

Rebuilding the Temple, by Rabbi Moshe Thomas Heyn August, 2014

There's an old story about Reb Levi Yitzchak (1740-1809), an early Hasidic rabbi from the Ukrainian town of Berdichev. When his son was engaged to be married, he excitedly sent out invitations to everyone he knew announcing that the celebration would take place in Jerusalem on such-and-such a date and time. In small print at the bottom of the invitation, he added: *If, G-d forbid, the messiah has not yet arrived, the wedding will be held on the same date and time here in Berdichev.*

I have long been inspired by this kind of faith and optimism that is so prevalent in the lives of Hasidic rabbis and their students. I was reminded of this during a recent visit to Israel where, especially in Jerusalem, I encountered many devoutly-religious people. While standing at the *kotel* (the Western Wall), I stood alongside hundreds of them as they prayed fervently for the coming of the Messiah and for the rebuilding of the Temple.

I was fascinated by the way they went about their lives as though I didn't exist, even though I was standing next to them. It somehow felt like there was a huge chasm between us, yet I wondered how that was possible since we both practice the same religion. I then realized that there is a pivotal difference between the principles that inform their faith and the principles that inform my own.

The principles that inform their faith are rooted in a narrative we both share as a frame of reference: that we are the descendants of Abraham and that we have a special relationship with God which is defined by the Torah given to Moses at Sinai. However, as non-Orthodox Jews, we will only see ourselves as lesser versions of our Orthodox coreligionists until we understand that this narrative, whether it has any historical basis or not, is part of an even larger story.

The principles of my religious faith are rooted in a story that includes all races, nations and faith traditions because it encompasses the history of humankind as I came to understand it through the study of comparative religion, sociology and developmental psychology. The most fundamental principle of my faith is this: *that all religions originate from the human encounter with a transcendent reality.*

For such encounters to have any lasting value, they must be interpreted and communicated through language, symbol, myth and metaphor. Both the primary stage of 'encounter' and the secondary stage of 'interpretation' are necessary, but we run into trouble when the order is reversed. When people become fixated on their *interpretation* of reality, they end up pressing God, the world and other people into the service of their own agenda. There's something I find to be offensive about that.

When devout Christians talk about salvation, I understand them to be describing an intimate, loving relationship with the transcendent. Their passion for and devotion to God inspires me. But the mythic narrative through which they interpret their experience becomes a problem when it causes them to believe that their path to salvation is the *only* path.

In a similar way, Islam provides its adherents with a beautiful way of being in relationship with the transcendent. Some of my best friends are Sufis. However, there is a mythic narrative within Islam which causes its adherents to believe that *their* path is the only path. When they come to regard outsiders as 'infidels,' we end up with the crisis we now see playing itself out on a global scale.

The same dynamic occurs in our own religion, though with a bit less aggression toward outsiders since most Orthodox Jews have no interest in converting non-Jews. When it comes to relations within the Jewish community, fundamentalists believe that their way of thinking represents the definitive interpretation of how to be a Jew. They are convinced that their way is the only way for a Jew to be in an authentic relationship with God. Any other interpretations are, at best, misguided.

Our Jewish narrative, and the principles we derive from it, are precious. However, we must also acknowledge that (1) all human beings have the capacity to be in relationship with the transcendent and (2) any Jew desiring to be in an authentic relationship with God can do so outside of a traditionalist framework. Broadening our view in this way will help bring about a paradigm shift no less significant than one that took place 2,000 years ago.

At that time, the ancient Temple was believed by our ancestors to be the only place where they could be in direct relationship with the Divine. When the Temple was destroyed, the dominant way of thinking changed to allow for that direct relationship to continue, albeit in a different form – through prayer and study. An old view of what was required to be in relationship with God was replaced by a new one. Now, in our age, another shift of this magnitude is taking place.

When I heard prayers being recited for the rebuilding of the Temple there at the *kotel*, I could not join my prayer with theirs. I do not seek to return to a pre-modern, theocratic State, nor do I seek a cataclysmic confrontation with fundamentalist Muslims who cling passionately to their own mythic narratives. Such adherence to traditional views, on both sides of the conflict, inevitably leads to violence and destruction on a global scale. What is needed is a paradigm shift in which progressive and inclusive religious philosophies come to replace the old mythic ones.

As I stood before the *kotel*, the Temple stood before me as a symbol of our capacity to live each day in direct relationship with a transcendent reality. My prayer was that we might rebuild whatever structures are needed for that relationship to be nourished. And I prayed that the paradigm shift necessary for that to happen was well-underway.

When I returned home to Temple Israel to see our beautiful campus, our pluralistic congregation, and our exciting schedule of classes, programs and services, I could see that my prayers were already being answered. We are the builders of that Temple.