

THE DEDICATION OF BETH ABRAHAM SYNAGOGUE
MAY 4, 2008

Mizmor Shir Hanukat HaBayit l'David. “A Song for the Dedication of the House, from David.” We recite the thirtieth psalm every morning in our early prayers, but perhaps only once in a lifetime does the actual occasion come to put this devotion to its proper use, dedicating our own house of worship. And suddenly the sense of it eludes us. After the opening words – which we have probably always ignored – the psalm has nothing at all to do with the dedication of a house, or a temple, or a synagogue. It’s one of David’s many psalms in which he celebrates God’s rescue from foes, from illness, or from the pit of death.

*I extol You, Adonai, for You raised me up.
 You did not permit foes to rejoice over me.
 Adonai, I cried out and You healed me.
 You saved me from the pit of death.
 Sing to Adonai, you faithful, acclaim God’s holiness.
 For God’s anger lasts a moment, divine love is lifelong.
 Tears may linger for a night; joy comes with the dawn.
 While at ease I thought: nothing can shake my security. Favor me and I am a
 mountain of strength.
 Hide Your face, Adonai, and I am terrified.
 To You, Adonai, would I call;
 before the Eternal would I plead.
 What profit is there if I am silenced?
 What benefit if I go to my grave?
 Will the dust praise You?
 Will it proclaim Your faithfulness?
 Hear me, Adonai, be gracious, be my help.
 You transformed my mourning into dancing,
 My sackcloth into robes of joy
 That I might sing Your praise unceasingly,
 That I might thank You, Adonai my God, forever.*

What has being rescued from the pit of death to do with the dedication of a house of worship? If you know the story of how this new Beth Abraham synagogue came to be built, you will not be surprised at our wanting to sing: *Adonai, we cried out and You healed us. You saved us from the pit of death. . . You transformed our mourning into dancing, our sackcloth into robes of joy.*

When I came to Beth Abraham five years ago, I did not fully grasp the fragility of this congregation. But it took no time at all to realize that there were few children, that a “young member” of Beth Abraham was between forty-five and fifty, and that over half of those who attended Shabbat services were in their eighties. As I became acquainted with Jewish Dayton I learned about its demographics and its north-south divide. Beth Abraham was located in a neighborhood long abandoned by the Jewish community. And

yet at every conversation where the subject came up, I was told that the congregation had already considered relocation and concluded that it was not possible.

I learned that the Jewish community of Dayton had numbered around six thousand not long ago, and now counted fewer than four thousand. The equivalent of one entire synagogue population had disappeared, yet all four of its synagogues still held on. Of these, Beth Abraham was the most vulnerable. It became clear to me that if Beth Abraham didn't move, it would close its doors in about ten or fifteen years. That would be about the time I would want to retire, so perhaps I was the chosen one to turn out the lights. A rabbinic colleague recently told me that before I came to Dayton, everyone assumed Beth Abraham was dying.

*But we cried out, Lord, and you healed us.
You saved us from the pit of death.*

It was at one of those “meet-the-rabbi” sessions we held a few months after I arrived, in the fall of 2003. This one was at the home of Lee and Patti Schear. After everyone else had left, Lee took me aside and told me his vision. He was the only person I met in those first months who had a vision for Beth Abraham's future. He was the only person who articulated real confidence in what the Beth Abraham community could do. Every vision begins as just one person's vision, but it darkens and dies if it remains only one person's vision. Lee told me what he would commit to make it happen, and it impressed me; but he had no intention of buying us our future. He wanted to enable us to believe in ourselves. He had spoken to no one else about this, and after our conversation he left it entirely in my hands to act on it or not to act. He wasn't going to press it, he wasn't going to buy it, he wasn't going to do it. He made an offer to work with and generously support the community, if I wanted this and if the community wanted it.

I didn't know this man at all, but his sincerity and his modesty encouraged me to take his vision on faith and make it my vision. It was easy to do, because I already saw clearly where Beth Abraham was headed, and here, with God's grace, Lee offered me a new opportunity. Within a few weeks of our conversation I sat down with Susie Katz to talk about it, and it became her vision too. That's how vision turns into energy, and energy becomes action. It didn't take this remarkable woman very long to move from her initial surprise to strategizing on how to process this idea through the congregation, starting with Beth Abraham's Executive Committee. Although Lee was prominent in the conversation, it was never presented as his vision, nor was there ever any mention of his financial commitment. The decision had to be Beth Abraham's. The leadership was repeatedly urged to think about Beth Abraham's future without regard to cost – almost as a kind of thought experiment, to free ourselves from the constraints of money in order to imagine without encumbrance what, in an ideal world, would be the best course to ensure Beth Abraham's future. That's how the conversation began and how it continued for a long time, until people began to have confidence that we could make this happen, and a plan began to emerge.

