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(re-write of YK 1996 talk)

“The Cave of Wonders (Redux)”

Part One: “An Uncanny Discovery”

*The Eternal appeared to [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre. He was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, “My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on – seeing that you have come your servant’s way.” They replied, “Do as you have said.”*

*Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Quick, three measures of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!”*

*And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who hastened to prepare it. He took curd and milk and the calf which he had prepared and set these before them, and he waited on them under the tree as they ate.*

*(Genesis 18)*

This is the beginning of Genesis 18, which sets up the dramatic Torah portions we read last week on Rosh Hashanah. Twenty years ago, on Rosh Hashanah 1996, I delivered the

talk I am about to share with you, albeit extensively re-written and pared down for tonight.

Our congregation had just turned forty. I myself was barely forty. We were growing rapidly, as were all the shuls around here back then. We were facing important questions about our institutional identity. How would we stay “small” when we got “large?” How would we not become a “bar mitzvah factory?” How would we continue to govern ourselves according to the Kaplanian guidelines that had served us so well? How would we continue to know one another? To care about one another? To show up for one another in times of trial as well as joy?

Moreover, we tried to look at ourselves honestly, to see what in fact we had neglected in our first forty years. How had we failed to develop ourselves spiritually, intellectually, and in terms of our responsibilities to our immediate community and our world? In what ways were we too insular, uninvolved and disconnected from the community around us? How might we start to come of age as leaders among Jewish institutions? As model-builders in our social action work, in our davening, and in our striving for universal Jewish literacy?

And, if we were so enamored of our haimishness, how might we work on ourselves in all the ways we were *not* haimish? Not “welcoming?” Not fully present for each other beyond a small circle of old neighbors and friends? In what ways could we use “forty” as a time to “grow up” without sacrificing our youthful outlook?

Now that we are sixty – well past a traumatic fire and a dramatic rebuilding; well past several gut-wrenching congregation-wide conversations about our principles, beliefs, practices, politics, our essential self-definition; and now barely past one of the most wrenching of all of those conversations, played out paradoxically during several of our most productive and creative years since our founding - now that we are sixty, I want to invite us to think theoretically, broadly, *mystically*, about what it means to each of us to be part of a synagogue community. And parenthetically, what it means to each of us to be part of *this* synagogue community.

I tried to do just that with this talk twenty years ago. I would like to go there again tonight.

I argued then, as I will now, that the passage from Genesis 18 sets the stage for what would become the most important model of Jewish living, Jewish meaning, and Jewish continuity, namely the institution of the synagogue. In this blink-and-you-miss-it passage, Abraham and Sarah welcome strangers into their tent. They run to fetch a calf. They prepare dinner. The guests eat. The guests deliver news of life-changing events soon to come for Abraham and Sarah, and for the dangerous world beyond. And that's it.

But now listen to the story midrashically retold by a generation emerging from the ashes of the Temple era, and struggling to find footing amid the military occupation of Rome and the cultural occupation of Hellenism, and soon thereafter, Christianity and eventually

Islam. Listen to see what details our Rabbis insert into the bare bones of the original story:

*And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and choice. Abraham was running after the calf, but the calf ran away. It entered a cave, and so Abraham followed it and then he saw...Adam and Eve buried there. He knew that they were Adam and Eve because he saw the form of a person. And while he was gazing a door opened into the Garden of Eden, and he perceived the same form standing near it.*

*Now whoever looks at the form of Adam cannot escape death. For when a person is about to pass out of this world he catches sight of Adam and at that moment he dies. Abraham, however, did look at him, and saw his form and yet survived. He saw, moreover, a shining light that illuminated the cave and a lamp burning. Abraham then coveted that cave for his burial place, and his mind and heart were set upon it. And he took the calf...and he took curd and milk and the calf which he had prepared and set these before them, and he waited on them under the tree as they ate.*

*Zohar I:127a on Genesis 18; Pirke d'Rabi Eliezer 36*

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Part Two: “Abe and Sarah Join a Shul”

Everyone tells the story of the Jewish Robinson Crusoe who, when discovered alone on his desert island, demonstrates to his rescuers that he has survived rather handily by

building several structures for himself, among them *two* synagogues: “This is the one I attend; the other one I wouldn’t be caught dead in.”

