MAKOM: The Place of “space” in Jewish Tradition
by Baruch Sienna

Time vs. Space

Space? I thought Judaism sanctifies time over space, a view popularized by the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his oft-quoted opus The Sabbath: Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.... Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn...

Jewish ritual may be characterized as the art of significant forms in time, as architecture of time. Most of its observances -- the Sabbath, the New Moon, the festivals, the Sabbatical and the Jubilee year -- depend on a certain hour of the day or season of the year.... The main themes of faith lie in the realm of time. We remember the day of the exodus from Egypt, the day when Israel stood at Sinai; and our Messianic hope is the expectation of a day, of the end of days...

When history began, there was only one holiness in the world, holiness in time.... It was only after the people had succumbed to the temptation of worshipping a thing, a golden calf, that the erection of a Tabernacle, of holiness in space, was commanded. The sanctity of time came first, the sanctity of man came second, and the sanctity of space last. Time was hallowed by God; space, the Tabernacle, was consecrated by Moses.¹
Wandering

So, after Heschel, it is hard to re-imagine Judaism as a place-based culture. Jeremy Benstein, associate director and founder of the Heschel Centre for Environmental Learning and Leadership asks, “Can the Jewish people, the People of the Book, who have made wandering a veritable art form, be a civilization indigenous to a land and its conditions?” And not just our patriarchs (Abraham journeyed from Ur to Haran to Canaan to Egypt and back to Canaan), but the Israelites who according to the book of Numbers:

... [they] set out from Kibroth-hattaavah and encamped at Hazeroth. They set out from Hazeroth and encamped at Rithmah. They set out from Rithmah and encamped at Rimmon-perez. They set out from Rimmon-perez and encamped at Libnah. They set out from Libnah and encamped at Rissah. They set out from Rissah and encamped at Kehelath. They set out from Kehelath and encamped at Mount Shepher. They set out from Mount Shepher and encamped at Haradah. They set out from Haradah and encamped at Makheloth.

And even in more recent Jewish history, Jewish life has migrated from Pumbedita to Rome, Lisbon to Meknes, from Toledo to Vilna, and Warsaw to Santiago.

Partly because of this history of wandering, it has been hard for Jews to imagine being rooted in one place. Heschel’s view is certainly an accurate summary of post-exilic Judaism. After the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion from the land of Israel, the Torah and the Jewish calendar and traditional way of life replaced the centrality of the land. The writer Henrich Heine called the Bible “the portable homeland for the Jews” and, for almost two thousand years, Judaism in the Diaspora has developed largely without a strong connection to the Land of Israel or even to the earth. Today, most of us are urban; we are largely unconnected to the cycles of the land or even the seasons, able to buy strawberries or asparagus in February without a second thought.

Disconnected from Space

Only recently have we begun to appreciate that we are out of touch with the earth. “Proprioception” is the often overlooked sense that enables us to know where our bodies are and to move them without looking. This sixth sense enables us to play the piano or touch type by knowing automatically where our hands and fingers are. Oliver Sacks writes about “The Disembodied Lady,” a patient who had a dislocated sense of proprioception:

At first she found herself unable to walk. Then she became unable to hold things in her hands. Then she could not even stand. Her hands began to wander about of their own accord “unless she kept an eye on them.” She lost nearly all coordination of body movements.
This idea that losing our sense of space contributes to a sense of dislocation is relevant to our Jewish lives. The Torah is very concerned with “space,” but, for a long time, Diaspora Judaism has had an uneasy relationship to “place.” Part of our problem is that we identify more with the Jews in the wilderness than the Israelis living in our homeland. For two thousand years of exile, Jews have not had an intimate connection to the land or to place. Jews have adapted successfully to living in all climates and geographical regions of the planet, but, for the most part, resist developing a deep connection to their new homes.

