

Temple Beth Am

Parshat B'halot'kha 2010

By Associate Rabbi Susan Leider

At the beginning of *Parshat B'ha'alotkha*, God instructs Aaron about the crafting of the *menorah* for the *mishkan*. In the rabbinic mind, there is a natural link between this section of the book *Bemidbar*, as the appointed Torah reading for *Hanukah* is drawn from last week's *parashah* and today's *Haftarah* is also read on Shabbat *Hanukkah*.

The *shoresh*, or three-letter Hebrew root of *B'ahalotkha*, is *ayin, lamed, hay*, meaning to ascend or to go up. The same *shoresh* is found in the rabbinic principle known as *Ma'a lot Kedoshim*, the idea found in discussions between the Rabbinic sages *Shammai* and *Hillel* about how we celebrate *Hanukkah*. *Beit Shammai* argued that we should begin *Hanukkah* with eight lit candles and decrease the number of candles each night, until we are left with one candle on the eighth night. But because of the principle of *Ma'a lot Kedoshim*, we practice as *Hillel* ruled: we begin with one candle on the first night and increase the number of light as the holiday progresses.

Many of our psalms begin with the words, *Shir Ha Ma'a lot*, the song of those who ascend.

These psalms were sung by those who ascended the steps of the south wall of the Temple in Jerusalem. I found myself in this spot a few short weeks ago, as I participated in the Tel-Aviv Los Angeles Partnership Trip to Israel with the Pressman Academy delegation including students and parents from our sixth-grade class. As we stood at Robinson's Arch, near the south wall, I thought about those who ascended the Mount, those who had travelled from a far, carrying out the Holy Work of the Temple, the sacrifices that represented for us a connection to God and to community.

At Robinson's Arch, there is a designated area where Conservative and Reform Jews pray together in egalitarian services. Yet, just around the corner is the place where most Jews seek holiness – the Kotel.

Many people feel a greater sense of *ma'a lot kedoshim* in being at the Kotel. It is closer to where the Temple Mount was and since the Six Day War in 1967, has become an increasingly “religious-ized” site. Scholar Dr. Doron Bar notes that the struggle between the government and other bodies to inject national content into the sight has been thwarted as the religious establishment has continued to heighten the “religious” or “holy” aspects of the sight.

Dr. Bar notes that even Theodore Herzl, when he visited Jerusalem in 1898, confessed, “My heart cannot feel deep emotion.” Why? Herzl envisioned the entire land of Israel representing the totality of what Israel could be – he did not envision an Israel where the locus of “holiness” would be focused on the Temple Mount or even Jerusalem itself. For him *ma'a lot kedoshim* was settling the land, not cultivating the notion of the *Kotel* area as a heightened place of *ma'a lot kedoshim*.

I must confess when I read Herzl’s words, I was so relieved. In the times I have visited the Kotel, I have not felt a heightened sense of *ma'a lot kedoshim*. I realize the historical import of where I am standing, but I do not feel closer to God there and like Herzl, nor do I do feel deep emotion of this particular nature.

As a Zionist and an *ohevet Zion*, a lover of Zion, where does this leave me? As a Jew and as a Rabbi, where do I find *ma'a lot kedoshim*?

Drawing upon this recent trip, there are two experiences which reflect my feeling a heightened sense of *ma'a lot kedoshim*.

Shabbat Morning in the Old City

The first took place at the Sephardic Educational Center in the Old City of Jerusalem. On a beautiful Shabbat morning, I woke up and ventured out to one of the stunning synagogues within a five minute walk of the Center. Although I had less than welcoming experiences in many orthodox synagogues in

Israel on prior trips, I reasoned that not venturing out to shul would mean giving up an opportunity to daven in one of these gorgeous *shuls*. As I donned my long skirt and long-sleeved blouse, I left my *tallit* in my room aware of unspoken taboo of a woman wearing this ritual garment, even in the women's section. As I entered the women's section of the synagogue, I found myself needing some assistance there and asked a woman for help. Even as the Hebrew words came out of my mouth, she looked up from her prayer book, stared right through me and continued her prayers.

