple. Even though the whole world was theirs to share, each one insisted: I want the Temple built on **my** property. The moral: Better to reject sacred geography in favor of global sacredness.

It's a powerful argument, but allow me to offer another take on sacred space. You notice each High Holiday season, how people at shul drape their talitot over several chairs? People really do have an attachment to certain seats. Why? It's about **emotional geography**.

Each seat in our shul is a witness to the stories of our shul. We know who sits here, or who used to sit there, and who moved away, or who is no longer with us. Those of you who davened at the old shul building can probably recall **those** seats and the stories **they** could tell. If we bring to mind the chairs in our home, the sofa, the rocking chair, the recliner, the stories of family and friends, their words, their tears, their smiles, their spirits - **it all can come back to you in a flash** - so, don't let anybody tell you that seats are unimportant.

OK, to tell you the truth, tonight isn't only about seating. Chairs were idea #1, which takes us to Idea #2: where you are is not only about location.

If you ask me tonight where a particular congregant is, I could reply, "she's sitting in that seat in the sixth row," or "he's roaming the hallways, skipping the sermon this year." The seat could signify location, but the seat is not really enough to tell us **where someone is**. Back in the Garden of Eden, God asks an emotionally charged one-word question of Adam: **אײן** - **where are you?** Adam told God that he was afraid and that he was hiding. Adam didn't understand the question. Tonight, that same question, Where are You, is addressed to each of us, and God isn't asking us to produce our photo ID, dues statement, or proof of citizenship. As far as our sacred story goes, it's safe to guess that God had the seating chart for the Garden of Eden, and that God wasn't fooled by Adam hiding in the bushes. In our High Holy Day prayers, we acknowledge that God knows the ins and outs of every creature, large and small.

Where are You - **אײן** - is really God is asking us **who** we are and **what we're doing here**, as in, "what are you doing with your life?". These are key questions for Yom Kippur, the Day we imagine God deciding which names to write into the Book of Life or into the Book of Death.

Who are we and what we doing here? Those questions are answered - **sort of** - whenever I check up on people and stories in the great Book of Face. This book may not quite equal the range of humanity logged into the Heavenly books, but it sure is one busy chatty place. In the Book of Face, lots of people are constantly updating their status and various friends around them give them a thumbs up. So many lives are being chronicled, some of them in stunningly minute detail. There are photographs and video-clips, comments about television and movies and people's instant reactions to their just having eaten breakfast, lunch or dinner - along with various opinions about the food or drink; someone's taking a nap or going fishing, or complaining about the weather, or being bored; there's chat about new shoes and football games and music and politics, and there are virtual hugs, along with a lot of things that will remain far beyond my understanding. But even with all the new friends I find, with all those who find me, even with all the accumulated details of where, who, how much, how sweet, how cute, how rotten, how boring, even with all the recipes, the trivia, and the smiley faces, the deeper question remains: Who are You and What is Your Life **really** about?

We're approaching the homestretch: **"Where am I?"** - which is a question of meaning, a question of purpose that is posed to each us. Our prayers are voiced in the plural, and we have coaches and friends, but each of us has a moment when we realize that we face this examination alone. Yom Kippur adds urgency to this question of Who am I. **Life is short, and it is not wise to put off the question. מה אני ? What is my life all about?** For some, the answer is: I fulfill God's Will by mastering each ritual. I know who I am and where I am going. This approach is tempting, **but it fails to reach the core.** The law says that I may not eat an egg in which there was a speck of blood. The 19th Century teacher of morals and ethics, Rabbi Israel Salanter said: the law is about much more than eggs. If I take money that is tainted with the blood of exploitation - isn't that treif? It is prohibited to swallow an insect.

And what if I swallow another human being with my envious, jealous eyes; isn't that treif? Why should we fast - which is about softening our hearts - if we can't stop putting other people down? What's the point of shabbos candles if our homes remain dark with strife? What good is davening if we become so self-absorbed that we can't hear someone else crying out?

Before reciting the Motzi, the ritual is to pour a cup of water over each hand. Some people like to pour the water three times over each hand. Salanter would take just a few drops of water and put them on the tips of his fingers. His congregation asked: why don't you pour the cup of water like everybody else does? He replied: "did you see the maidservant over there? She carries the water from the well, two large buckets at a time in a yolk on her back. **I don't want to earn my mitzvot on her shoulders.** So...rituals add something important. But **the core** is about mensch-craft, it is about rachmones-compassion, it is about sweetness, about loving, it is about dignity, and about caring, it is about comforting those who grieve, about making that minyan that a mourner needs; it is about the blankets Gabi Stein is encouraging us to make for people who need them, it is about rebuilding the Coleman playground; it is about lifting up the lives of the women who make the beautiful crafts that Susan Moinester sells, it is about mentoring children who need our guidance, and it is about caring for lonely animals at the shelter. It is about גמילות חסדים. There are acts of kindness for which Jewish law gives no minimum or maximum, no time frame, not even a blessing. God created our world without a ברכה, and these acts of kindness need no ברכה because they create new worlds of possibility.

Yes, my words tonight were about seating. **Where are you?** From where you sit, how do you take in the big picture? What is this short and fragile life about? How will you approach the new year's blank pages which await your words and deeds? **How will you update your profile?** Your seat preference, your perspective makes all the difference in the world. שנה טובה ומתוקה - a good, sweet year.

