

KEREM

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*Creative Explorations
in Judaism*

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Dvar Torah

Pilgrimage Sites

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There are ten degrees of holiness. The holiest land in the world is the land of Israel. The walled cities of the land of Israel are still more holy than the walled cities the holiest city is Jerusalem. In Jerusalem the holiest place is the Temple Mount. The Rampart is still more holy. The court of the women is still more holy. The court of the Israelites is still more holy. The Court of the Priests is still more holy. Between the Porch and the Altar is still more holy. The Sanctuary is still more holy, for none may enter therein with hands and feet unwashed. The Holy of Holies is still more holy, for none may enter therein except the High Priest on the Day of Atonement at the time of the Temple service.

— MISHNAH KELIM, I

I LONG TO GO ON PILGRIMAGE; TO UNPACK MY WORRYING WOES, SAY GOODBYE TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS, AND GO OFF ALONE IN SEARCH OF SOMETHING IMMUTABLE, TRANSCENDENT, SACRED. NOT TO SEARCH SO MUCH AS TO FIND THAT WHICH OTHERS HAVE FOUND BEFORE ME: THAT CONFLUENCE OF TIME AND PLACE DESCRIBED IN THE MISHNAH; THAT CENTER OF ALL CENTERS. THAT PLACE WHERE, AS ELEANOR MUNRO PUTS IT IN *On Glory Roads: A Pilgrim's Book about Pilgrimages*, HEAVEN AND EARTH ARE JOINED, "the unnatural with the natural, the unseen and longed-for with the inevitable." I'm tired of journeying day-by-day along a single plane of existence, from home to work, from meals to meetings, governed by schedules and lists, calendars and

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clocks. A pilgrimage, at the very least, follows a trajectory, and for a Jew it always means to ascend, *la'alot beregel, oyle-regl zayn*. A pilgrimage breaks the routine of moving in a maze.

My desire to go on pilgrimage is especially keen at this time of year, Elul being the month for visiting parental graves. The cemetery, for us, is not only a sanctified plot of land, set apart by rabbinic law from human habitation; not only the repository of the immediate past, one's link to parents and community, but also a foretaste of the future. For here we are sure to lie, awaiting the redemption when, according to legend, all bones will roll beneath the ground to be joined in Jerusalem. My mother, raised in a Russian-speaking home, still visits my father's graveside every Elul. If I happen to be in Montreal at the time, I accompany her there.

Yet I wonder how many of us will carry on this tradition. We who make our homes so far from our parental graves; we for whom death is dead-ended and therefore is the thing we fear the most; we who worship at our private altars; who, at best, can have a "peak experience" but have rarely, if ever, scaled a magic mountain—do we have any place at all that would be worthy of a pilgrimage? Indeed, the saddest pilgrimage of all would be the one that tried to recapitulate that peak experience: to visit, say, the rooftop on our college campus where we first smoked pot, or the deserted field where we first got laid, or even, I daresay, the Mall in Washington where we joined with a million others to protest the war in Vietnam. Those moments are ephemeral because they allowed for transcendence only in the heat of the moment. They are places now rendered profane by the traffic of human events.

For lack of anything better, we journey to places that others, with a different stake to claim, have rendered sacred. The stark and simple Vietnam War memorial belatedly erected on the Mall goes a long way towards healing the pain, confusion and betrayal of that era. But we who did not fight that war and have no personal connection to the names of fallen soldiers etched in stone are scarcely consoled.

Thus our culture of selfhood is only one obstacle blocking access to the crossroads of past, present and future. Another is the fierce competition over history-laden space. So long as Jews merely prayed for the restoration of Zion, or for their musaf service to someday be replaced by the real thing—the people's ascent to Jerusalem, there to bring sacrifices in

the Temple—they remained pilgrims of the heart and mind. As such, they were free, because they could escape from the tyranny of time. But the moment Jews once more laid claim to space, to an actual tomb, or Temple, or territory, they traveled the far more hazardous route of trying to escape through time. A pilgrimage site that occupies real space, they discovered, is mired in whatever mess history has made of it.

Despite the odds, much of the modern, and particularly modern Jewish, experience has been a desperate attempt to find alternative pilgrimage sites. So much energy was expended in trying to build another temple, to decenter the universe. And what a record of paradox and failure that has been! Here are some of the high—and low—points of the Jewish pilgrim's progress through modernity.

Let us begin in the Ukraine, on the trade route to Byzantium, where early Hasidism maintained its historic and transtemporal link to the Land of Israel. Legend has it that the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, was thwarted in his desire to visit Erets Yisroel; had he made it there to meet his Sephardic counterpart, Rabbi Hayyim ben Atar, the two luminaries would have brought the redemption. In point of fact, Rabbi Gershon Kitever, the Baal Shem Tov's father-in-law, made aliyah, as did Menachem-Mendl of Vitebsk, the leader of White Russian Hasidim, in 1777.

In the third generation of Hasidism, as Napoleon's army swept across Europe and the battle between Gog and Magog seemed about to be concluded, Nachman Bratslaver traveled incognito to the Holy Land to prepare himself for the messianic Coming. Upon his return to the Ukraine, when his redemptive hopes were dashed, he kept them alive in his stories, each one an elaborate tale of pilgrimage.

