

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

T'RUMA 5784

Broadly speaking, Parshat T'ruma introduces us to the remarkable - and some would say revolutionary - doctrine of K'DUSHAT MAKOM, the sanctity of place. We are undoubtedly familiar with its more famous companion, K'DUSHAT Z'MAN, the sanctity of time whereby certain days and times are imbued with intense holiness, Shabbat and Yom Tov being the most illustrative of this principle.

With the command to construct a House for Gd, we are ushered into a dimension of holy space which is not restricted to a specific location, but which incredibly can encompass wherever we might be. In a word, if the Infinite Almighty can contract Himself, as it were, into a small finite Mishkan, He can also choose to reside within each of us! As the verse clearly states, "They shall make for Me a Sanctuary so that I may dwell among them (25:8). No need for any intermediary, any third party to have access to Gd; each of us may experience Him in His full immediacy, directly - personally and intimately! And if Gd, in our tradition, is also known as HAMAKOM, the Place, then that theological denomination of Gd's Omnipresence comes to remind us that Gd is everywhere, where no place is devoid of His Presence,

allowing us to rendezvous with Him and speak with Him as our close Companion wherever we might be.

There is another dimension of "place holiness" which, Rav Soloveitchik argues, is fundamental to understanding and appreciating our unique mission as Jews. To cultivate a religious "place consciousness" means to ask, "What is my makom, my place? What is my world perspective? What is my self-definition?" The answer to these questions, the Rav avers, is not a function of only what you know. "For knowledge alone means nothing. The spiritual nomad [he who has no place] may have universal knowledge and yet remain cultureless, for he does not experience his knowledge... modern Jews have much theoretical and practical knowledge [of their tradition, but the problem] lies in the fact that they are lacking in the living experience of [religious] values, the passionate merger of the worshiper with the object of his worship... [They are lacking a] "religious life permeated with enthusiasm and rapture, [one] which opens to man new vistas and enchanted horizons... Without the idea of place consciousness, the state of K'dusha, sanctity, can never be acquired or held."

In other words, the Rav asserts that what finally transforms the "spiritual nomad" into a "spiritual settler" is the stark realization that wandering and sampling the wares of cultures alien

to his true self will prove to be a futile attempt at self-fulfillment. Only when the Jew implants himself within the all-enveloping, all-inclusive religious culture and Torah life-style of what it means to be Jewish, only then does the Jew experience what it means to come home, to come back to his "place" - to himself. In a word, with this self-discovery, the Jew will have attained an eternal and powerful rootedness in holy place - K'DUSHAT MAKOM. Indeed, that experience can be life-changing, gifting one a fresh perspective on life, one saturated with meaning and purpose.

A third interpretation of K'DUSHAT MAKOM is to be found in the writings of the Chofetz Chayim. In the dramatic scene when Moshe approaches the "burning bush", HaShem tells him "Do not draw near here. Take off your shoes... for the place - HAMAKOM, upon which you stand is holy ground - ADMAT KODESH HU" (Sh'mot 3:5). The marvelous insight of this great sage is the conviction that whatever place you may find yourself, can become holy. HaShem is telling Moshe that the simple, ordinary soil upon which he is standing is sacred - KODESH! This astonishing idea posits that the sanctity of space is not only a function of Gd's Presence, but that finite man can actually endow temporal, mundane space with lasting holiness!

The brilliance of the Chofetz Chaim's understanding of K'DUSHAT MAKOM is his wider definition of what "place" can refer to. In his view, "place" can be much more than a physical location. It can also refer to the "place" - the situation - in which a person finds himself. What this means is that no matter what state or condition I may find myself, I have the wherewithal to transform that experience into the stuff of K'dusha by how I respond.

To illustrate: Say I am celebrating the simcha of a child. My happiness is boundless. I am brimming with excitement and delight. If in that moment of sheer joy, I can remember the "other", if, in the midst of my own personal celebration, I can be sensitive to people around me and behave with kindness and generosity of spirit, if I can climb out of my own simcha state and genuinely make someone else happy, that very deed transforms my "place" - my situation into something holy! I have created an unforgettable K'DUSHAT MAKOM.

Of course, the opposite set of circumstances present a very different and perhaps far more difficult challenge. Say you have experienced some personal defeat, some terrible disappointment. Your life is now fraught with tension and anxiety; your day, no longer bright and inviting, is now overcast with

gloom and misery. If, under these stressful circumstances, if when you find yourself in this dark "place", you nevertheless behave with dignity, charity and goodness. If, when assailed by feelings of despair and melancholy, you do not allow yourself to descend into some hedonistic, self-medicating escape, but rather you display courageous emotional restraint and proper ethical behavior to all around you, you have then fashioned out that passional state of unhappiness to something holy! Here, as well as, in what appears to be the most unlikely of places, you have created a precious K'DUSHAT MAKOM!

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and tzedaka, such incredible togetherness and camaraderie so as to astound everyone who thought the very opposite would occur. Thank Gd, we rose to the occasion and behaved forgivingly and lovingly, gallantly and magnanimously. One day soon, all of these brave and valiant stories will be told.

Until then, we can only pray that HaShem reward and respond to our K'DUSHAT MAKOM with His K'DUSHAT MAKOM, His immanent Presence, which can shield and deliver us from this suffering and hate, and usher in an era of vindication and peace. 

While all of the above understandings of a K'DUSHAT MAKOM are certainly not mutually exclusive, it is the Chofetz Chayim's explanation which seems most relevant during these frightening and trying times. When war wages and fatalities crush our spirits, when the world appears to turn against us, it is precisely when we find ourselves in these bleak and black "places", that we must transform that very "place" into a MAKOM KADOSH - a place and atmosphere of sanctity. And how? By doing exactly what we, as a people, have been doing since October 7th. We have heroically demonstrated such extraordinary acts of chesed