

Pitching Tents in the Wilderness

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Pivot. I have come to loathe the word “pivot” during this pandemic. It’s an elegant, graceful, sanitized way of saying that everything you had carefully planned is about to be totally messed up. To pivot is to let go of what was going to be, and to embrace something else entirely. In the last 18 months, we have pivoted, and pivoted and turned ourselves all the way around-- over and over again. School and work and vacations. Trips rescheduled, cancelled, rescheduled again. Weddings, b’nei mitzvah celebrations -- we have pivoted and pivoted, and pivoted, until, here we are welcoming 5782...in a tent...in the parking lot.

When we “pivoted” to the tent plan just two weeks ago, The Tent quickly took on its own identity. *The Tent*- a proper noun with capital letters- #TheTent. We began to plan services in a space that we’d never seen, for another year unlike any year we had experienced before.

But connecting with God in a tent has precedent in Jewish tradition. In fact, The Tent goes all the way back to the Torah, in the book of Exodus. The Ohel Moed, the tent of meeting, in which Moses talks to God.

In the Torah, we read about the Israelites, wandering in the wilderness getting to know the God who freed them from slavery. When Moses goes up to get the 10 commandments from God, God also gives Moses the blueprint for an ornate tabernacle, referred to in Hebrew as the Mishkan. The Mishkan is a place for God to dwell among the Israelites. It is to be constructed with precious metals and bedazzled with jewels. Every detail is carefully imagined by God -- the ark, the table, the lamps, the priestly outfits -- everything. This would be the holy place where God’s presence would sit among the people.

Moses is getting all of these instructions when suddenly the Torah text is interrupted by the episode of the Golden Calf. While Moses is hanging out with God, the people are getting restless. Moses has been gone for a long time, and so the Israelites construct an idol...a golden calf. God really does not like idols. God becomes enraged and threatens to destroy the Israelites, but Moses talks God out of it.

So to recap: God gives Moses instruction for a fancy holy space, the Israelites build a Golden Calf, God gets angry, Moses calms God down.

Here comes the tent: After Moses convinces God not to destroy the Israelites, we read about a tent...The Tent...*u'moshe yikach et'ha'ohel*...Moses would take the tent and pitch it outside the camp...And whoever sought God, they would go out to the Tent of Meeting, the Ohel Moed.¹ So, after we learn about the plans for this big fancy sacred space for God, we learn that sometimes, Moses took his little tent, and he pitched it outside the camp. Moses...and whoever else needed it...used this ordinary tent to talk to God. We know it wasn't a fancy space, no gold or silver or jewels, no ark, or table, or lamps, no special outfits...just a tent so small that Moses could pitch it on his own.

So, what happened? Where did this little tent-- the Ohel Moed-- come from? The 19th century Italian Torah scholar Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto, taught that the big fancy tabernacle was cancelled. They probably found some of its early tweets...God was so angry about the golden calf that God scrapped the plans for the big fancy tabernacle. God essentially said, “If you're going to worship idols, then I don't even want you to build me that big fancy Mishkan. Just forget about it.”²

And Moses had to pivot. Stuck in the wilderness with an angry God and a restless people, Moses pitched a tent. It wasn't grand or elaborate, but it allowed him to do what he needed to do. To connect with God, to enable others to connect with God, and to chart a path forward through the wilderness, though an uncertain future.

This has been a season of pitching tents in the wilderness. Of building temporary structures to shelter and sustain us. Finding short term solutions, not for the long haul, but solutions that are good enough. When you pivot and pivot again- all you can do is pitch a tent, nothing too fancy, just a place to take care of the necessities...a place to rest, until the next pivot.

Last year, I gave a Rosh Hashanah sermon about rebuilding after destruction. About the possibility for change and renewal in the wake of massive disruption. I still believe that there is opportunity and potential embedded in all of this challenge. But I've come to appreciate that the wilderness in which we find ourselves is more vast than I had once realized. That we won't just arrive at a clearing and know that we've made it to the other side. So, perhaps we are meant to begin this new year with more humility, with more modest aspirations, rooted in three of the central themes of these days of awe: *Chein*, *chesed*, and *rachamim*.

