

Building More Than a Sanctuary | 5787 Shabbat Shuva Drasha by Rabbi Dov Winston

In April of 1998, approximately 250 people gathered on the campus of MIT to say goodbye to a building. It was not, by any conventional measure, a beautiful building. Building 20 had been constructed hurriedly in 1943 as a temporary structure during World War II, and the original contractor expected it to last only for the duration of the war and six months thereafter. Instead, it remained standing for more than fifty years.

The building was shabby, flexible, and remarkably unremarkable. Walls could be moved or knocked through. Laboratories spilled out into hallways. Doors were often propped open because there simply was not enough room inside. And yet, somehow, this unimpressive building became one of the most creative spaces in the history of MIT. Work conducted there contributed to advances in radar, atomic clocks, medical imaging, and eventually even gravitational-wave research. Researchers from completely different disciplines found themselves working alongside one another, wandering into each other's laboratories and discovering ideas they otherwise never would have encountered.

At the farewell gathering, Professor Paul Penfield tried to explain what had made this ugly old building so remarkable. Building 20, he said, had an "uncanny, magical power to bring out the best in everybody." Another professor described it somewhat differently: Building 20 was "a place that would be shaped by its occupants."

And perhaps that was its secret. The building shaped the people who entered it, but the people also shaped the building. There is something profound about that relationship. The spaces we inhabit affect us. They create expectations, influence our behavior, and establish a culture. But at the same time, the people who occupy those spaces determine what those places ultimately become. In some ways, the place makes the people; in other ways, the people make the place.

Over these past few years, our congregation has invested an extraordinary amount of thought, energy, and resources into the renovation of our Shul. Now, as we stand in our renewed sanctuary, we have an opportunity to ask a question that goes far beyond the architecture: What does it mean for us to inhabit a renewed space? Will this new sanctuary change us? Will we change it? Will the space define the people, or will the people define the space? Or, perhaps, will it go both ways?

That question feels especially appropriate on Shabbat Shuva, because the central goal of these days is itself one of renewal. Teshuvah is, in some ways, one of the most illogical ideas in Judaism. On Yom Kippur, we speak about the possibility of emerging from the day genuinely cleansed. The Kohen Gadol would emerge from the Kodesh HaKedoshim, and Klal Yisrael could somehow believe that what had been broken could be repaired, what had been stained could become clean, and what had been damaged by sin did not have to remain damaged forever.

But how does that actually work? We know what we have done. We know the mistakes we have made. We know our histories. How can a person ever really become new when he or she remains the same person who made those mistakes?

What Does It Mean to Be “New”?

Perhaps the answer begins with understanding what the Torah itself means by the word *chadash*. The first appearance of the word in the Torah comes at the beginning of Sefer Shemot: “*Vayakam melech chadash al Mitzrayim asher lo yada et Yosef*” — “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef.” Later, in Sefer Devarim, the Torah uses the same word in a very different context. Before the Jewish people go to war, the officers announce that anyone who has built a *bayit chadash*, a new house, and has not yet dedicated it may return home.

But what exactly constitutes a “new house”? The Mishnah in Sotah records the opinion of Rabbi Yehudah that someone who renovates a house without redoing the entire structure does not receive this exemption. The Rambam, however, surprisingly rules that the halachah does not follow Rabbi Yehudah. That raises a fascinating possibility: perhaps a house can be considered *chadash* even when it has not been completely demolished and rebuilt from scratch.

Rav Asher Brander, citing the Ben Ish Chai, connects this to that very first appearance of *chadash* in the Torah. The Gemara in Sotah famously records a dispute between Rav and Shmuel concerning the “new king” of Egypt. One understands the Torah literally: there was actually a new Pharaoh. The other maintains that it was the same Pharaoh, but “*shenitchadshu gezeirotav*”—his decrees had changed. Externally, he may have been the same person, with the same face, the same name, the same throne, and the same palace. And yet the Torah could call him *chadash* because something fundamental had changed within.

The Ben Ish Chai suggests that this helps us understand the Torah’s conception of a *bayit chadash* as well. A house does not necessarily need a new exterior to become a new house. The walls can remain. The foundation can remain. The external structure can remain recognizable. And yet its inner reality can become completely different.

That is a very different definition of newness. In our modern vocabulary, “new” usually means replacement. Throw away the old phone and buy a new one. Tear down the old structure and construct something different. Discard the previous version and begin again. But *chadash* can mean something subtler and perhaps much more demanding. It can mean renewal.

