



Living Room: Shrines

VANESSA L. OCHS

When my daughter phoned to announce she was pregnant and then added “with twins” after a pregnant pause (which grew richer each time I relived the conversation), my husband reacted by resolving to spend the next months without saying a single word until, “Godwilling,” the babies were born. I reacted by fainting (one of my stock responses) with astonished joy. Our chosen responses — silence and swooning — left something to be desired. For a while, we turned to the God-fearing and modest Jewish phrase, “*b’sha-ah tova*” (may the babies come “in an auspicious hour”), which we launched back when people said, “Aren’t you excited?” or offered an altogether premature and inauspicious “*mazal tov.*” But the phrase grew flat after repeated use, with months to go.

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Then I assembled a covert Jewish house shrine to accompany me through the months of waiting; it stood as the visual symbol of all my hopes and prayers. Not altogether covert: it was in the living room, alongside the fireplace. But I figured that if I didn’t mention it was a shrine until it had done its work, it could stand in the open, looking like one of my assemblages of stuff put out for decorative effect. Low profile because Jews, in theory, don’t make shrines; in reality, of course, we do — we just don’t talk about them. Our shrines are spiritual agents that construct our religious and cultural identities, that prompt ethical and holy response, and that foster connections between oneself and the community. Sometimes we amass photos of our ancestors to look over us, interceding with God on our behalf at the hot moments of our lives. We may assemble the Rosh Hashanah cards we received on the mantelpiece, with hopes that the wishes they have extended for a good, sweet year will come true. We may keep out various Israeli souvenirs, trinkets, and ritual objects we have collected: the Hebrew Coca-Cola can, the decoupage *hamsa*, the mezuzah purchased in the Cardo. It’s not that we need those objects “lest we forget Jerusalem” — how can anyone who reads the newspaper

forget Jerusalem? Those objects are displayed as a 24/7 prayer for peace.

My mother, as a Jewish home shrine keeper, keeps her archival stash in a ziploc bag. Her mother’s Sabbath shawl, her father’s velvet *kip-pah*: she activates them with prayer at moments of risk, danger, and even joy. They summon all the ancestors, who worry about us now, in the world to come, as much as they did when they were alive. When relatives ask my mother to use her “powers” on their behalf, she faces in their direction. She does not disappoint!

My shrine needed to meld various symbols. To represent the ancestors, there was the giant-sized Seagram’s bottle that my grandfather used to display in the window of his liquor shop so many years ago in Ridgewood, New Jersey. That made a little nod as well to my husband, who holds a Bronfman Chair in Jewish Thought. To represent my daughter who would hopefully grow with each month, there was a moon that she had once carved out of wood for her father. To represent watery healing of Miriam the prophetess, I put out my bright yellow enamel watering can. I added a red wooden birdhouse, adorning it with *hamsas* my daughter had made as a child.

No one noticed the shrine; no one said a word. I passed it many times each day as I moved about the house. I cannot say I knew what ritual practice might emerge. I don’t practice my mother’s *minhag*, and certainly don’t have her “powers” of communication with the ancestors. But I found myself sending off prayers as the bottom of my bathrobe brushed against the Seagram’s bottle, and again as I extracted the watering can to feed my plants each week. The physical objects linked me to Jewish women, in times gone by and in the present, who have traveled to the shrines of saintly rabbis and to the tombs of saintly ancestors in efforts to beseech God for healthy children and grandchildren. I cannot say that my own theological scheme permits me to ask God to do good things for me or the people I love. I believe that good things, like bad things, simply happen, that we turn to God to hold us up, however things land. I started out praying for the optimism of Miriam, and as the due date came closer, I cast my theology aside, and dared to imagine a happy and blessed ending — which came to pass.

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