¹ Exodus 33:7

² <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-other-ohel-moed>

Chen means grace. On the High Holidays, we appeal to God’s grace as we stand before God with all of our imperfections. We ask for the chance to try and do better next year. Just as we seek God’s grace, now is the time to be grace givers to those who are pitching tents for us. Our teachers, our healthcare workers, our co-workers, our friends...Tired, and run down by the challenges of the past 18 months, we are the beneficiaries of others’ hard work and resilience. When Moses pitched the Ohel Moed in the wilderness, it wasn’t just for him. It was for anyone who needed to talk to God. There are so many people who are continuing to pivot to make things work for *us*. It is very easy to lose sight of their hard work, to take it for granted, to get frustrated. So, for our teachers, and our coaches, our colleagues, our family members, and our friends, let this be a season of patience, of understanding- of *chen*- of grace.

Chesed means love- but more than just regular love- a kind of over the top, generous love for those who really need it, modeled by God- Godself. At Temple Sinai, during the week that we pivoted, and decided to rent “The Tent”, every day the news was filled with images of people fleeing Afghanistan. People willing to leave everything behind, *desperate* to leave everything behind, to keep themselves and their families safe. To pivot, and to pivot comfortably, is often a privilege. It is a privilege to solve a problem by spending more money, or being willing to abandon the work and the resources spent on a prior plan. We are very blessed in so many ways. So while we are pivoting, we cannot avert our eyes from the needs of others. We are meant to help them build their tents as well.³ Let this be a season of *chesed*- love- for those who need our help.

Rachamim means compassion. In the midst of all of this pivoting, we need to have compassion for ourselves. Because this is hard, and it has been hard. Uncertainty wears us down, and constantly changing our plans is exhausting. We have all faced losses and disappointments. Some small and some large. 18 months is a long time, and after a summer of optimism and the sense that perhaps we were heading toward a better place, the restoration of anxiety and uncertainty is particularly painful. So, let’s be kind to ourselves. The Ohel Moel was an average, little tent that Moses built alone. Far from perfect, far from the beautiful image that God had conjured for the Mishkan. But it was good enough. On the days when we are sad, or exhausted,

³ One way to support Afghan refugees in our area it to donate to our friends at Lutheran Social Services: https://lssnca.org/take_action/donate.html

or angry... let's treat ourselves with *rachamim*, with compassion. Let's be okay with good enough.

We built the Mishkan, the fancy dwelling place for God. Our new sanctuary at Temple Sinai is beautiful. It's got the ark, the table, the lights...it's accessible, it has great technology, the chairs are WAY more comfortable than the old ones. I can't wait for the time when we all feel safe gathering there together. And I know that time will come. But for now, for lots of good reasons, we're out here, together in the Ohel Moed. Our tent of meeting for connecting with God and each other.

When the word pivot is used as a verb it means to turn, or change, or swivel. That's the usage that we've come to associate with the changing plans of the pandemic. But I want to share another definition, as we prepare ourselves for another uncertain year. When the word pivot is used as a noun, it has a very different meaning. A pivot is the center. It's the fixed point on which everything turns, it's the source of strength and stability.

In the new year, let's not just pivot, let's be pivots. We have learned that we are strong and we are resilient. We have been pitching tents in the wilderness, we have kept each other going. It has not always been easy, but we have discovered previously unknown reserves of strength and hope. Creativity and compassion. Today as we gather in The Tent, in our Ohel Moed, our tent of meeting, we celebrate with our community and we promise to be each other's pivots. To treat each other with grace, and with love, to save some compassion for ourselves. May the new year bring us health and joy, stability and strength, and the ability to keep pitching tents in the wilderness.