Rav Brander develops this beautifully. Every morning we describe Hashem as “*hamechadesh b’tuvo b’chol yom tamid ma’aseh bereishit*”—the One Who constantly renews creation. Creation is not discarded every morning and replaced with another universe. The same world is continually infused with renewed existence. And that, he suggests, is the challenge of Elul: “to renew the stale without razing the infrastructure,” to discover new meaning without abandoning everything that came before.

True newness, in other words, does not necessarily come from the outside in. It comes from the inside out. And that idea resonates powerfully with what we have done physically in our own Shul. One of the guiding principles of this renovation was that we did not want to destroy the shell and

begin again. We wanted to preserve what was ours while renewing what was inside. The building would remain our building, but it would become *chadash*.

What Are We Building?

To understand what a renewed Shul asks of us, however, we first have to ask a more fundamental question: What exactly is a Shul? After all, the Torah never commands us to build synagogues. The institution of the synagogue developed later in Jewish history. Yechezkel, the prophet of the diaspora, speaks of Hashem becoming a “Mikdash Me’at”, a miniature sanctuary, for the Jewish people in exile. Thus, over time, the synagogue became the portable center of Jewish religious life—the place of tefillah, Torah, community, and encounter with God in the absence of the Temple. But, there is no doubt that its spiritual ancestor is the Mishkan.

There is something fascinating about the Mishkan. The Torah does not merely tell us that a sanctuary should exist. It commands, “*V’asu Li Mikdash v’shachanti b’tocham*” — “They shall make for Me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell among them.” The Malbim offers an extraordinary interpretation of those words. The Mishkan was not merely a structure standing somewhere in the Jewish camp. Every individual was charged with constructing a Mishkan “b’chadrei levavo”—within the chambers of his own heart. Every person must make himself into a dwelling place for the Shechinah.

That changes the entire meaning of a sanctuary. A Shul is not simply somewhere we go to find God. It is a place that is supposed to teach us how to bring God into ourselves.

There is an even deeper connection between the Mishkan and these days of teshuvah. The Midrash Tanchuma makes a remarkable claim. Although the Torah records the command to build the Mishkan before the sin of the Golden Calf, the command was actually given to Moshe on Yom Kippur, after the Jewish people had been forgiven. Why then? Because the Mishkan itself was testimony that they had been forgiven. The same people who had taken their gold and fashioned an idol would now take their gold and build a sanctuary. The material did not have to disappear. The people did not have to disappear. Even their past did not disappear. Instead, everything was redirected. The gold of the sin became the gold of the Mishkan.

That may be one of the most powerful descriptions of teshuvah imaginable. Hashem did not say, “I need a new people.” He took the same fallible people—the people who had failed spectacularly—and gave them the opportunity to build something holy. The Mishkan was not merely a building constructed after forgiveness; in a very real sense, the Mishkan became the architecture of forgiveness itself.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt”l, asks why the Torah devotes so much space to the construction of the Mishkan. The answer, he suggests, is that until that moment, virtually everything had been done for the Jewish people. Hashem took them out of Egypt, split the sea, provided food and water, and Moshe led them through every crisis. Yet the people continually complained. Then came the

Mishkan, and suddenly the pattern changed. Hashem essentially said: Let them build something together.

Some brought gold, some brought silver, some brought fabrics, while others contributed their craftsmanship and their time. They contributed so enthusiastically that Moshe eventually had to tell them to stop. Rabbi Sacks sees in this a fundamental lesson: it is not only what God does for us that transforms us; it is what we do for God. The Mishkan transformed a nation of passive recipients into builders.

Perhaps that is one of the great purposes of a Shul as well. A Shul cannot simply be a place where Judaism is provided for us. It cannot merely be somewhere we arrive, sit, receive, and leave. A Shul asks us to become builders—builders of Torah and tefillah, builders of chesed and community, builders of relationships, and ultimately builders of one another.

Rabbi Sacks elsewhere describes the revolutionary nature of the synagogue. Unlike the Beit HaMikdash, it could exist anywhere. The Mishkan had already taught us that holiness did not depend upon permanent stone. God could accompany His people wherever they traveled. “*V’shachanti b’tocham*”—God does not merely dwell *in it*. He dwells *among them*. The holiness of a sanctuary ultimately lives in its people.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel captured this idea magnificently. Jewish history did not always give us the resources to construct the great cathedrals that other civilizations built. Instead, he wrote, our ancestors learned “to lay bricks in the soul”—to construct holiness out of study, prayer, love, fear of Heaven, and simple human deeds. That is the building project that never ends.

Rabbi Norman Lamm takes the idea even further. In a remarkable drasha titled “Why Synagogues Fail,” Rabbi Lamm describes several different ways we might understand the function of a synagogue. We might imagine that the Shul is the source of holiness, with kedushah radiating outward from the building into the people who enter it. But the classical Jewish conception, he argues, also moves in the opposite direction. The synagogue is not only the cause of the community’s holiness; it is also its effect.

