



## Sample Sermons Introducing *Mishkan HaNefesh*

### Reverence for Tradition, Commitment to Innovation

Rabbi David B. Thomas  
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5776 – September 14, 2015  
Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley

On the east coast of Japan, not far from the sacred city of Kyoto, you'll find one of the most extraordinary buildings on the planet. Established 2,000 years ago, Isé Jingu is among the oldest shrines in Japan – and it is Shinto's most sacred. Because it was built before Buddhism arrived on the island, its architecture is unique in the world. The simple and beautiful wooden structure is protected by a fine thatched roof borne on strong cypress timbers and beams. This holy place is nestled in earshot of mountain river waters on the edge of an ancient forest.

Two years ago, in 2013, local villagers awoke early one morning, made their way to the revered shrine, and proceeded to tear it down. The thatched roof was thrown to the ground, the pillars felled and the inner sanctum was dismantled and carted away. The destruction of this uniquely sacred place would be tragic, if it weren't for the fact that the local people actually tear it down and rebuild it every twenty years. They have done so without interruption, 63 times now, over the past 1300 years.

Few structures in the world have stood as long as Isé's shrine. Yet, it wasn't constructed at monumental scale, or of indestructible materials like the pyramids of Egypt. The secret of the modest thatched-roof and wood structure isn't heroic engineering or structural overload. The secret of the shrine's longevity is cultural continuity.

If it weren't for the 20-year rebuild, the cypress pillars, which must be set directly on the ground, would rot. The thatched roof, exposed to the harsh seasons, would decay and begin to leak.

And yet, the regular rebuilding of the shrine is more than an ongoing maintenance program; it has become an important national event. The underlying concept is that repeated rebuilding renders sanctuaries eternal. Hence, many of Japan's 100,000 shrines are torn down and rebuilt on a regular basis.

Preparations for the 20-year rebuilding of Isé Jingu take about eight years – four years to prepare the timber alone. Local residents participate by taking part in a parade – transporting the wood along with white stones—two per person—which they place in sacred spots around the shrine. Not only does this tradition keep Japanese artisan skills alive, the powerful rituals reinvigorate the spiritual life of the



community and strengthen their bonds of kinship and their connection to their religious heritage.

As Japanese writer Junko Edahiro describes, local people will take part in the ceremony several times throughout the course of their lives. She wrote, “I saw one elderly person who probably has experienced this event three or four times saying to young people... ‘I will leave these duties to you next time.’” Perhaps the most important aspect of this ritual is that it preserves the foundations of traditions that give stability and meaning to people’s lives – *L’dor vador*.

We Jews are different from the Japanese, and Judaism differs from Shinto. We don’t endow our sacred buildings with eternity. Shabbat and our festivals are our perpetual islands in time. What is eternal for us are the core ideas and values of our people as they have existed for millennia; the Oneness of God, the inherent worth of every human being and the obligation to repair the world by establishing justice and righteousness with every holy deed.

But, like the people of Japan, Jews have always perpetuated these ideals by periodically dismantling and rebuilding our sacred institutions and practices. This is especially true of our liturgy, which is, and always has been, a barometer of change in our communities. For 2,000 years, Jewish prayer has evolved and been renewed to reflect our changing experiences of history.

Two weeks ago, we laid to rest our long-time member, Spencer Goldstein, in the Sudbury Town Cemetery. As we performed the mitzvah of *kevurah* – shoveling earth into his grave, folks watched with some curiosity as we placed worn and torn copies of the Harlow machzor around the outside of the casket, burying about 50 volumes of sacred books with him. I might have explained to the non-Jews present, that it’s not that we believe Spencer needs reading material for whatever is next. No, it’s just that we treat our holy books with the same reverence we treat the human body – as a sacred vessel given to us on loan for our lifetime. Like our bodies, every Jewish book with God’s name in it is marked “Return to Sender.” So when they are tired and worn and no longer serviceable, we return them with love to the earth from where they came.

For me, burying those books felt a little like tearing down and rebuilding the Isé shrine. With some sadness, we buried a book that served us well for more than 30 years. And with joy, next week we will take up a new prayerbook for Yom Kippur. Like timbers for the shrine, *Mishkan Hanefesh* has been in preparation for over five years.

It has been said, if you want to know what is going on with the Jews, or what we believe at any given time or place, take a look at our prayerbook. The Harlow machzor was written in 1972. Like all prayerbooks, its language, style and theology



are products of its time and reflect the sensibilities of the Conservative movement for which it was written. The God-language is exclusively masculine and not all the prayers are translated, much less transliterated. The style is formalistic and the theology is narrowly patriarchal. In the Harlow machzor, God is mostly depicted as a judging and punishing god. For these reasons and others, the book had become an obstacle in the prayer-life of many of our members. We are delighted to have a new machzor for Yom Kippur that offers us deep meaning, transcendence and inspiration. *Mishkan Hanefesh* reflects many diverse, nuanced and positive ways we experience God.

Perhaps the best example of how we Jews have torn down a prayer and built it back up over the centuries is the *Eileh Ezk'rah* – These I Remember, also known as the Martyrology. *Eileh Ezk'rah* first appeared in Europe back in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, soon after the first Crusade. It is an extended *piyyut* – a liturgical poem – that reviews the martyrdom of 10 famous rabbis at the hands of the Romans. You'll find *Eileh Ezk'rah* before the confessional prayers in the Musaf Amidah for Yom Kippur. Its purpose is to set up and prepare us (and perhaps God) for our communal confession. The main idea of the poem was, and remains: "*chatanu tzureinu, s'lach lanu yotzreinu* – we have sinned, our Rock, forgive us, our Creator."

