

*D'var Rav: Words from the Rabbi*

## OF OSSUARIES AND SANCTUARIES

I want to begin this fall's column with a traditional Jewish blessing of return, a return from what I hope has been a relaxing and revivifying summer for every one of you: *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, shehecheyanu, v'kiyemanu, v'higiyanu lazman ha-zeh* ("Blessed are you, Adonai our God, sovereign of the world, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this moment").

As we embark together on this, our fifth year as a spiritual community, the concept of sanctity is very much on my mind. Like many of you, I am a lover of words, especially of their etymology. I read over the summer about the important discovery of some ancient ossuaries in the southern Mediterranean region. An ossuary is a vessel filled with bones, the remnants of a human life. A related and similar-sounding word, *sanctuary*, means something far different. A sanctuary is a vessel that is—or ought to be—filled with that which is sacred.

Many of us grew up in or have been exposed to houses of worship that seem more like ossuaries than sanctuaries, like empty vessels of stagnation and decay rather than reservoirs of creativity and life. Yet, as we read in the book of Ezekiel, even dry bones can live again. The synagogue is not dead. For Jews, it can still serve as a primary vehicle for uplifting our souls, becoming literate about our religious heritage, and fostering the bonds of community.

So how do we breathe the breath of life into our sanctuaries, our vessels of (potential) sanctity? To me, the answer is through *avodah*, or service. In the Sixties, JFK asked Americans not to think about what they could do to better themselves, but what they could do to help those around them. Judaism asks the same of us, as it has for thousands of years. Whether or not we respond to that call to service depends on us.

Joining a synagogue, supporting it during its times of trial, paying visits to fellow congregants when they are in pain or in mourning, even if they are total strangers—in our era, these are the outer manifestations of a *counterculture*. To be a serious progressive Jew today is to be a rebel, a subversive, a person whose behavior stands in stark and bold defiance against the narcissistic impulses that permeate our society. Neither secularism nor fundamentalism can ever produce true sanctuaries. For that, we must balance our personal autonomy with the charges of our faith. We must give of ourselves in order to receive the gifts of the spirit.

As we get back to work, school, and our post-summer routines—and as we prepare for the Days of Awe ahead—let us think of the ways we can best serve our community and, in so doing, create for ourselves and one another a shared vessel filled with a sanctity borne of commitment and service, rooted not in guilt or coercion but in heartfelt love.

*B'shalom*, Niles

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