

On the altar of Broadway
by Rabbi Lisa Edwards
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One of our friends managed recently to get front row center seats to see Patti Lupone in Gypsy on Broadway. He was thrilled, and couldn't believe his good luck in scoring the tickets he got. A few days later he discovered why those tickets were available – they're for ...tonight! – Kol Nidre.

"I don't know why it didn't occur to me to look at the Jewish calendar when I was picking dates," he said.

I laughed, "so are you trading them in for a different night?" I asked. Assuming he would, I was about to tell him the dates for Sukkot and Simchat Torah, just to avoid further conflict, when he said,

"How could I? They're fabulous seats!"

I must have raised my eyebrows,

"What can I say?" he said to me, shrugging his shoulders, "I worship at the altar of Broadway."

"Hey," I said kissing him on the cheek, "I can think of worse altars to worship at."

He's not, after all, the first Jew (nor the last I suspect) to worship at the altar of Broadway. Do you remember that story that was circulating back when the musical THE PRODUCERS was impossible to get seats for?

One Wednesday matinee Mrs. Goldberg showed up by herself with two front row tickets. When the man sitting on the other side of her saw the empty seat, he expressed surprise. "My husband and I bought these seats well over a year ago," she explained, "to celebrate our 50th anniversary which is today."

"Mazel tov!" said her new friend, "so where's your husband?"

She sighed, "Sol died before we could celebrate."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said the man, "but couldn't you get any of your friends to come with you so you wouldn't be alone?"

"I tried," she said sadly, "but they're all at Sol's funeral."

Some people swear that story is also true, although I changed her name to protect the innocent. But kind of like the Bible, does it really matter whether it really happened or not? Just because it might be fiction doesn't mean it isn't true.

Oh stop looking around to see who isn't here – they're not all at Gypsy (or are they?), but really that one is a true story.

And I tell it to you for a couple of reasons – first, because I thought it was funny, and I thought we could all use a good laugh – it is Yom Kippur after all.

And then because it made me think: who's to say what will move a person closer to God, what will move us to become a better person? Believe me, I don't mean to encourage you

not to attend Kol Nidre, and after hearing Juval, aren't you glad you did come here tonight? But do we always know what place we ought to be in at any given time? Or what place will get us to the next right place for us?

Nobody more than I wants this place and this service to be the right place for you tonight. [Well, okay maybe Brett does, and maybe Juval and Joe and Fran and the choir and Felicia and the Board of BCC and Josh who's making an appeal a little later tonight...don't you just feel so wanted right now?]

But Yom Kippur in general and Kol Nidre in particular is such a tenuous time for so many of us. I spend so much time during the year compiling – not stories to tell you here – but gathering a sense of what people are facing in their lives – the good and the not so good – what people long for – again good and bad.

And even if you didn't talk to me, but I hope you will, we all read the papers and listen to NPR and listen to the debates and hear the icky new anti-same-sex marriage ads and check our accounts and go to the doctor (or don't do those things because we're afraid). We'd have to be living somewhere very far away from here not to know there are new waves and kinds of anxiety in our midst tonight and in the world.

So how do we help one another with that? How do we make this place and this time and these services and this community a kind of altar -not for us to worship them as if they were gods, but an altar – a sacred place – that you come to in order to find God?

Jewish tradition has a rather mixed history on how to find God, where to find God. While there are clearly places in which our people met with God – at Mt. Moriah, at the burning bush, at Mt. Sinai, at the Temple in Jerusalem, to name but a few important ones, except for a relatively few Jews around today, we mostly don't obsess about those locations – even about knowing where they are let alone say, re-building a Temple in Jerusalem.

We could talk another time about who wants to build what where, or at least have access, or about what happened where and to whom, but for right now suffice it to say not a lot of Jewish energy is invested in trying to discern which mountain is Sinai, or in making pilgrimages there. In the Reform Torah commentary, for example, the map of the Sinai wilderness offers something like 8 different possible locations for Mt. Sinai – that vitally important place where God presented us – twice – with the 10 commandments written in stone.