Jews do not fully identify with where they live. Jewish mobility, an amazing survival strategy, is also at the heart of an alienation from the natural world and physical place. I may be feeling this most acutely as I am moving at the end of the month; the average American moves ten times in his/her lifetime. Typical Jewish demographics: over the last five generations, no one raised children in the same place where he or she had been raised, most not even in the same country.

Our people’s wandering has contributed to this sense of homelessness. Richard Israel, in his wonderful volume, The Kosher Pig, writes: A few months ago, driving cross-town in a Manhattan taxi, my Korean cab driver turned far enough around to start a conversation and asked, “Where are you from?” “Boston,” I said.

Then, since that answer was apparently not sufficiently rewarding, clearly not what he was after, he asked, “And what are your origins?”

What are my origins?... I thought to myself. Chicago is where I was born, but could I call Chicago my origins? What about England, where my father’s family comes from?

He continues in this vein, recognizing the problems of saying that he is from Eastern Europe, or calling himself Israeli, or Palestinian. Finally he concludes.

While I was trying to unravel the meaning of the question, and simultaneously formulate an answer which was at once accurate and intelligible, the driver turned again. “You are taking too long to answer,” he said. “You must be Jewish.”

Rootlessness is part of our problem. For some Jews, this feeling leads them to pack up and make aliyah and move to Israel. To put down roots in an ancestral homeland. But even Zionism has an ambivalent relationship to place: while eager to return to the land, many early Zionists saw their role of draining the swamps and restoring the desert as conquering nature. One early Zionist song proclaims, “We will robe the land in concrete...” Clearly for Jews, finding our place is complicated.
Makom: Sacred Space

But with all due respect to Heschel, I think it is time to let go of this emphasis on time over place. Judaism originally was intrinsically connected to “Eretz Yisrael,” the Land of Israel. The Land was always present, central to holidays and liturgy and in mitzvot applicable only in the Land of Israel (such as shmitah). There is an equally strong tradition of the sanctity of the Land of Israel and the importance of the Earth.

The Creation narrative focuses attention on the centrality of the earth; the term adamah lends its name to the first earthling: Adam. In Psalms and the prophets, the theme of Creation emphasizes God’s sovereignty over the whole planet. Place, not only time, can be a site of holiness too. Moses, at the burning bush, is told to shed his sandals from his feet for he is standing on holy ground.

Makom, the Hebrew word for place and the title of one of the installations, is a word that appears in the Bible over 300 times and in the Torah over a hundred. Its first mention is in Genesis, chapter 1 when God creates the world and collects the water to one “place.”

Heschel was partly right; our first sanctuary, the ifan, was portable. We have no natural holy mountains, no sacred spaces. We do not worship nature. Seven years ago, Everett Gendler wrote a wonderful article in a rabbinic journal about Zen gardens. Contemplative Zen gardens are contrived and highly formalized arrangements of rocks, water, and plants on a bed of sand or raked gravel that somehow evoke a balance between nature and human. Judaism has no wordless Zen gardens; instead we are drowning in words: the Bible, rabbinic commentary, midrash. The three categories in Simon Schama’s book Landscape and Memory, Wood, Water and Rock reminded Gendler of his desire for a “Jewish Zen garden” and he found the three elements as he followed the biblical narrative. Our patriarch Abraham is associated with trees, Isaac (together with Rebecca) is associated with water. Our patriarch Jacob is associated with rock, and place. Instead of gravel and rocks representing water and land, the biblical narrative’s description of our three patriarchs forms an “equivalent in-words” Zen Garden.

The pivotal story of Jacob’s encounter with the angels has the theme word:

He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.
The story continues:

Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!" Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven."12

Jacob’s encounter with the place is an encounter with the divine. The Rabbis even use the word "place" as one of God’s names. We use this name of God to comfort mourners: שמחת אבל ציון הרשע. The Rabbis distinguish between two kinds of mitzvot: בר wk ot ihc, between individuals, and בר wk ot ihc, between individuals and God. God Who is not in any place is called “The Place.” It is not entirely surprising that certain places such as the Grand Canyon evoke the divine. But, today, perhaps mitzvot between people and “HaMakom” should also be understood as between individuals and the environment. Jeremy Benstein argues that the values of rootedness and territoriality can be the source of responsibility and caring; “belonging, in spatial as well as social terms” can be the basis for progressive activism.

