

Rabbi Jonathan Roos
 Rosh Hashanah 5784 Morning Sermon
 Temple Sinai, Washington, DC
Pitchu Li: Open the Gates to Hesed

This is an exciting moment: we are soon ending our capital campaign and opening our new building wing. We've raised nearly \$12 million, thanks to so many of you. There much excitement about the new building and our optimism is literally written on the new entrance to the Temple. Alongside the main doors, you will see a verse from Psalm 118 written on the stone:



Figure 1: CGS Architects Drawing

פְּתֹחוּ-לִי שְׁעַר־צֶדֶק
 אֲבֹרָם אֲוֹרָה יְהוָה:

Open for me the gates of righteousness. I will enter them and I will thank God. (Ps 118:19)

When a small team of volunteers and clergy began making plans for the renovations, we based the whole project on a vision for the future wherein the new building would be a sign of a deep and meaningful evolution in the culture of our temple. We started from the story of the Israelites building the biblical Tabernacle and God's initial commandment: "Build me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them," and we emphasized the second part - God's dwelling among us - as the "true north" of this project. Now that we are here, we must remember that vision and not simply enter these gates for business as usual. One of the most important things we can do this year is to evolve into a community where people see each other, know each other, and care about each other's well-being.

Pitchu Li Shaarey Tzedek - each of us should be able to count on the promise that the threshold of this temple is in fact, a gateway of righteousness. I believe - and my colleagues on the clergy team also believe - that being part of Temple Sinai should change your life. We have seen it happen and we know what kind of potential is here.

Pitchu Li is such an obvious choice for the entrance to any synagogue that it hardly needs explanation. In Jewish practice, however, no biblical verse stands simply for its surface-level meaning. We always interpret and discern layers of significance from our texts. *Pitchu Li* is no exception. One midrashⁱⁱ says that when King David penned the words of the psalm: *pitchu li shaare tzedek*, he was talking about the gates to the Garden of Eden. Remember, we had been exiled from Eden long before he wrote this psalm and David knew we were not literally going back to the Garden of Eden. If "*shaarey tzedek*" is a reference to Gan Eden, then it must be a spiritual idea, not a geographic location. The meaning of putting that verse on our entrance is to say that this place should be like a paradise, a refuge, and a palace of joy for those who enter.

Another interpretationⁱⁱⁱ of the verse focuses on the verb, *pitchu*, to open. There are many Jewish prayers that celebrate things that are opened in a spiritual context. In the morning, we pray for the opening of our eyes. Before the *avot and imahot*, we pray that our lips will be opened in praise. In *Ashrei (Psalm 145)*, we pray about opening hands. The midrash teaches that *Pitchu Li Shaarey Tzedek* is a meta-encapsulation of all the openings in all the other prayers like the way the color white contains all the colors of the rainbow. If these gates of righteousness open for me, how could I not also open my hands, open my eyes, open my mind,

and open my heart? That, too, is the significance of inscribing the verse on our door. We are saying that this place should be like an aggregation of all the blessings we can experience and that being part of this community should inspire us to propagate those blessings in the world around us: to be generous (open hands), to be curious (open minds), and to be loving (open hearts). The completion of this building signals the opportunity for us to start working on the great redemption and spiritual renewal of ourselves and our community.

The proposition that these doors are the gateway to a moral and relational space where our lives will be better is not just a textual interpretation or homily. It is but a practical plan that we are meant to make real. *Pitchu Li Shaarey Tzedek* doesn't just happen through God's grace, nor does it happen because we write the words on the entrance. We must work on bringing its meaning to life every day. Fortunately, we do a pretty good job at Temple Sinai taking care of each other and giving support to people in need. And we could do more and be better as a caring community. This is not a matter of tasks and task completion; it is about culture.

In the confessional prayer on Yom Kippur, we confess for the sin we have committed "*b'kalut rosh* - by responding lightly to serious matters." *Kalut rosh* is a lack of seriousness. The word "*kal* (in *kalut*)" is the Hebrew word for easy. It should be easy inside these walls, your blood pressure should drop when you cross the threshold - or at least it shouldn't go up.

This is especially important because, I'm sure you know, beyond the walls of our community we are in tough times. We are in the midst of a youth mental health crisis, and an epidemic of adult loneliness, and a worsening culture of

violence and mean spiritedness. Many of you shared with a recent article by David Brooks about Americans becoming sadder and meaner over the past eight years. He chronicles, "rising rates of depression... deaths of despair from drugs, alcohol, and suicide.... The [increased] percentage of people who say they don't have close friends..." Brooks recounts stories and statistics of rude or cruel behavior now regularly occurring in places where that never used to happen. Brooks writes, "The words that define our age reek of menace."^{iv}

It sometimes happens when we make our commitment to caring into a vocation, or as our Christian friends sometimes call it, a ministry, we can become transactional and focus on quantity - how many people can I call today? This can minimize the quality or depth of relational engagement. We may call or send an email, attend a shiva, but quickly the daily hum of our own lives drowns out the cries of our neighbors. We can't carry all the burdens of all people all the time as if they were our own, but we also shouldn't minimize our ability to ease other people's struggles a little more than we do.