And one answer to why Jews don't seek out these actual “sacred places” more seems to be because we worship God, not places. We don't want to turn a mountain into an object of worship.

Of course, that doesn't mean we don't want meaningful locations for worship and community, and creating beautiful places of prayer is part of what Jews do. We do that here in this sanctuary on the Days of Awe, and at our home at 6000 W. Pico Blvd. the rest of the year. And if all goes well with escrow, we'll be doing that soon to our new building at 6090

W. Pico. These buildings may not have the history or the grandeur or the location of the Kotel or the Dome of the Rock, but neither do they have the difficulties that conflicting histories bring. Very few Jews in the world today truly seek the re-building of the Temple in Jerusalem. Instead, for many generations already Jews congregate in many small buildings that house not altars for sacrifice, but people gathering for prayer, for study, and to engage in tikkun olam – repair of the world. It will indeed be exciting to see what kind of lovely new home we'll create for ourselves, and how the architecture of it will inspire us in our prayer, our learning, the educating of our children, and the building of a better world.

Judaism also constructed what Abraham Joshua Heschel called “a sanctuary in time,” structuring Shabbat and the Holy Days as though creating beautiful architectural works, but more permanent even than the most solid of physical structures. We need only note that Solomon's Temple no longer exists, but the holy days observed therein remain solid and powerful and help protect and provide shelter for the Jewish people. These Days of Awe, for example, are constructed as a full life lived in only 10 days. On Rosh Hashanah we talked about how the liturgy and symbolism of that day point toward conception and birth, including the shofar at times sounding like a woman in labor, followed by the cries of a newborn baby. Each Rosh Hashanah we are born full grown, as were Adam and Eve, and because we are doing tshuvah -- repairing our misdeeds, turning down the right path -- we live the week between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur becoming the best possible people we can be. Then we arrive at tonight and tomorrow, when the symbolism changes from birth to death: we wear white like the angels, or a kittel – the same garment in which Jews are traditionally buried. Like dead people, we don't eat or drink or wash or make love or wear shoes – we focus all day on meeting our Maker and facing judgment. And at the end of the day tomorrow we'll hear one long blast from the shofar – the sound most like the birth cry of a baby – thus signaling that at the end of Yom Kippur we are re-born: once more pure and innocent, at least until we walk out into the world again.

Perhaps in part to move us away from fanaticism about the worship of place, the midrash and Talmud centuries ago adopted the Hebrew noun hamakom – meaning, the place – into one of the names for God. Psalm 90, the only psalm whose authorship is attributed to Moses, begins with a synonym for hamakom – Mavon – N/[m Adonai, You have been our dwelling place in all generations Adonai mavon atah hayita lanu b'dor va-dor [Psalm 90:1]. In the Torah story Jews read every year on second day Rosh Hashanah [Genesis 22] Abraham, on the third day of walking toward Mt. Moriah, watching for God to show him where to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, lifts his eyes and, says the Torah, “sees the place from afar,” va-yar et ha-makom mei-rakhok [22:4], instead of “the place,” midrash reads, Abraham saw God from afar. We're left to wonder: does God seem distant because of the fearsome assignment to sacrifice Isaac, or does Abraham, seeing God even if from afar, perhaps feel encouraged and thus keep walking toward the Holy One?

At BCC we're most familiar with hamakom as a name for God in the verse Jews use to welcome mourners into the congregation: Hamakom yinakhem etkhem... Hamakom - may the Source of Life comfort you, we say in our translation, but more literally, May THE

PLACE comfort you. Does it seem odd to use that name for God when comforting a mourner? Why not El rachum v'chanun – the Compassionate One, the Comforter?

Can you find, for a moment right now, the feeling you've had when someone close to you died or broke up with you and left, or maybe just moved away? Or if you yourself have encountered a life threatening situation? Or the way you're feeling as you grow older, many friends die, and your life constricts, or the way you feel when you hear the economic reports lately and worry about your financial obligations and your financial security, or the security of your parents or children or friends or fellow congregants.

