

Rabbi Lisa Edwards “The World Outside”

Parashat Tazria

April 1, 2011 Shabbat Hachodesh

2nd to last Shabbat in 6000 W. Pico

I’ve been feeling a bit anxious lately. I wonder why? Maybe it’s the absence of the stained glass windows here – Even though I *knew* they’d be going -- that’s different from actually having them be gone. I know where they are, so that’s good.

Oh, I know there are some advantages to their absence. One is just an exciting reminder that we’ll soon be in our new building -- reunited with our beloved windows, created by artists who are members of our own community. And not only will we be reunited with the art we’ve come to love here through the years, we’ll also soon be in the company of new art – which artists from our own community helped build. It’s thrilling. The new building is thrilling.

Do you know that Jewish tradition suggests sanctuaries are always supposed to have windows? It derives, we think, from a passage of Talmud (Brachot 31a) in which Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba said, “A person should always pray in a house with windows, as it says (and now it quotes from the Book of Daniel), ‘Now his windows were open,’” [Daniel 6:11].

Does anyone here remember where that passage is found? It’s in The Book of Daniel – and is said about Daniel, that “he went into his house – and his windows were open in his upper chamber toward Jerusalem, and ...he prayed and gave thanks before God” (Daniel 6:11). What’s interesting about this passage? Anyone?

So Daniel was at home, not at synagogue. And his window was open, yet the tradition is not necessarily that the windows in the synagogue open. Facing Jerusalem (hence we face East).

What happens next in the Daniel story?

Possibly because they heard him praying through the open window, men came and said, don’t you know the king has signed an interdiction forbidding anyone from making a petition to any god or man, save the King? Yes, I know, says Daniel. So what do they do to him? Throw him into the lions’ den.

OY! Are we sure this is the example we want to follow?

Just last night Davi and I were here working late – after Torah study – on the revisions for our “interim” prayerbook at the new building. As often happens somebody came by and pulled at the front door. We keep it locked, but it’s always a little unsettling when strangers try to open our doors at 10pm. Somehow we could tell they were young men, and then somehow we realized they were students from the Orthodox yeshiva at the end of our block. You’ve noticed that place right? The students are very visible in our neighborhood – they shoot baskets in the back alley; they go get snacks --where – at 7-11 I think (special kosher snacks there I guess)! They get dropped off and picked up and drive their own cars to school. And lately they seem more interested than they used to in our building. Anyone know why? Because they bought it!

So last night, after they tried the locked door they walked over to the windows here and – you know how the street is much lower than the floor here? – they started jumping up to look in the newly exposed windows! Davi and I laughed and waved as their faces started appearing for a few seconds each in the windows all along here! It

looked really funny, and by the time we walked over to the windows to try to invite them in to see their new place, they were gone.

They seemed excited though – and I knew how they felt – given how excited I am about our new building! (I keep trying to look in the windows over at 6090 too).

Our new sanctuary will follow the tradition of windows in a synagogue/sanctuary – our stained glass windows will indeed again be prominently part of our new sanctuary, we’ll have a skylight overhead, and in addition we will have a window – not one that opens, but one that will allow us to look out from the sanctuary onto that corner of Alvira St. and Pico Blvd. The shades will obscure the view for “lookers in,” I’m told, but we’ll be able to see out.

“The windows in the synagogue,” said Rav Kook [1st Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of pre-State Israel], “are to teach us that during our prayers we must be aware of the outside world. A Jew must not withdraw from the world and pray only for his own needs.”¹

The windows here exposed as they are right now, remind me of Rav Kook’s teaching. Presumably so will the window at the back (the west side) of the new sanctuary.

In this week’s Torah portion, Tazria, as well as in next week’s, we read of a different kind of exposure to the people around us. The portions are filled with gritty descriptions of skin eruptions, bodily secretions, and other distressing disruptions to everyday life. Nobody looks forward to these Torah portions – in fact, perhaps as proof of that, the two portions are usually read in the same week – who wants to spend *any* time thinking about this stuff, let alone more than one week.