The way it works is by asking God to remember the virtues of our ancestors who were murdered as innocent victims and to accrue their merits to us. This concept is called *z'chut avot* – the merit of the ancestors. When we fall short, undeserving of forgiveness, we ask God to give us credit for the past deeds of our ancestors.

*Z'chut avot* suggests that each of us has a kind of bank account where our moral credits and debits are held. Every time we do a mitzvah, the bank balance increases. When we sin, the account is hit with a deduction. The beauty of *z'chut avot* is that one's moral bank account can be inherited – so that the merits of those who came before us can be passed down to us. When a perfectly innocent person is martyred, God owes them and their heirs for failing to intervene on their behalf. The bank balance skyrockets, leaving a credit for generations to come.

*Eileh Ezk'rah* became a way of justifying why innocent people suffer AND a way for us to remind God that He owes us on the day it really matters. On Yom Kippur, when we find ourselves morally short, we tap into the virtue we inherit from those who came before us.

Apparently, this idea worked well for folks who lived after the Crusades, when martyrdom was hugely popular. Perhaps this is because *z'chut avot* acted as a counter-argument to Christianity's claim that Jesus died to make atonement for humanity's sins. Christians have Jesus, we have our righteous ancestors who died innocently, so we could be forgiven.



Be that as it may, in the post-Holocaust world of the 1970's, this doctrine no longer rang true for contemporary Jews. We couldn't stomach the idea that we earn moral credit on account of the deaths of six million innocent Jews. So Jules Harlow tore down the *Eileh Ezk'rah* as it had been, and built it anew, with a new theology, which essentially goes like this. "Dear God, where were You when our people were being slaughtered? Why did you forsake us? ... All we can know is that Your ways are beyond our understanding, and yet, we have not abandoned You. In spite of it all, we stand before You today, begging for Your mercy on this Judgment Day."

The problems with Harlow's approach are manifold. It doesn't adequately deal the notion of *z'chut avot*, even though we don't really subscribe to it. It raises huge theological problems about the Holocaust, and most of all, it leaves us with no reason to believe that God could or would ever do anything for us. I suggest that the reason it worked for us for so long actually has less to do with the ideology it offers and more to do with the sheer emotional power of it. Even that was too much for many people who simply needed to leave the room before we read it. The truth is that Lorel saved us from the despair of Harlow's *Eileh Ezk'rah* with her powerful and uplifting rendition of *Zol Shoyn Kumen D'geulah* – expressing hope for the messianic age yet to come – in spite of everything that has happened to us.

Well, it's 2015 now, and after two generations, we will no longer be reading the Martyrology from Harlow. So what did the CCAR's editorial team decide to do with *Eileh Ezk'rah*? Some were tempted to omit it altogether. Others, out of deep reverence for tradition, wanted to keep it. So, of course, they tore it down and built it back again. Their goals were to create a powerful experience to prepare us for the *selichot* and *vidui* – our confessional prayers. At the same time, they wanted to avoid turning Yom Kippur into a review of all the tragedies that have befallen us throughout history. For that, we already have Yom HaShoah and Tisha B'Av. They wouldn't ignore the Holocaust – not at all – but they gave it a new theological context by inviting us to be inspired by the lives of ten people who gave their all for the benefit of humanity.

As *Mishkan Hanefesh* explicitly states: "The *Eileh Ezk'rah* in this machzor frames the themes of life, death, and remembrance differently from that of our forebears. From the account of Rabbi Akiva's spiritual resistance against the evil of Rome, we turn to human beings who lived in the more familiar, but no less treacherous, terrain of modernity and responded to extraordinary events in ways worthy of sacred remembrance. ...We recall men and women who... gave their lives while struggling to right wrongs, make peace, and save others from humiliation, harm or death. We remember them not as martyrs and not as saints, but as human beings defined by their moral choices, their sacrifices, their sense of responsibility. Theirs are stories of repairing the world: *tikkun olam*."

With this, our new machzor offers us an *Eileh Ezk'rah* with a theology for the 21<sup>st</sup>



century – one grounded in tradition and filled with inspiration and hope. Its message is: “We inherit the merit of our ancestors when we are inspired to live our lives by their actions. Redemption will come to us by the virtue of our own heroic deeds expressed through the work of tikkun olam – bringing justice and righteousness to a broken world. Every human life has the power to shape history.”

The morning the villagers gathered at Ise Jingu to dismantle their beloved shrine, I imagine more than a few tears were shed. For young people, it was the only shrine they had known. For all of them, it had been a place of healing and renewal. I also imagine smiles of joy and laughter, as the new shrine took its place next to the old.

There is no future without the past. Yet the past is gone, so the future is all we have. This is the paradox of our existence.

From the beginning of time, Judaism has survived and thrived on account of our ability and willingness to change. Renewal and change are crucial to the vibrancy of our communities, vital to our own religious practices and central to our own personal Jewish identities. Rosh Hashanah is a celebration of the perpetual cycle of rebirth and renewal of life. Let us embrace it and go forward in joy.