Then came the period of decline, and with it, the displacement of Zion. In the fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century, the Rebbe himself was transformed into the sacred center, the *axis mundi*. And this was true not only in the lavish hasidic courts in Husiatyn and Ger, the rival of any nobleman's manor, but also of those places where the Rebbe deliberately eschewed an institutional framework: Bratslav, where no rebbe would ever presume to inherit the throne, and Kotsk, home of the famous recluse and truth-seeker, Menachem-Mendl. Kotsk inspired the poignant

pilgrimage song still sung early in the twentieth century: *Vayl Kotsk is dokh bimkoym hamikdesh / Kayn Kotsk darf men oyle-regl zayn*; “For Kotsk is in place of the Temple / You’ve got to make a pilgrimage to Kotsk.”

The energy it took to displace the Temple in Jerusalem was energy the Jews of Eastern Europe could ill afford. For when the forces of destruction began to descend, the great *rebeim* aligned themselves—almost to a man—against the Zionist movement. Any attempt to hasten the redemption through secular means, they protested, was a *hillul hashem* (desecration of God’s name).

Yet who was not guilty before God for the sin of hubris? The Hasidim were by no means the worst offenders. Bundists, Diaspora nationalists, Zionists and later Jewish Bolsheviks were all obsessed with the idea of building a heaven on earth. And while they mobilized their forces in this utopian adventure, each movement established its own pilgrimage site to inspire the faithful: the graveside of the martyrs; the monument to the writers; and in the most grotesque spectacle of all—the wax effigy of their leader guarded night and day by goose-stepping Red Army soldiers.

And yes, even the Zionists. Those few who finally made it to Zion discovered that as good Socialists they could not lay claim to the existing pilgrimage sites—to Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, Meron, not to speak of Nazareth and Bethlehem—for each place was already overdetermined. Besides, their Zion would be sanctified through sweat and blood, not by divine fiat. And so they chose alternative sites instead: Masada in the south, scene of the last Jewish revolt against Rome, in 73 C.E., and Tel Hai in the north, scene of Joseph Trumpeldor’s last stand against the Arabs, in 1920.

While all this was going on, vast numbers of Jews, following instinct alone, set out for the one pilgrimage site on earth that stood for political freedom and opportunity for all: the Statue of Liberty. Never mind that the Isle of Tears stood nearby and that Miss Liberty shut her gates in 1924. Inaccessibility only added to her mythic stature. In his extraordinary film, *Au Revoir les Enfants*, Louis Malle shows us, through a Jewish boy in hiding from the Nazis, what the Statue meant to those who would never see it. For the Catholic boys in Malle’s French boarding school, a showing of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Immigrant* is but an evening’s entertainment. For the Marrano boy, sighting Miss Liberty is the very

essence of the unattainable dream.

And so the proliferation of Jewish pilgrimage sites was the measure of how much had changed. Yet even as history unleashed its centrifugal forces, scattering Jewish pilgrims over the globe and turning one band of pilgrims against the other, history also conspired to reduce the final choices down to less than a handful. In the desecrated landscape that we inhabit today, three pilgrimage sites have emerged, each one sacred to a different degree.

The modern Jewish path of return is from west to east. This proves, through our movement, that we’ve defeated historical determinism. But before leaving the west we pay our last respects to Miss Liberty. We have come not to worship, graven image that she is, nor even to admire her intrinsic beauty. She commands our respect only because of where she stands, at the symbolic gateway to America, and because she carries the sentimental lyrics of Emma Lazarus, and because those lines have literal truth to them, and because the immigrant saga of the 1880s to 1924 replayed in approximate way the Puritan myth of slavery to freedom. These multiple layers of meaning endow the Statue with her universal and trans-temporal power. She is our Lourdes and our Acropolis all rolled into one.

Then eastward, retracing our immigrant steps, to Warsaw; from there southward to Cracow followed by a short bus ride to our second pilgrimage site: a place so terrible that even its name fills one with dread. There is no sign above the entrance to Birkenau, eight times the size of Auschwitz, and built for the sole purpose of exterminating the Jews. Only in the mind’s eye of the Jewish pilgrim can one just make out the words, *Mah nora ha-makom ha-zeh!* “How awesome is this place!” (GEN. 28:17).

At this slaughter site, the seat of absolute evil, where the absence of life is so palpable that it becomes a numinous presence, in this unmentionable place we do not utter prayers or recite the Kaddish. We do what Jacob Bronowski did upon his own pilgrimage there. With the cameras rolling, this great humanist walked straight into a puddle of mud, stood there for a moment, then ran the muddied water through his hands. It was a baptism (yes!) in waters mixed with the ashes of millions.

Finally we return to the source of all beginnings, to the center of centers, to Jerusalem. And this pilgrimage site is the most sacred of all. It is so because its claims upon us are absolute. For us, Jerusalem has no double in Mecca or Medina. It has no replica in Rome. All our attempts to replace it, to circumvent it, have been in vain. History itself has thrust Jerusalem back upon us.

Since the first *Yom Yerushalayim* in 1967, since that day in June when Jerusalem was liberated, we have learned this: That the city is sacred even though the Temple is gone and a magnificent mosque stands in its stead. The city is sacred even though the Temple sacrifice has been abrogated and the High Priest cannot enter the Holy of Holies. It is sacred even though it was profane history, not our faith in God, that brought us to the heart of holiness. History—vehicle of dislocation, of desecration and destruction—has been the source of our redemption. It has saved us from ourselves and our own self so that once again we may stand before the Lord in purity and danger; we—a nation of priests and of prophets and once more, and forevermore—of pilgrims.