A sanctuary, in this conception, is built out of the Torah, mitzvot, generosity, integrity, and spiritual aspirations of the people who inhabit it. In Rabbi Lamm’s striking formulation, the synagogue is not merely an oven generating spiritual heat; it is also a thermometer measuring the spiritual temperature of the community. That means we need both directions. We need a Shul that changes us, and we need to be people who change the Shul. We need this sanctuary to challenge us to daven differently, learn differently, give differently, behave differently, and expect more of ourselves. At the same time, the holiness of this room will depend upon what we bring into it.

A beautiful Aron Kodesh cannot create a holy community by itself. New floors cannot do it, and new walls cannot do it. Only people can do that. The purpose of renovating a sanctuary is not simply to make a more beautiful room in which Jews can sit. It is to create a room in which Jews can become more beautiful people.

And, yet, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt”l, takes it one step further. He writes that when a community gathers, that group stands together as a microcosm of all of the Jewish people: past, present and future. Therefore, in essence we recognize that the Shul is meant to be the gathering place of the community. All are welcome in these walls and all can experience its grandeur. The fact of the matter is though that we are simply incomplete without the remainder of the Jewish nation. The space requires of us to need each other to grow and thrive.

Renovating Ourselves

And that brings us back to teshuvah.

Therapist and author Lori Gottlieb has observed that human beings live inside stories. We tell stories about why we are the way we are, why things happened to us, why relationships failed, why we succeeded, why we failed, what we are capable of, and what we are not capable of. The problem is that eventually we can become prisoners of our own narratives. We convince ourselves that this is simply who we are, that we have tried before, that certain relationships will never change, that we are not someone who learns, or davens, or gets involved.

The circumstances of our lives certainly shape our stories. But the stories we tell ourselves also begin to shape our lives. Perhaps teshuvah, then, does not require us to become someone else. Perhaps it asks us to change the story we tell about the person we already are.

For nearly four years, we have spent an extraordinary amount of time asking questions about this building. What should stay, and what should change? What needs to be repaired, and what needs to be replaced? What can become more beautiful? What can become more functional? Almost poetically, Shabbat Shuva asks us to turn those exact same questions inward. What within me should stay, and what needs to change? What needs to be repaired? What needs to be replaced? What within me could become more beautiful than it has been before?

That is teshuvah. Teshuvah does not ask us to demolish ourselves and start again. It asks us to become *chadash*. A *bayit chadash* can stand upon the same foundation, within the same walls, and nevertheless become something new. And so can we. True renewal happens from the inside out.

That is why there is something so meaningful about entering 5787 in a renewed sanctuary. We did not tear down our Shul and begin again. These are our walls. This is our history. This is our community. This is our home. But inside these walls, something has changed. And now the question is whether the same thing can happen to us.

Can we enter 5787 carrying the same names, the same histories, the same families, and the same personalities, and nevertheless become *chadash*? Can we establish a new standard for our tefillah and our Torah learning? Can we establish a new standard for the way we speak to people, the way we notice people, the way we give, the way we participate, and the way we take responsibility for our community?

And, perhaps now we can answer the question with which we began: Will we define this space, or will this space define us? The answer, I hope, is both.

We will define this space through the Torah we learn here, the tefillot we offer here, the chesed we perform here, the way we treat one another here, and the standards we establish for what it means to be part of this community. And then, God willing, this space will begin to define us. We will walk through these doors and remember that more is expected of us. We will enter this sanctuary and remember who we can become.

At the farewell to that ugly, temporary building at MIT, Professor Penfield said that Building 20 somehow possessed an “uncanny, magical power to bring out the best in everybody.” What an extraordinary thing to be able to say about a building—and what an extraordinary aspiration for ours. That people should walk through these doors and somehow this place brings out the best in them.

But our tradition asks for something even greater. The Malbim taught us that the ultimate Mikdash is the one each of us constructs *b'chadrei levavo*, within the chambers of our own heart. Perhaps, then, the greatest dedication we can make this year is not merely the dedication of a building. It is the rededication of its builders.

Chazal famously teach at the conclusion of Masechet Berachot, “*Al tikrei banayich ela bonayich*”—do not read the verse merely as “your children,” but as “your builders.” We are the builders. We have spent years renewing our house. Now, as we enter a new year, the challenge is to allow that renewed house to inspire us to renew ourselves.

Our names, histories, struggles, and imperfections may all come with us into 5787. But Judaism does not ask us to erase the past in order to create a future. It asks us to take what already exists and make it *chadash*.

We have renewed our Shul. May we now have the courage to renew the people who fill it.