Susie has already given tribute to the many people who made this rebirth possible, but it is left to me to tell you that there were two indispensable people. Along with Lee Schear, there was the amazing Susie Katz. Lee with the vision, and Susie with her total mastery of the art of process, guiding this difficult and unexpected discussion carefully

through the Executive Committee and the Board, until it came before the entire congregation and became our collective vision. Through Susie's leadership, all of us came to see with such clear eyes what we could make happen. Susie had accepted the presidency of Beth Abraham just one month before I became rabbi, with no thought at all of the destiny that would open up for her. Having had the close-up seat to watch, I cannot imagine that anyone else could have guided our community through this better than Susie has done. Lee and Susie have made Beth Abraham's life their legacy.

Ultimately, however, it was not Lee, not Susie, certainly not me, who brought this all to pass. It has been the people of Beth Abraham, all of us together, moved by a deeper spirit that entered our hearts and took hold of us. The vision first announced in that conversation at Lee Schear's home four and a half years ago reached out and embraced everyone here in our Beth Abraham family, and as one my rabbinic colleagues recently said to me, it has animated the entire Jewish community of Dayton.

I think we have almost forgotten the sense of resignation that once hung over our congregation when it hesitated to think about its future. For God has tapped at our hearts and so much energy burst out that we cannot imagine feeling tired or doubtful about the future of Conservative Judaism in Dayton.

*You transformed my mourning into dancing,
My sackcloth into robes of joy,
That I might sing Your praise unceasingly,
That I might thank You, Adonai my God, forever.*

What seems like the anomaly of this psalm – that a song for a building dedication celebrates the soul's passage from the pit of death to dancing, praise and thanksgiving – tells us that our *Bayit*, our house, is only a casing to hold our collective heart, a place and a fixed point to unite us in the work to which God calls us. Our mystical tradition of Kabbalah tells us that the Holy Temple, the *Bet HaMikdash*, was a representation of a spiritual reality, the spiritual palace formed by the Infinite in the earliest moment of creation to contain and poise its unfolding energy, the energy which would shape a universe.

Our house, too – and this moment of its dedication – is to gather and hold and poise our own energy, unfolding toward the future. We build in order to sing together, to dance, to praise God by doing the work to which God has called us. We have a moment to rest here today, to rest and celebrate and gather our force, but our dedication is for tomorrow and what we will do with tomorrow.

We live in a broken world, and our charge is to heal it. We live in a world widely cursed by hatred, and our charge is to love and be a blessing. The Hebrew words above our Holy Ark were chosen collectively by this congregation to be placed before us whenever we come together to pray and to praise God. *V'ahavta et Adonai Elohekha, b'khol levavkha uv'khol nafshekha, uv'khol me'odekha*. "And you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Taking that fundamental charge of our faith as the personal motto of this community, we dedicate ourselves and all our tomorrows to think and act from the love of God in everything we do, to see God in every human face, and to gather here to worship God for the refreshment of our souls, so that we may go out from this holy place and repair our

world. We are *Bet Avraham*, the House of Abraham, whom God charged to be a blessing to all peoples. May we dwell in this new home as a blessing for all the people of our community. *Mizmor Shir Hanukat HaBayit*. To that we dedicate our house. *L'ma'an yezamerkha khavod v'lo yidom, Adonai Elohai l'olam odeka*. "So that my soul might sing to You and not be stilled; Adonai my God, forever will I thank you."

A CONCLUDING BENEDICTION
FOR THE SERVICE OF DEDICATION OF
BETH ABRAHM SYNAGOGUE
May 4, 2008

Ribbono shel Olam. Lord of the universe.

This afternoon, in Your presence and in Your sight, Your holy congregation of Beth Abraham - has come together with all our friends from the Dayton Jewish community, and with our new neighbors from Oakwood, to dedicate the labor of our hands and hearts to Your service, knowing well that “unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain that build it.”

We ask You, Adonai Eloheinu, as Solomon prayed at the dedication of Your Holy Temple: “May your eyes be open day and night to this house. May You heed the prayers and supplications which Your people Israel offer here. When Your people turn to you in this house in repentance and acknowledge Your name, oh hear in heaven and pardon our transgression. Render to each person as you know his or her heart – for You alone know the hearts of all people – so that we may revere You all our days.”

We have spoken today the dedication of our hearts to thinking and acting in everything we do from our love of You, Adonai. As our sages have taught us, we show our love of God by loving what God loves, and so our dedication is to mercy and compassion, justice and peace, for the well being of all people and the healing of our world.

Adonai oz l'amo yiten. Adonai yevorech et Amo vaShalom. Adonai, may You grant Your people strength. Adonai, May You bless Your people with peace. Amen.