The gag works for anyone who has ever joined a synagogue, and especially for anyone who has ever *switched* synagogues, because it acknowledges the strange ego bonding we tend to make with “our” shul. Unlike other communal institutions which allow us to do our civic work in an objectively civil way, our synagogue becomes an extension of our private home, and even of our private personality.

This is probably because other institutions exist for specific tasks, while the synagogue is ultimately not a place to “do something,” but rather to “be someone.” Or better, to “become” someone. We are named there at birth. We are brought publicly into puberty there at bar/bat mitzvah. We are blessed there at the start of that most private-public phase of our lives called marriage. We bring our children there to receive their names, to reenact the ritual motions of Jewish study, to enter puberty publicly, and so forth. We are comforted there when we’ve gone through a harrowing experience, and consoled there when we have suffered a death in our family. And, of course, we are eulogized there at our own death. In between these signposts we mark the end of each old week and the start of each new year there by reflecting on both the inadequacy of our outer lives and the worthiness of our inner selves, and it is there that we are given hope that improvement (or at least, survival) is possible for yet another seven days or twelve months. At least till next Yom Kippur.

Yes, the synagogue is also a “house of worship, study, and meeting,” as the old saw goes, a “*bet tefilah, bet midrash, and bet k’nesset,*” but this may be beside the point. Generally, the synagogue is the eventual *beneficiary* of exciting innovations in “worship, study, and meeting” taking place *outside* the synagogue: in retreat centers, institutes, kallot, kollels, yeshivot, independent minyan, and you-name-it. Rarely is the shul the locus or origin of these activities, though I’d like to imagine we at Bet Am Shalom have worked hard at being the exception to some of these rules.

Nonetheless, it is the synagogue to which we Jews go to mark the great moments of our year and our life. For instance, no one wants to celebrate a wedding at the UJA-Federation General Assembly. No one makes a special trip to the Isabella Friedman Retreat Center to say kaddish or yizkor for a parent. Yes, it is true that many of us fly with our children to Israel to commemorate their becoming b’nai mitzvah, but look where we go: to the quote-unquote “synagogue” at Masada; or to the Kotel, the Western Wall, which is a kind of synagogue in its own right; to Robinson’s Arch, which may one day become the egalitarian Kotel; or to an actual synagogue in Jerusalem. But for those who observe the Sabbath weekly, the overwhelming majority attend not a center, not a minyan, not a havurah, not a “group,” not a happening, but a *synagogue*: One single shul *in their own neighborhood*, close to home. Virtually no one travels *every* Shabbat to a distant camp or retreat environment in the same way that many Jews scurry off to a ski home or beach bungalow every Friday night.

And note well: Galas, dinners, bazaars, fairs, support groups, auxiliaries, and every other technique any shul ever conjured up to raise funds or membership or to keep people from quitting or falling asleep – none of these things draws as much synagogue attendance (or true gut-level interest) as do basic life-cycle events, High Holy Day services, and even Shabbat davening. And no Jewish convention, no spirituality retreat, no Torah-life institute ever attracted as many Jews as do the funerals of beloved life-long members of the congregation or the yizkor services on Yom Kippur morning.

This is not to suggest that synagogues are “fine” no matter what they do. Needless to say, the most celebrated congregations today are renowned for their “joyfully serious” atmosphere, for such things as their profound educational programming, or their phenomenal music, or their bold embrace of vexing political and social issues, or their path-breaking liturgical change. But the people accomplishing these important things are just Jews who *already* come to synagogue. They are “doing” great things in a place where they already “are.” Yes, they “do” what they do because they are remarkably spiritual or intellectual, or socially conscientious, but they are “doing” it *as Jews* – and *in their synagogue* – because of some deeper need: The need to *be* Jews, and to do their Jewish “being” in the most nurturing environment available to them. That environment is what we arbitrarily call “the synagogue,” as our shipwrecked friend instinctively knew, *but it is in fact the secret cave that Abraham stumbled across long ago.*

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Part III: “The Cave of Wonders”

Think about it: Abraham is at a crucial stage in his personal development. He is working out the early details of his covenant with God. He has been given the most *universal* vision ever revealed – *lech l'cha* – and yet he is asked to make that universalism the core of a new *particular* identity – *lech l'cha*. He is expected to carry out his rather abstract mission by means of the most common physicalities in his life, namely, his marriage and his progeny. But his marriage is strained and his offspring are nonexistent. He is far from home and roots, disconnected from family traditions, culture, social structures, and even burial grounds. His environment is potentially hostile. Now that he has circumcised himself three days prior, he has sealed his estrangement from the local population. Nonetheless, he is trying to live like a mensch, and it is in this spirit that he greets the three strangers and runs to fix them a meal.