Yet the portion Tazria, if you can get through the very graphic descriptions of skin afflictions, brings us some moving passages and reminders about life. While the Israelites were dwelling in the wilderness, if a person is afflicted with a certain kind of skin disorder, not only is that person “to dwell outside the camp” until they recover, but it is the high priest (Aaron or his sons) who is supposed to examine the person’s condition periodically and decide whether or not the person can return to the community. The term that’s used for “examining” is *ra-ah – resh alef hay* – ‘to see,’ which leads at least one commentator to read a different idea into the priest’s physical examination of the skin affliction: *v’ra-ah-hu ha-kohain* -- read not “when he sees *it*,” but rather “when he sees **him** [sees the PERSON]” [*Meshekh Khokhmah*, note 3 in Etz Hayim Torah commentary, p. 653]: “The priest is to examine the whole person, not only the diseased limb. He is to see what is whole and healthy about the person, not only what is afflicted.” As difficult as this portion can be to read, including the “ordeals” that the afflicted people go through, something I appreciate every year in this Torah portion is the reminder that not only are the afflicted persons not completely ostracized (as you might expect), but it is the HIGH priest who tends to them. Lest the person be ostracized by the rest of the community, the priest’s visit, the priest’s touch, and assurance that the person could come back into the camp, must surely have helped put the patient and everyone else at ease.

¹ Rabbi Abraham Milgrom

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Prayer/Synagogue_and_Religious_Leaders/Architecture_and_Design.shtml

Not that I identify with the Israelite High Priests, or anything, but as it happens, recently I've visited a number of different people in a number of different hospitals. And whenever I visit people in a hospital, I try to notice not only them, but also *not* them --- details about the hospital itself: what are the patients' rooms like, how do the various medical workers and other employees treat the patient, do the workers and the hospital itself seem to want visitors there [the word *hospital* and the word *hospitality* are related, after all]? what instructions and messages does the patient receive, and do I - as a visitor receive - for example, how expensive is the parking lot? Do I have to sign in and if so, are the people at the desk friendly, do they make sure I know how to get where I'm going? Is there food there for visitors to eat - if the patient is mobile - would the grounds be a nice place to walk together? Or the chapel a pleasant place to visit? And perhaps most of all - in patients' rooms I notice the windows (or lack thereof) - what's the view? What's the light like? How easy to operate are the shades? Can the patient reach the shades or see out the window without being exposed?

This week, by chance -- the week of this Torah portion, Tazria, and the week our stained glass windows went away leaving me newly aware of the "outside world" -- I happened to have the pleasure of a very long hospital visit to someone in a very 'pleasant hospital.' The patient and I were able to sit for over an hour in the hospital room beside a window with the shades pulled open and the sun streaming in. And there beside that window, we prayed for strength and courage to get through this hard and painful time, this lions' den.

And though the patient's eyes were closed while we prayed, I was watching the world outside - all the people coming and going from this place of healing. And not right then, but later, I thought of Daniel praying in his room before the open window, prayers which both landed him in - and saved him from - the lions' den. And last night - while I studied the Torah portion with friends in that room, talking about the fact that no one - despite their ailment -- was totally ostracized from the community, I kept looking over here at our recent exposure to the outside world. And I couldn't help but think that Jewish tradition is brilliant in its insistence that when we build our sanctuaries - our safe havens - we put windows in them to allow us to keep our eyes on the world - in part for safety's sake, I'm sure, but also for our own sake and for the sake of the world, as Rav Kook taught, lest any of us be tempted to "withdraw from the world and pray only for our own needs."²

In our new building we'll have it all - the stained glass windows that have inspired us for years already, the skylight that will remind us of God's presence (with our own story lines copper strips reaching right up toward it), and the window that looks right out onto the street reminding us that we are part of God's world, on this earth to help make God's creation a safe haven for everyone.

Shabbat shalom

² Rabbi Abraham Milgrom

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Prayer/Synagogue_and_Religious_Leaders/Architecture_and_Design.shtml