In such unsettling circumstances, we can feel as if we're losing our place in the world. I hear it from so many of you. It's easy to become confused – who am I? where do I belong now? Where is the source of our strength now? When we lose our moorings – people who know us well, or who knew us when, or when we lose our health or our wealth, or our strength, or our security -- our identity can be up for grabs, and we seem to float unanchored through space. Someone described it recently as feeling like he's living someone else's life. This can't be happening to me.

In these times of free fall, when we pray to God, looking to become anchored again, if the name for God we use is Hamakom – the place – perhaps it could help us begin to feel a foundation starting to form under us again. When Moses, having shattered the first set of tablets, comes up on Mt. Sinai for the second time. Could you imagine a shakier time than that one for Moses or the people waiting down below? Perhaps even verging on panic, Moses begs God to say more, to reveal more, hareini na et k'vodecha – show me PLEASE - Your glory (your essence) [33:18]. What a big change from the Moses who met God at the burning bush and hid his face, “afraid of looking at God.” And God replies immediately (a bit cryptically) but comfortingly too, “I shall have all my good pass before you...” [33:19]

And then God says, “Behold there is a place with me Hineh makom iti yTiai מ/qm; hNEhi [Exodus 33:21] and God invites Moses to stand on a rock, saying, “And I will place you in a cleft in the rock and shield you with my hand.” In that safe place on the mountain Moses gained a more certain knowledge of God, and with it the strength and the confidence to continue the journey with his people.

If “God is our dwelling place,” as the psalm [90] says, this image of standing in the cleft of a rock shielded by God's hand might bring us also to a renewed sense of strength and comfort and confidence and knowledge of God. Slowly you might come to know your place again: protected by the hand of God as you stand in this safe cranny of a mountain. Take a moment to picture yourself there, in that place with God. Hineh makom iti yTiai מ/qm; hNEhi [Exodus 33:21] Here is a place beside Me.

Do you know the story of the movie, “The Jazz Singer”? The 1927 version was one of the very first movies with sound. Starring Al Jolson as Jakie Rabinowitz, who changes his name to Jack Robin, and chooses not to become the 6th generation of cantor in his family, becoming instead a jazz singer and a stage actor. Toward the end of the film, his father, the Cantor, takes ill, and Jack must decide whether to miss his Broadway debut and return home to sing Kol Nidre for the congregation he grew up in. He does --- but only that once,

and Jack's success on Broadway is delayed only one night.
Sigh, instead of a talkie, they might have called it a weepie!
I'll bet there are some tears being shed at "Gypsy" tonight.
The opening frame of the Jazz Singer reads,
"In every living soul, a spirit cries for expression - - perhaps this plaintive, wailing song of
Jazz is, after all, the misunderstood utterance of a prayer."
If I were writing that line I'd delete the word, "misunderstood."

A rebbe asked his students, "where is God?" and the students replied, "Isn't God everywhere?"
"No," said the rebbe, "God is wherever you let God in."
It's said that on Rosh Hashanah the Gates of Heaven open, ready to receive our prayers of reconciliation and resolution, and that the Gates remain open until the end of the day tomorrow. The name of the closing service of Yom Kippur – Neilah – means "closing."
Since closure is seldom easy, some of our sages say the gates remain just a little bit ajar until the end of Sukkot/Shemini Atzeret – you get an extra 13 days or so!
And yet another Jewish teaching says that any time of any day of any year, our tears can unlock those gates, and open them wide enough for our prayers to reach Hamakom – the Holy One, and when they do, perhaps we'll hear the words that Moses heard as he made his way to that safe place in the mountain.
Hineh makom iti yTiai μ/qm; hNEhi [Exodus 33:21] Look, says God, here is your place with Me.

In these times of uncertainty, in this wobbly time, may we find our place here in community, with God's presence, Hamakom, filling the empty chair beside us.

G'mar chatimah tovah – may we be sealed for good in the Book of Life