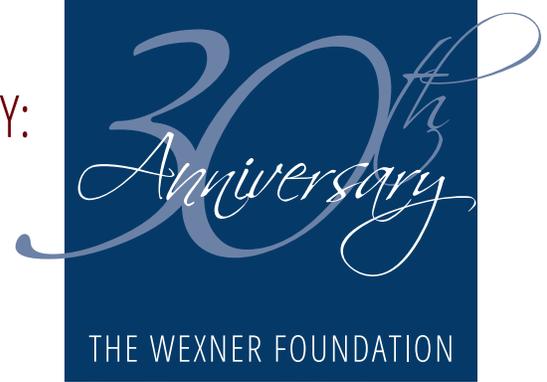


DIGNIFYING THE INDIVIDUAL WITHIN COMMUNITY: THE HOLINESS OF PERSONAL SPACE

DR. ERICA BROWN



“WHAT WE ARE ALL MORE OR LESS LACKING AT THIS MOMENT IS
A NEW DEFINITION OF HOLINESS.”

PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

“SPACE IS THE BREATH OF ART.”

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

I. SANCTIFYING TIME AND SPACE

One of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the word *kadosh*, holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine. Now what was the first holy object in the history of the world? Was it a mountain? Was it an altar?

It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word *kadosh* is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness.

This is a radical departure from accustomed religious thinking. The mythical mind would expect that, after heaven and earth have been established, God

would create a holy place--a holy mountain or a holy spring--whereupon a sanctuary is to be established. Yet it seems as if to the Bible it is holiness in time, the Sabbath, which comes first.

When history began, there was only one holiness in the world, holiness in time. When at Sinai the word of God was about to be voiced, a call for holiness in man was proclaimed: “Thou shalt be unto me a holy people.” It was only after the people had succumbed to the temptation of worshipping a thing, a golden calf, that the erection of a Tabernacle, of holiness in space, was commanded. The sanctity of time came first, the sanctity of man came second, and the sanctity of space last. Time was hallowed by God; space, the Tabernacle, was consecrated by Moses.

Rabbi A. J. Heschel, “Shabbat as a Sanctuary of Time”

II. DESIGNATING PERSONAL SPACE IN JEWISH LAW

Four cubits is...

- The minimum proximity allowed between a person who is excommunicated and everyone else.
- The space you are “allotted” when you are buried.
- The personal prayer space you should have when you pray.
- The closeness you should have before making a blessing on another person: a king, a wise person, a strange person.
- The distance you must put yourself from a repulsive or malodorous object to pray.

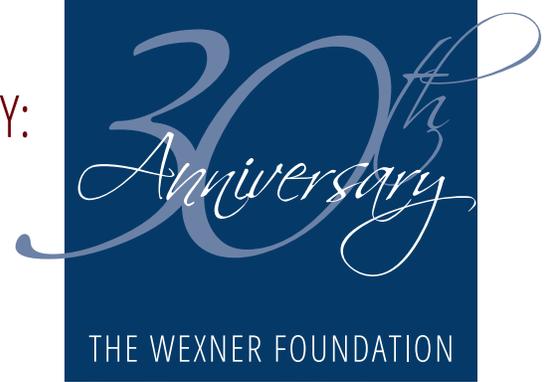
BABYLONIAN TALMUD KETUBOT 111a

“Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yochanan said, ‘Whoever walks four cubits in the land of Israel is assured to inherit the World to Come.’”

The rabbis say that if a person is sleeping at the onset of Shabbat and has no intention of acquiring residence in his location, he only has four cubits...These four cubits within which a person can walk on Shabbat, where are they written in the Torah? As it was taught “remain every man in his place (Exodus 16:29), means one must restrict his movement to an area equal to his place. And how much is the area of his place? A person’s body is usually three cubits, and an additional cubit is needed to spread out his hands and feet. This is the statement of Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Yehuda says: “A person’s body measures three cubits and an additional cubit is needed in order to allow him to pick up an object from under his feet and place it under his head.” What is the practical difference between them? There is a practical difference between them in that [Rabbi Yehuda] allows exactly four cubits only.

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BABYLONIAN TALMUD ERUVIN 48a

Rabbi Mesharshiya said to his son: “When you come before Rabbi Pappa inquire of him – the four cubits, do we grant them to each person according to his own forearm or do we grant them according to the cubit used for consecrated property?”...When he came before Rabbi Pappa, the latter said to him, “Were we to be so precise, we would not be able to learn anything at all [since we would be too busy answering questions].” In fact, we grant him four cubits measured according to his own forearm...If there were two people in four cubits, one whose space was subsumed under another, they may each bring food and eat together in the middle...

BABYLONIAN TALMUD BRAKHOT 8a

“When the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One was left with nothing in this world but four cubits of Jewish law.”

III. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE NEED FOR PERSONAL SPACE

“Discipline means to prevent everything in your life from being filled up. Discipline means that somewhere you’re not occupied, and certainly not preoccupied. In the spiritual life, discipline means to create that space in which something can happen that you hadn’t planned or counted on.”

Henri Nouwen

“...in many ways, we humans – social creatures known for our warmth and empathy toward our families, friends, and communities – are not only efficiently protected and fortified against our enemies, but in some ways also protected – meaning, we protect ourselves – from any Other....”

‘Hell is other people,’ said Sarte, and perhaps our fear of the hell that exists in others is the reason that the paper-thin layer of skin that envelops us and separates us from others is sometimes as impervious as any fortified wall or border.

If we observe those around us, we will find that even between couples who have lived together for decades – who have lived more or less happily, and who love each other and function well as parents and as a family – there can often be, almost instinctively and unwittingly, a complex unspoken agreement (whose application, incidentally, requires a most sophisticated and nuanced form of collaboration!), the main tenet of which is that it is best not to know one’s partner through and through. Not to be exposed to all that happens within him...

We human beings are uneasy about what truly occurs deep inside the Other, even if that Other is someone we love. And perhaps it is more than unease; perhaps it is an actual fear of the mysterious, nonverbal, unprocessed core, that which cannot be subjected to any social taming, to any refinement, politeness, or tact; that which is instinctive, wild, and chaotic, not at all politically correct. It is dreamlike and nightmarish, radical and exposed, sexual and unbridled, at least according to the social-order definitions that prevail among “civilized” people (whatever that term means)...It is, if you will, the magma, the primordial, blazing material that bubbles inside every person simply because he is human, simply because he is an intersection of several forces, instincts, longings and urges. It is magma that usually, among sane people – even the most tempestuous – hardens and cools when it comes into contact with air, when it encounters other human beings, or the confines of reality...

David Grossman, Writing in the Dark: Essays on Literature and Politics