

## “Holy Homes – Holy Work”

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I have experienced lots of natural and unnatural disasters. I experienced two wars in Israel, a major earthquake in San Francisco, riots in Los Angeles, but still, I can't say I've ever experienced anything plague-like until this year – last month, in fact. It was the night before Pesach and Chip was preparing holiday foods as I was setting our holiday table when a strange storm enveloped our neighborhood. All of the sudden hail the size of ping pong balls started shooting down from the sky. My ten year old son, Max, emerged from his room with a panicked look on his face. We were uncertain if the sizeable balls of ice would break our windows. Quickly my mind moved to the Exodus story we would tell the following night and the seventh plague of hail.

This week's Torah portion also speaks of plagues – plagues that afflict skin, plagues that affect garments, plagues that even damage homes. When we enter the land of Canaan, the text tells us, and God inflicts an eruptive plague upon our house, we need to go before the priest and say “Something like a plague has appeared on my house.”

The Priest should work to isolate and stop the plague, yet if, after pulling out the afflicted stones and replastering our home, the plague does not abate, our house should ultimately be torn down - it's stones, its timber and all the coating.

I always imagined this Biblical plague upon a home was much like the mold that grows on shower curtains. I saw that mold a lot in my college years. It can get to a point of no return, where it can no longer be salvaged and the curtain has to be tossed. Modern commentators affirm my hunch. As the Women's Torah Commentary remarks the Tzaraat of houses seems to have been a kind of mold or fungus that attached itself to building stones.

While today we don't see homes being torn down due to leprosy, we do see homes destroyed by spiritual afflictions. Negative energy and negative relationships, if neglected or left unchecked, can damage a home.

Like the Israelites of old who brought in the Priest to examine the messiness of their lives, those elements over which they had seemed to have lost control, we need to similarly work to keep our homes holy.

As those of us who are older might do routine checkups for skin cancers, we need to self-examine our relationships – as parents, as children, as partners. Are we neglectful? Are we angry? Are we hurtful with our words or with our inattention? Do we take for granted the people we love and the blessings we know?

Just as we'd take vitamins to keep our bodies healthy, or change the filters in our vents to keep our air healthy, so do we need to invest time into keeping the spiritual elements of our homes healthy. Bringing simple Jewish concepts into our dwelling places can enable us to create holy and healthy space.

Our homes are more holy and whole when we observe Shabbat and sacred time. It's really quite simple - set up a nice table, make a good dessert, buy flowers, mark the special moments of Shabbat or of birthdays or of finishing a big deal or a project or completing a school year.

Our homes are more holy when we celebrate mundane time. We can bring simple rituals into each day... sitting down as a family for breakfast or dinner, reflecting with our kids at the end of the day on the high points and the low points, what we call in our Schindler/Wallach household - the "glads and the sads" of each day.

Our homes are more holy when we speak and listen to those we love. The Talmud teaches that, "Words that come from the heart enter the heart." All that our loved ones want is our presence and attention -- even if it's at a distance through the phone.

Our homes are more holy when we invite people into them. "Your house should be open wide..." Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of our Fathers, teach. Just as Abraham and Sarah had their tents open all four sides to invite in any passerby, so should we invite others to join us and enjoy the harvest we have.

Our homes are more holy when we share responsibility. "A community is too heavy for any one person to carry alone," our Jewish texts teach. No matter what the ages are of the people in your home, everyone is happier when jobs and responsibilities are shared and when work is acknowledged by saying a simple "thank you."

Our homes should be filled with laughter and fun. An essential element of Shabbat is oneg Shabbat – the joy of Shabbat. Do something fun in your homes with those you care about it – ice cream, movies, board games, reading a novel together, romance.

One of my father's favorite scenes from a play was from Thornton Wilder's, *Our Town*, where the character Emily, after having died in childbirth, is allowed to return to earth for just one day. She chooses her twelfth birthday to relive. Yet as she comes upon the home so familiar to her, she realizes that everyone is too busy to recognize the day's glory.

Though the family of her childhood cannot hear her, as she looks at the scene of her life as an outsider, she begs her family to pay attention. Taking leave, she cries out:

Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners, Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking... and food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths, and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute? That's all human beings are! Just blind people. [From Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (New York: Harper & Row, 1938, 1957)]

We make our homes holy and we make our lives holy by recognizing the holiness of what we have – before it's too late and the opportunities are gone – either through kids moving out, relationships dissolving into nothingness or death that is the inevitable conclusion to everyone's lives.

Beyond our homes, we best live when we make our places of work holy, as well. For some of us spend more waking hours at work with our colleagues than we do in our homes and with our families. The same elements that make a home holy -- meaning making, celebration, honesty, presence, shared responsibility, and fun -- can make the sanctuaries of our employment sacred as well.

Plagues don't just happen, on almost all the nights of my life, save one, hail doesn't just fall from the sky.

Family alienation doesn't appear out of the blue – seeds of discontent spin out of control through the decades.

Divorces aren't declared out of a vacuum.

The holiness of our homes and of our lives needs to be created, nurtured, watered regularly like a spectacular orchid that flowers in bloom. The beauty of our holy homes can brighten not only our lives but the world.

As Rabbi David Wolpe once wrote, "Shalom bayit – household harmony – is a treasured value. Shalom bayit radiates outward. "One who creates peace at home builds peace in all Israel," said Simeon Ben Gamliel. "Goodness inside one's home is no less exalted than greatness outside it."

Oseh Shalom Bimromahv, O God who makes peace in the heavens above, among the angels where that peace is not needed, bring peace upon our homes, upon houses of business, and upon our world.

Amen.