

Aaron Spiegel

Rabbi, Information Technology Director, Indianapolis Center for Congregations

*Sanctuary*

When considering this essay, I figured a rabbi should have religious places that hold special if not sacred value, so I thought of the synagogue of my childhood where I learned (or at least they tried to teach me) the rich traditions of Judaism. I thought of the *shul* where I *davened* (prayed) with my grandfather. I thought of the synagogues I have been privileged to serve. I thought of the myriad places in Israel that have historical and religious significance to Jews. And I thought of the synagogue where my children became *bar* and *bat mitzvah*.

And while all these places brought fond memories, none felt inspiring. I panicked. How could I write an essay on inspiring places when, while important and meaningful, none jumped out as truly inspiring? Then I realized all had a common trait that was inspiring—people. It wasn't the synagogue of my childhood that was inspiring; it was Mr. Shapiro who taught me that learning Torah could move me to be a better person. It wasn't *davening* in my grandfather's *shul* that was inspiring; it was seeing my grandfather's non-judgmental piety, in the face of so much personal tragedy, that inspired me. It wasn't leading a congregation that inspired me; it was the privilege of being with people as they experienced the ups and downs of their lives that inspired me. It isn't the synagogue where my children became full members of the Jewish community that is inspiring, it is their acceptance of their place in the community and the love of friends and family that inspired me.

Jewish tradition holds that there are only two things holy in a synagogue—the Torah and the people. The building, while important, is just a building. Crossing the threshold into the synagogue does not take one from the world of the profane into the world of the sacred any more than crossing the threshold of an office building. What's really important are the people whom we seek to inspire and who, in turn, will inspire us.

When the second Temple was destroyed in 79 ACE, the community faced a conundrum. How could they maintain a sense of Judaism without this thing, this structure, as the central focus of their faith? In their inimitable wisdom, the rabbis transferred the power of the *Beit Hamikdash*, house of sanctuary or holiness, to the home—the *Mikdash Me'at* or little temple. Parents became the

new priests and children their charges. While synagogues became and remain important, they are so primarily because they offer a place to congregate, to be together as a community.

In his book *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Places*, Lutheran theologian Jon Pahl writes that new institutions have usurped churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques as our revered spaces. For me as a Jew, it's not that these places compete with synagogues for our souls; it's that we have forgotten how to be in community. Instead of seeking inspiration from one another, we search for it in experiences. Life has taught me that the experience of inspiration is not found merely in congregating with others, but in forming relationships. Martin Buber was clear that it is when we acknowledge the humanity of others in our relationships that we experience God. Judaism says that it is loyalty to the teachings of the Torah that is the measure of the faith of the Jew, and not loyalty to an institution.

Jewish spirituality centers on being inspired by others. Which is better: the focus on finding the spiritual in the synagogue or in life's journey? I am not convinced that either is better, but that personal spiritual growth requires both. It is our tradition to explore the Divine in places other than the synagogue, especially in the home. The concept of *Mikdash Me'at*, the sanctuary of home, is a cornerstone of Jewish spiritual practice. However, it is also our tradition that prayer in a group is more powerful than alone. It is not happenstance that a quorum, *minyan*, is required to recite certain prayers, particularly those that are most personal. It is not that God hears better in groups, it is that we hear better in groups! Our connection to God is through our connection to each other. Therefore, the synagogue provides the space where the sacred can congregate, where people can come together with Torah and live the experience of Judaism. After all, what are we worshipping? It's not the building, the chairs, the walls, or the *aron ha'kodesh*; we are worshipping our aliveness and our connection with the Divine.

Buber also said, "Next to being the children of God our greatest privilege is being the brothers of each other." That inspires me!