

DARSHANUT

Darshanut, derived from the Hebrew root darash [explicate, expound], presents the expository, homiletic interpretation of the Bible. Its origins are as old as the most ancient aggadic and midrashic teachings and as new as the sermon or D'var Torah delivered on the most recent Shabbat. The intent is a challenge to relate the Bible to the problems, issues and goals of daily living.

We encourage our readers to contribute to Darshanut. The submission should be based on the Bible, no more than 750 words in length, and as relevant and current as you would like to make it. For more information on submissions, see the inside back cover.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

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While thinking about the importance of place, I found myself recalling an early memory of being in a synagogue. I was about six or seven years old, and it was during the High Holy Days. My father must have bought tickets for the auxiliary service, because my memory is of sitting near him in a classroom.

All of a sudden, a man came up to me and told me to leave my seat. He may have spoken in Yiddish, which I did not understand, because it took me a few seconds to get the message. I guess I did not move fast enough to please him, because he slapped me in the face. My father had words with him, and that is the sum of my recollection.

But why did he slap me? Perhaps because it was the High Holy Days, the room was crowded, the mood was restless, and I was sitting in his seat. I had mistakenly taken his bought-and-paid-for place. Space and place are important things. Often they are part of a person's identity and self-definition. You take someone else's place at your peril. That's what happened to me.

Another memory: The representatives of two neighboring synagogues in our community met to discuss the possibility of merging. They were located

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near each other, and both were hurting from declining membership. The talks broke down quickly when the people from the synagogue whose building, for various reasons, was most likely to become the site of the merged congregations, announced: "All our sanctuary seats are reserved. If we merge, you folks will have to sit on the folding chairs in the back." End of negotiation. Seats and space and place are holy stuff.

What prompts this topic? A suggestive word in the weekly portion *Vayera*. At the close of the discussion between God and Abraham over the fate of Sodom, the text states: *The Lord went His way. . . And Abraham returned unto his place* [li'm'komo] (Gen. 18:33).

This may seem like an ordinary phrase until you remember that the word "*makom*," which translates as "place" or "space," is a rather special word in rabbinic literature.¹ In the Talmud and Midrash, *Makom* is a frequent name for God. As, for example, when taking leave of a mourner, the traditional expression is: "*Ha-Makom yenachem et'chem* [May *Makom* (the Almighty) console you]." God as *Makom* connotes the space and place of the whole universe. *Makom* is everything that is.

Thus place and space count. And that is why, all these years later, I can better understand why that man slapped me in the synagogue for having taken his *makom*. My father and he had angry words, but the end was that I had to find a another place for myself. A person's *makom* is holy.

We all have our private, sacred space and place, some cherished piece of ground, a locale of special meaning. It may be a cemetery plot where persons we love are buried. It may be our home or our childhood home. Holy ground can be anywhere.

Moses found it in the wilderness where he had gone in search of a lost sheep. He suddenly heard a voice calling to him from the mysterious Burning Bush, '*Draw not closer; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.*' Holy space is wherever man and God intersect, and meet.

Even as I write this, I am aware of another, contrasting, even contradictory, idea. Abraham Joshua Heschel put it best. Judaism, he taught, is primarily a religion of time and not space. In Judaism, days are sanctified. Time, far more than place, is holy. The Sabbath, said Heschel, is a cathedral of time.

Men kill each other over space. Defending one's turf, or adding to it, is the cause of almost every war in history. Thus space can be fraught with uncleanness, the opposite of the holy. But time belongs to everyone, and therefore it is holy. Time is the stuff of which life is made.

This theme pervades the tradition. The Sages wondered: Why is the exact location of Mt. Sinai unknown? The answer: It is not known, so that no nation or people can lay claim to it. The teaching – not the place – is the important thing.

So what shall it be? Time or space? The two will always be in tension, and it is a terrible tension. Perhaps we have a kind of built-in sensitivity to both sides of the tension – time and space. We shape much of our lives by the knowledge that time is a most precious thing, and that certain times are holy: Shabbat, for example. And yet we are physical beings, and we know that space too has its precious sanctity. Our special and holy places are not many: Our homes, synagogues, where we bury our dead – and above all, the small land of Israel, the homeland, the place of our dreams, and the land of our hopes.

During the past several years, many lives have been snuffed out by persons, terrorists, who would deny our right to our *makom*. This is a regular occurrence. And yet – can one ask, in fear and trembling – may we be patient enough, and wise enough, and faithful enough, and strong enough, and hard enough – to convince the nations, and our enemies, that this land is our holy place? Our only holy place, and we will fight for it with all our strength.

NOTES

1. I have taken a midrashic-style liberty by taking a word – *makom* – out of its biblical context and, using it, in midrashic fashion, to suggest an entirely different idea.