At that point, I decided to listen to my *kishkes*, and got up and left the synagogue. My feet carried me back to the Center, where our sixth graders were preparing to lead *davenning* in an unadorned room with wooden tables and cafeteria-style chairs. As the students led the service, I felt a palpable sense of *ma'a lot kedoshim* as I recognized that in this room, people were being treated *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. I was struck by the irony that in all of the Old City, with its hundreds of synagogues, there was not one where we could pray the way we prayed together that morning. Men and women side by side, we lifted our voices in prayer to God in a simple room. It was there that I found holiness.

B'not Mitzvah Ceremony at Bet Daniel, Tel Aviv

The second experience happened at Bet Daniel, a reform synagogue in Tel Aviv. Each year the Israeli students from our partner school, *Magen*, prepare a beautiful *B'not Mitzvah* ceremony. The assumption is that many of the boys will become *B'nai Mitzvah* outside school, but very few of the Israeli girls do so and the school helps to fill this gap. This annual ceremony looks very different from a *Bat Mitzvah* in a conservative synagogue in the U.S. There is no Torah reading, no traditional prayers. But as I looked around the synagogue, I was once again struck by how welcoming the room felt. Secular Israelis in jeans and observant American Jews, came together in this prayer space to mark these girls' coming of age. Even as my heart ached to have some presence of traditional Judaism in this moment, I also realized the incredible potential that the room held. It was here with Israelis in a synagogue that I felt the power of what could be. What Israel could be if everyone were truly welcomed in a synagogue as

they were on this occasion. The potential of Israelis being able to see themselves as “religious,” and seeing this spiritual experience as normative made me feel a sense of *ma’a lot kedoshim*.

What these two experiences have in common was an overwhelming sense of people being made *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of God. My sharing these experiences with you comes at an interesting time. On May 10, Peter Beinart published an article, [The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment) (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment>). While I will not address this article at length here, I do feel that many of the issues that Beinart addresses pertain to the ideas I have discussed with regard to *ma’a lot kedoshim*.

This week’s news also brought coverage of White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel attempts to have his son become *Bar Mitzvah* at the wall. Amid heckling and protests, the ceremony was eventually moved from the Kotel to the south side of the wall where I lead services during our recent trip. A Jew who wants to come to Israel to have his son become *Bar Mitzvah*, has to worry about being barred from this site as some Israelis see his work for Obama as prohibiting him from being in this space or possibly even from being in the country itself.

As I prepared to board the plane from LA to Tel Aviv, I turned to my two male Rabbinic colleagues and asked them if I could daven *shahrit*, the morning service, with them on the plane. I mentioned that laying tefillin on an El Al flight can sometimes be challenging for women as the withering looks come our way. Rabbi Gil Kollin, jokingly said to me, “Well, Susan, at least they can’t throw chairs on the plane!” Rabbi Kollin’s joke is in reference to the dilemma of the Women of the Wall, a group who attempts to *daven* and read Torah on *Rosh Hodesh* in the Women’s Section at the Kotel. They too, persevere amidst heckling and some have even been injured due to men throwing chairs at them while they assemble. But yes, Rabbi Kollin was right. I *davenned* in *tallit* and *tefillin* on the El Al flight and not a single chair was thrown my way.

Ma'a lot Kedoshim is possible when we see the human beings in front of us. As long as our relationship with Israel is defined more by historical sites, archeologically-important objects or politics than by the faces of our brothers and sisters, then we will not realize *kedushah* in Israel or anywhere else. An excerpt from a Yehuda Amichai poem, *The Tourists*, summarizes this beautifully:

פעם ישבתי על מדרגות ליד שער במצודת דוד, את שני הסלים הכבדים שמתי לידי. עמדה שם קבוצת תיירים סביב המדריך ושמשתי להם נקודת ציון. "אתם רואים את האיש הזה עם הסלים? קצת ימינה מראשו נמצאת קשת מן התקופה הרומית. קצת ימינה מראשו". אבל הוא זז, הוא זז! אמרתי בלבי: הגאולה תבוא רק אם יגידו להם: אתם רואים שם את הקשת מן התקופה הרומית? לא חשוב: אבל לידה, קצת שמאלה ולמטה ממנה, יושב אדם שקנה פרות וירקות לביתו."

Once I sat on the steps by agate at David's Tower,
I placed my two heavy baskets at my side.
A group of tourists was standing around their guide
and I became their target marker.
"You see that man with the baskets?
Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period.
Just right of his head."
"But he's moving, he's moving!"
I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them,
"You see that arch from the Roman period?
It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit,
there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."