In short, Abraham is not only the *first* Jew; he is also a *typical* Jew. He is particularist yet universal; he is estranged from his locale and cut off from his roots, yet he attempts against all odds not only to make a home for himself but to extend hospitality to his neighbors. He is, in a way, that Jew on the desert island, as we *all* are: Far from home, yet making ourselves *at* home, and eager to make our fellow strangers feel at home as well.

How does he pull himself together? How does he make himself “at home?”

Quite by accident, he follows the calf into the cave. There he meets his universal ancestors, Adam and Eve. He sees both his origin and his destiny. And in a moment

which an overload of explanation would only befuddle, he understands that this place filled with ethereal light will make his ultimate death bearable. Now the trials of his daily life will be redefined by his awareness that this all-embracing destination exists. Here in this cave he can – for the first time in his life – simply *be* who he is. He does not have to *do* anything at this moment. And these few minutes of being-without-doing will allow him to go back to the disjointed exile of his mundane routine life as a fully integrated person: The *particular* Abraham (read “the *particular* Jew”) with a *particular* Jewish task in a very *general* world.

In that cave Abraham discovers *who he is* and *where he is going*. This he learns simply by being there, by showing up, by becoming a regular. You can bet that he returns to the cave often, mainly to remind himself of what he already knows. *Almost as if that cave were his local shul.*

Perhaps he sits down from time to time on the wet cave floor and quietly prays or meditates. So his cave is sometimes a sort of proto-*bet tefilah*, a house of prayer.

Perhaps he occasionally brings a book and studies. Then his cave is a *bet midrash*, a house of learning and of seeking ancient wisdom.

Perhaps he goes there to contemplate politics, like the ethical ramifications of the water rights squabble with Abimelech, or the civil liberties of the doomed residents of Sodom and Gomorrah. Then he is in a sort of *bet k'nesset*, a house of communal meeting – but

only when he is discussing these matters with the other denizens of the cave. Remember that he is hardly alone in there. It is *not* a desert island. All of his ancestors and all of his descendants reside there with him, all of them in their ultimate form: The form not of “doing” but of “being.” Abraham goes there not to escape from reality, *but to enter ultimate reality in the fullest sense.*

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#### Part IV: “Maftir”

The cave still exists wherever we Jews choose to build it. Whether we are one of several million Jews in greater New York or a single soul on a desert island, we need to visit the cave to remind ourselves of our mysterious reality. Once we have built it – or found it – we can go there to do great things, but those things will not be what enables the cave to work for us. Rather, it is the cave itself that will make our prayer, our study, and our sacred meeting profound. In the end, the cave will be our secret link to the garden of our origin and our destination. It will be the place where we go to understand what it means to be born, to take a name, to enter a covenant, to reach puberty, to choose a mate, to propagate, to grow older by a week or a year or a decade, and to die.

*That is purpose enough for any cave, or even for a synagogue.*

Dear ones, because it is the eve of Yom Kippur and because it is our sixtieth anniversary as a congregation, it is time for us to come to terms with the profound preciousness of *this* cave. Time for us to embrace our six decades of life-and-death-and-life that we have

experienced here together. Time for us to put aside our very real differences – personal, marital, political, ideological, theological – at least long enough to love one another again for *who* we are to one another. Time for us to assure that we can bequeath this cave intact to our children and grandchildren, who will be eternally grateful if we do, and bitterly unforgiving if we do not.

May the year we are about to spend together in this cave – our sixty-first – be one of deep prayer; of lofty study; of sacred meeting; of serving and nourishing one another; and of looking together for the precious *ner tamid*, the lamp that fills this space with the ethereal light of life.