

## Rabbi's Reflections: The Synagogue--Part 2

Synagogues are holy places, where God's Presence dwells, so some synagogue practices emphasize it. One first walks into a hall before entering the sanctuary in order to leave behind the outside world both physically and mentally as one moves from secular to holy space. Some shuls have a pitcher and washbasin in the hall outside the sanctuary for worshipers to wash their already clean hands ritually before praying, so hand-washing helps separate the profane and holy. We joke now that cleanliness is next to godliness, but in earlier times Jews believed it. If God means everything, one treats God accordingly. We clean and dress up for significant meetings and important people, so we add ritual purity to physical cleanliness when we encounter God. Even during services, if people touch their feet or shoes, pick their nose, or use the rest room while praying, they wash their hands before returning to prayer. *Shmutz* (dirt) on the body distracts the mind and shows others we do not care what we are doing (we are not playing football). Hillel two millennia ago called it a *mitzvah* to bathe, for if people faithfully wash the emperor's statue, we should diligently wash for we are in God's image. Nor should one spread germs, which entails extra hand-washing. "Who may ascend the Lord's mountain? Who may stand in His holy place? One who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Psalm 24:3-4, the Psalmist then adds some ethical criteria).

As mentioned above, we wear proper clothing and shoes. One may wear work clothes to weekday services, but Shabbat's extra sanctity should entail nicer attire. We would not go to the Capitol or the White House dressed like a *shlumperdik zhlub* wearing *shmattes* (slovenly hick in rags). Like the body, clothes must be clean. Even dirty shoes must be wiped before entering the synagogue. Every morning we say a blessing when putting on clothes and shoes. Clothes and shoes reflect beliefs and alter moods.

To increase the level of holiness before God and induce the spirit to pray, one enters the sanctuary, says *Mah Tov*, and bows towards the ark when it says as a sign of respect. Then one sits in the same seat (or within six feet). The same seat helps to create the right mood to pray by its regularity, its force of habit, the sameness of the surroundings. The Talmud says that Abraham fixed a spot to pray, and so God will help us get into the mood to pray if we have a set seat like Abraham (*Berakhot 6b*).

Sanctuaries have windows (Daniel 6:11 facing Jerusalem; some twelve, recalling the tribes) for light. Seeing the sky inspires reverence. Looking out reminds us that we are part of the larger world. They have no mirrors lest we focus on ourselves, or pray to an image (contra the second commandment). These practices help put the worshiper in the proper mind-set.

Running in the sanctuary (or anywhere else), and frivolous behavior, e.g. playing video games, reading secular books, using cell phones, are not allowed. One

should walk with dignity and respect, pray and learn. Eating, drinking, chewing gum, and smoking in the sanctuary are prohibited as one cannot concentrate entirely on God and form prayers with the mind and mouth doing other things. An unclean body or lackadaisical behavior detracts from the proper mood, or at least makes it much harder to achieve it.

A shul's holiness is not intrinsic like the Temple's, but stems from similar purposes and it houses the Torah scrolls. An object's holiness derives from its proximity to the scrolls. The holier it is, the harder to use or sell for other purposes. All synagogue property should be treated respectfully and not damaged or removed from the building. One cannot spend unlawful profits on sacred purposes, so one cannot donate them to a synagogue (or any charity). Gains realized by immoral means cannot be sanctified; they defy and defile holiness. All adults model and teach this behavior to the children.

Synagogues are holy and we must act duly by inspecting our actions and cleansing our bodies, behavior and minds to achieve holiness and appear before God. Many shuls put the phrase, "Know before Whom you stand" near the ark. Consider your behavior's point. "Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8).

-- Rabbi Michael Rascoe