

Dedication to Community:
On the Rededication of KAM Isaiah Israel's Historic Sanctuary

We Jews are a people on the move.

Our father Abraham was called the first Hebrew, meaning “one who crosses over,” and the mythic formation of our nation occurred in the wilderness as our spiritual ancestors received God’s word at Mount Sinai’s rocky foot. Beyond the bounds of legend, Jews have wandered from Judea to Babylonia and back, to Alexandria and Africa and Assyria and Rome, to European town after European town and Muslim empire to Muslim empire. We have crossed every sea and settled in every continent; and while half our population today reside in the State of Israel, Jews continue to call home every corner of the globe.

How have we managed to survive and thrive in so many places? In a word: dedication. Wherever we go, we set aside a special space and call it holy; and this space serves as a reminder of the values we hold, values which – truth be told – hold us as well. By dedicating sacred space, we reiterate our noble causes and robe in stone the pursuits of peace and truth that have sustained our people in every age.

Consider our first communal building project, the Tabernacle the Torah describes built on our wilderness trek from Egypt to the Promised Land. More than a third of the Bible’s Book of Exodus describes the design and construction of this sanctuary, called in Hebrew a *mishkan*, a dwelling-place for God. This is the space for common Israelites to come face-to-face (so to speak) with God, presenting on the altar offerings that symbolize their connection with the Creator. The first recorded *dedication* is of this altar: וְזֹאת חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אַחֲרֵי הַמִּשָּׁח אֹתוֹ, “This was the dedication of the altar after its anointing” (Numbers 7:88).¹ God knows, the Torah tells us, that the people need a physical meeting place to ground their devotion; and the Tabernacle, with the altar within, serves as the perfect image of interaction between human and divine.

Those who wrote this story, who read it and passed it down and saw in it a lesson for all time recognized a very important truth: We don’t look for God *everywhere*, but we can find God *anywhere*. By setting aside a special place or thing, and then by entering or touching or lifting or using it with purity of intention and wholeness of heart, our minds transcend the material realm, drawing our focus to that which matters most. The object itself bears no mystical power but rather unlocks in *us* the power to reach beyond ourselves.

And so it was with the Temple in Jerusalem, the centerpiece of Jewish worship for nearly 1000 years. The Bible tells of its ceremony of dedication, replete with details of the building’s grandeur and glory (1 Kings 8). More important than the Temple’s

¹ See also Numbers 7:10, 11, and 84.

physical resplendence, though, are the prayers which Solomon pronounces during its dedication. In five cascading paragraphs, Solomon prays for justice (vv. 30-32), forgiveness (vv. 33-40), openness (vv. 41-43), defense (vv. 44-45), and restoration (vv. 46-51). וּפְנִיתָ אֶל־תְּפִלַּת עַבְדְּךָ, “And turn, O Eternal my God, to the prayer and supplication of Your servant ... to open your eyes day and night toward this House” (1 Kings 8:28-29). This is a prayer for Solomon’s age and a prayer for our own, a prayer beseeching blessing in a time of need and consecrating in a holy space our commitment to walking in divine paths.

These ancient stories of dedication – of the wilderness Mishkan and the Jerusalem Temple – are the blueprints for dedications and rededications through Jewish history. The Maccabees – whose triumphant restoration of the Temple to Jewish hands we celebrate tonight – rededicated God’s house to the service of the Most High. And later, over centuries of dispersal throughout the world, Jews would build and dedicate synagogues, each a *mikdash m’at*, a “small sanctuary” modeled on the Temple itself. In every city, village, and town where Jews lived, we brought our values with us, our sacred and eternal reminders of the power and the presence that accompanies us in our journeys as well as our purpose and drive to maintain the mandates of our religion and to make the world better for our having lived upon it.

KAM Isaiah Israel is no different. We, too, concretize our values in the space we call sacred, and we express our religious commitments by coming together under the umbrella of shared concerns. The briefest review of our history reveals that our community has remained consistently introspective, allowing for people of similar sentiments to organize at will, sometimes with independence and sometimes with unity or reform.

The parent of our congregation – and, indeed, the parent or grandparent of most of Chicago’s Reform synagogues – was Kehillat Anshe Maarav, KAM, the “Congregation of the Men of the West.” Founded in 1847 as Illinois’ first Jewish congregation, KAM from its earliest days walked the tightrope of tradition and change. They welcomed religious reforms and modern practices, sparking a breakaway congregation called B’nai Sholom to serve the needs of more traditional Jews. But KAM refrained from the most radical reforms of the day, resulting in a second breakaway, Chicago Sinai, for those who sought change at a faster pace. From these communities later arose Temple Israel² and Isaiah Temple³, which merged in 1924 when Isaiah built

² B’nai Sholom (1852) merged with Temple Israel (1896) in 1906. Temple Israel itself was also an offshoot of KAM: “Temple Israel (known as the ‘People’s Synagogue’), branched off from KAM in 1896” (Chicago History Museum, “Hag Pesach Sameach: Passover and Chicago’s Jewish Communities,” <https://www.chicagohistory.org/hag-pesach-sameach>). Temple Israel was founded by Rabbi Isaac S. Moses, who was ordained as a rabbi by Bernhard Felsenthal (*American Jewish Yearbook* Volume 5, 1903, p. 83, https://www.google.com/books/edition/American_Jewish_Year_Book/IKFKAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Isaac+Moses+1847+Posen&pg=PA83&printsec=frontcover) and who was serving as the rabbi of KAM at the time. An article in *The Jewish Voice* (June 29, 1896, p. 7) opens, “Rev. Dr. Isaac S. Moses, lately the rabbi of Anshe Maariv congregation, is organizing a new independent Jewish congregation whose home will be somewhere on the south side” (“Chicago Locals,” <https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/tjewvc/1896/06/26/01/article/28/?e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN%7CtXTI-----1>).

this magnificent sanctuary – and the reunification of all these communities was complete in 1971 when KAM and Isaiah Israel merged into the congregation we know today. The values enshrined in this sanctuary, painted on glass and etched in stone, represent the enduring commitments of our congregation, which give us direction and drive in tranquil or turbulent times.