Mapping Space

But we need to know where we are, in order to know who we are. Several movies begin or end by showing a celestial scene that zooms in on planet earth and then zooms in to the city and the house, or vice versa. So, where are we situated? Our vision is so limited; we think the world is all we can see. We can hardly imagine that our planet is a tiny dot, circling an insignificant star in our galaxy, which is traveling in the vast cosmos.

But in order to orient ourselves in space, we must also be aware of time. "The river I step in is not the river I stand in."13 A few years ago, our family visited Algonquin Park in Ontario, Canada, and went on several self-guided hikes. On one walk, we were reminded that the view in the summer was not the same as winter, and we tried to imagine the landscape in autumn with scarlet and orange leaves, or covered in snow. Another hike went through what was once a forest that had been recently flooded by dams constructed by beavers. Eventually, it would become a meadow. Later, we saw a forested area that, 100 years ago, was a meadow. These examples of constantly changing landscapes almost can be perceived in the span of a human lifetime, if we stayed in one spot and lived in relationship with the land like a farmer. Today, we drive up to Algonquin, take a mental “snapshot” of the area, and leave thinking this is what it looks like now and always. But the real stretch that the artist has reminded us is with geological time: we went on a hike seeing boulders that had been moved by glaciers that had covered the area and then receded. We can’t even imagine astronomical time.

Our concept of time is so limited. As a parent of teenagers, the olden days means 10 years ago. Remember slide rules? LPs? VCRs? One of my children’s teachers refers
sarcastically to her own childhood as in the Devonian age (for children, 50 years ago is probably the same as 400 million years ago). As Jews, we have the advantage that 500 years ago is considered recent; Rashi, who lived a thousand years ago, is more easily read than Shakespeare, only 500 years old. I can’t read Chaucer or Beowulf. You have to go back at least 2000 years for something to start being “old” in Judaism. But geologists and astronomers have their own sense of time. They measure time in millions of years.

Maps show us three things. First, because of the scale of maps, we can see patterns or connections that we might normally not notice. Second, different maps use different filters to document their data: political maps show country boundaries; environmental maps show global warming or pollution levels. How we map (i.e., what we choose to document or ignore) determines our perceived reality. Finally, maps define space by creating boundaries, a very important idea in creating sacred space. The Torah is all about boundaries: meat and milk; men and women, Shabbat and weekday. Holiness, like maps, is about defining and setting space apart.

Where Are You?

On a map, the first thing we search out is the little red dot or arrow labeled, “You are here.” But where is “here,” exactly? The first question in the Bible, asked by God to Adam, is “Where are you?” The Kabbalists paid great attention to the “firsts” in the Bible, the first instance of each word and even each letter as being the paradigm or quintessential example of it. A story is told of the “Alter Rebbe,” the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, who was imprisoned and befriended by the warden who recognized that his prisoner was not a common thief, but a holy man. The warden asked him, “If God knows everything, why does God ask Adam ‘where are you?’” The Alter turned to his questioner and said, “God is asking each person, ‘where are you’; God is asking you, for example, you are 52 years old, where are you in life?” Hearing his own exact age, the warden clapped the Rebbe on the shoulder and said, “Bravo,” but inside he trembled. How many different ways can we answer the question, “where are you?” physically, geographically, emotionally, spiritually.

“Where are you?” is the ultimate question. As we contemplate the space around us, and the potential for finding holiness, we must always ask ourselves, “Where are we?”

Endnotes:
3. Numbers 33:17–25
7. Exodus 3:5
8. Genesis 1:9


11. Genesis 28:11
12. Genesis 28: 16, 17
13. Heraclitus
14. Genesis 3:9

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