

Gala Dinner Speech March 2009

Maurice, Ben, Kenny, Steven, Daniel, Ben, Drew, Michael, Benji, Devin and Eric, my dear students:

ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם – They shall make for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst..

The Torah portions for the last few weeks have been describing in great detail the construction of the Sanctuary, the mishkan, which, upon completion would bring God's presence into the midst of the Children of Israel.

A house must be built to experience the presence of God. Not – as our Rabbis tell us - like Avraham, who encountered God on a mountain, or like Yitzchak, who encountered God in the field, but like Jacob who understood that God is to be encountered in a house. Why? What is the importance of a house?

First, a house must be constructed; ועשו. It requires sustained effort and labor. To quote Teddy Roosevelt: "Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty" Only when we dedicate ourselves – when we truly put our whole selves into something – does it become a thing of lasting and enduring value. When God's presence departed from Mt. Sinai, its sanctity evaporated; when the Temple in which we invested our time and labor to build was destroyed, the sanctity of *its* space endured.

And such labor, labor dedicated to a holy end, is itself holy labor. When we work to achieve our ideals, when we work to reach God, when we work to reach people, we sanctify our work, we sanctify every day, every moment.

But we must be careful. For what do we create with our labor? Do we create a House of God, or do we create – God forbid – a substitute for God, a Golden Calf? What is the difference between the Mishkan and the Golden Calf? A house has walls, boundaries, which delimit and structure the space inside. The Calf is not the empty space, it is the thing itself.

When we project only ourselves into the world, we make a Golden Calf. When we project *our* image of the other into the world, we make a Golden Calf. When we labor, instead, to structure a space, we allow the other to enter, we allow true encounter to occur. As any teacher knows after

having posed a question to the class, it is only by suffering through those few moments of uneasy silence that finally the student emerges from her shell, and true connection and true learning occurs. Only when we stop our efforts, stop our talking, stop our projecting of ourselves, only when we open a space, does the other enter. In such a space, God is met. In such a space, the other is met.

And when this space that we have created has walls and boundaries, then it is a safe space, a space that allows for a relationship of warmth and intimacy, a nurturing relationship, a relationship of security and protection.

My dear students:

We have worked to create such a space, such a house for you for these last four years. And we believe that in striving to create such a house and to realize our vision, our work has been sanctified in the process, that it is truly holy work. We have created a house where much Torah and halakha is taught, a house where you received expert professional training. But the most important work occurred when we created a space. A space to allow for a true encounter, between rabbi and student, between student and student, and between student and God, encounters and relationships that were intimate, nurturing, and empowering.

Now you will go out as rabbis, to lead communities, to teach Torah, to provide religious counsel and spiritual counseling to individuals and communities. Throw yourself into this labor, for only labor to which you dedicate yourself will be meaningful, will be holy. Never waver from striving to achieve your ideals and your vision, for in this way you will sanctify every act, every moment. Do not become so enamored with your work that it becomes the thing that you worship, that it becomes your Golden Calf. Work to create space, the space in which true encounters and true relationships occur. Pull back so that you can encounter God; pull back so that you can encounter the other – the student, the congregant, the stranger on the street. Make a space that invites people in; make a space that is loving, nurturing, and empowering.

Our Rabbis tell us that it is the same Yaakov who understood the secret of the house that was blessed with a נחלה בלי מצרים – an inheritance without bounds – ופררצת ימה וקדמה וצפונה ונגבה. We believe that we have provided you with a home that has nurtured you, empowered you, and imbued you with our faith in you. So that now, having benefited from this space and these walls, you will know no limits, so that now you may spread out and fly in the world. Give this gift to

your communities, to your students. Create your houses of God, your holy spaces, so that God may be encountered, so that others may be encountered, so that everyone you connect with will be nurtured and will grow, so that he or she may also fly in world, and have an inheritance that knows no bounds.

Mazel Tov!