All Jewish synagogues have three primary functions. A synagogue is a *beit midrash*, a house of study; a *beit t'filah*, a house of prayer; and a *beit k'nesset*, a house of assembly. KAM Isaiah Israel fulfills these purposes with the values that adorn our stained glass windows, the values of truth and holiness, piety and love, justice and peace.

As a house of study, this synagogue stands for curiosity and deliberation. Ours is a community concerned with history, its lessons and its legacies, and we make it our business to know from whom we came. Here we blend all areas of knowledge in our pursuit of truth, finding meaning in music and literature, science and philosophy, politics and, of course, religion. Indeed, the principles of Reform Judaism insist on the rigorous pursuit of truth, even (and especially) if it requires adjusting our prior beliefs when we learn something new – so we experience holiness when the treasures of the past glitter with the light of the present and illuminate our path to the future. In an age where truth is mocked and set aside, where partisan demagogues and billionaire robber-barons flatten society into an ugly and pugnacious *us* and *them*; in an age where the validity of facts seems to stem from the newspaper or TV channel they're published in; and in an age where higher education is under attack by those who profit from cultural strife, being dedicated as a house of study is a form of nonviolent resistance to the forces that would deaden us. We study to grow deeper in our understanding of ourselves, one another, and the world and so that we might know how to bring this world a little closer to the sacred ideals of our faith.

As a house of prayer, this synagogue stands for innovation and inclusion in the context of a robust engagement with tradition. The folkways of our people – our liturgies, customs, and rites – come alive with each new generation, and our piety is expressed in creative conversation with Jewish practices from around the world. You will find here the celebration of every Jewish holiday and some non-Jewish ones as well. You will find here a passionate devotion to the texts of our people as well as the braiding together of modern and ancient poetry and song. And you will find here the rich commitment to the power of prayer, for where better than a house of worship to find the time and space to encounter God? We believe that Jewish life can enrich anyone who wishes to connect with it, and we strive to make the wisdom and inspiration of Judaism available to all. Jews of every race and nation and cultural background – as well as people who aren't Jewish and who will never be – are welcome in this community. We aspire to embrace with love people of all genders, colors, and sexualities, ages and abilities – and yes, even political parties. Diversity strengthens our

³ Zion Congregation, founded by Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal, separated from Sinai in 1864, and Isaiah, founded by Rabbi Joseph Stolz, separated from Zion in 1895.

commitment to Judaism, and we embrace Isaiah's ideal: "[Our] house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples" (56:7).

And finally, as a house of assembly, this synagogue stands for standing together. This is a place to build and strengthen community, to make new friendships and deepen old ones, to remind ourselves of the power of relationships to bring stability in a world that seems, at times, unmoored from any sense of responsibility. Americans have gone from bowling alone to watching movies alone to even shopping for groceries from the comfort of our couch. We see much more of our addictive screens than we do of one another's faces, and ours is a space where we look up from our phones into another's eyes and see there reflections of ourselves. These human connections are powerful, and we believe that this power can be harnessed not only to better the self but also to repair the world. We believe that justice can be achieved when allies become advocates on issues of shared concern, and we contribute to coalitions that magnify the power of marginalized groups who would struggle to succeed alone. Peace is not a pipe dream, it's the guiding light of the world as it should be; and we know, as our prayerbook says, that "there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together."⁴

My friends, we gather today to dedicate this space to the sacred values of this beloved congregation. In line with countless generations who have gone before us, and with humble acknowledgement that we are role models for those who will come after, we reaffirm the ideals for which we strive, and we reify them here, in this house of study, prayer, and assembly.

KAM Isaiah Israel has stood for 100 years and more for truth, holiness, piety, love, justice, and peace. And today, on the occasion of this once-in-lifetime rededication, let us add a seventh value: community. Our synagogue is not just a building; it is also the congregation that suffuses it with life. And not only this: KAM Isaiah Israel could not exist without the partnership of our neighbors and friends in the greater South Side. Our membership and our community extend beyond Hyde Park, of course, but we remain firmly and proudly rooted in the South Side. We see ourselves as a landmark and a resource in our neighborhood, and at the same time, we benefit greatly from the rich treasures that surround us. Community makes us who we are: Jewish community, South Side community, Chicago community, and human community, all dedicated, albeit in unique and diverse ways, to flourishing, improvement, and growth.

And so let us not only dedicate this sanctuary but let us dedicate *ourselves* to the value of community. Let us draw strength from one another in our shared pursuit of love, justice, peace, and truth. Let us take inspiration from Jewish expressions of piety and holiness even as the perspectives of all faiths deepen our appreciation of the divine.

⁴ *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur* (CCAR Press 2007, p. 157). This is based on Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), which concludes: "We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught, or what it has commonly been taken to teach, about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form: first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt; second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land; and third, that 'the way to the land is through the wilderness' [W. D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 60]. There is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands and marching" (149).

And on this first night of Hanukkah, let us bring light into our hearts and, through our deeds, let us bring light into the world. May we feel, all of us, the warm glow of this power of community.