The Yom Kippur haftarah from Isaiah ends with a call to be the kind of builders whose new construction will reverse the trends of the street: "Your people shall rebuild ancient ruins and lay the foundations for ages to come. You shall be called 'Repairer of the Breach'."^v We are nearly done in that we have constructed the edifice and inscribed it with words to defy the reeking menace of this age. *Pitchu li shaarey tzedek*. Let not these words fade from our walls nor crumble to dust off the hardness of our hearts. Those are the gates of Eden and each of you within its walls will be like an unfailing spring beside which love and rightness and good will flower like palms.

How will we create a place like that? How will we make ourselves different from the mean world outside those doors? Let me explain through a story, a *Hasidic* tale that conveys my vision for what our community can be.

A young man left home to spend Shabbat with a great rabbi known as the Seer of Lublin. He hoped to become one of his *hasidim* (disciples). He just arrived when the rebbe looked at him and, without explanation, ordered him to leave. "You must arrive home before Shabbat begins tomorrow night." He begged to stay but could not change the rabbi's mind and so he left.

He spent the night at an inn and while he lay there, dejected and bereft, a group of *hasidim* entered the room. They were heading in the other direction, to spend Shabbat with the Rebbe. They heard the man weeping, asked him what was wrong, and heard what happened. They got some food and drink, filled their glasses and his, toasted: "L'chaim, To Life! To Life!" They told each other stories, sang, and shared what they had been learning that week. They wouldn't let him go home. They shouted: "You are coming with us to Lublin with us to spend Shabbat and don't you worry about anything!" At morning they practically carried him to the Rebbe's study.

As soon they entered the room the Rebbe noticed and looked to the young man with a long and silent intensity. Finally, he asked: "Where have you been? What happened?" Once he heard everything, the zaddik finally explained: "It had been decreed from heaven that you would die on this sabbath and so I sent you home to be with your family one last time. Your fate, however, has been averted. As for me, I now see that no single zaddik

can bring about what ten *hasidim* can accomplish.” (From the Stories of Yaakov Yitzhak of Lublin (“The Seer”), Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim, p. 305-6)

Here is why that story defines my vision for our community. First, unlike many hasidic stories, there is no magic or divine intervention that resolves the problem. The life of the man in the story is changed entirely by human actions - and not just any human actions; he is saved by acts of *hesed*. This is a story about normal people who encounter another person in a sensitive moment and they see that person and they ask: what's wrong? And they listen. And then they act with empathy and with kindness.

Second, the rebbe isn't the hero of the story. In fact the rebbe himself concludes that he's not the driver of the action but the group of interconnected parties make all the difference - in addition to the ten hasids and we need the innkeepers, the figures who never appear in the story but are critical to its outcome. They keep the lights on and spaces open and provide food and cleaning.

Third, the culture of joy and love at the heart of the idealized way of hasidic life is critical. The story reminds us that our most transformational moments are often unscripted and mundane encounters, not dramatic, grand gestures or predictable life cycle moments. On page 107, we read the words from *unataneh tokef* that the shofar gadol is sounded but the still small voice heard. That is how transformation happens. Because we never know when our response to a person is going to be life changing, we have to operate regularly with love, empathy and joy. The hasids in the story are so effective because they are just being true to themselves. They're not putting on airs for the sake of a rabbinic intervention;

being happy and positive and eager to share their joy is the essence of who they are. At the heart of our work is what Hillel taught: "Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to another person. That's the whole Torah, everything else is commentary. Go and learn."^{vi}

We have about 3,000 individuals who are members and many more friends of the congregation. In a community of our size, it takes a lot of *hasidim* and innkeepers to ensure people are seen and heard and supported in the times of need. That's where you come in. There's a teaching that when there are thirty six righteous people in the world, the messiah will come. Because the Hebrew letters Lamed and Vav combine to make the number 36, those people are called the "Lamed Vavniks." We need a team of Lamed Vavniks, people committed to ensuring that the doors to this community are *shaarey tzedek*. We need 36 people to form a team of visitors willing to do the mitzvah of *bikkur holim* and visit people in the hospital or in rehab or at home or to meet them here at temple or call them and stay in touch over the course of their recovery. We need people willing to make deliveries and help with life cycle support: bereavement bags, simcha sacks, shiva leading. We need people willing to serve as part of Mental Health First Aid corps who can be trained supporters and listeners.

On Yom Kippur we will have a service of healing and building resilience. Things are tough out there and we will keep that spiritual practice alive throughout the year with monthly healing services. We will soon have two professionals beyond the clergy who are helping with pastoral care and building a network of love and care: Karen Auerbach and a soon to be hired social worker

who will augment and help train our pastoral care givers. Please call or send us an email volunteering or set a reminder for yourself to call us in the coming weeks.

When the building is done, and we have fulfilled the commandment: *vaasu li mikdash*, build me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. If we did it right, we'll pass the code inspections and the building will be beautiful. And if the culture is right, if we have really made these into *Shaarey Tzedek*, then we will be called "Repairers of the Breach" and our lives will be changed forever.

ⁱ Exodus 25:8

ⁱⁱ *Otzar Midrashim, The Alef Bet of Rabbi Akiva*, Nusach 1: 29 (accessed at <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/482509.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} <https://www.ctpost.com/opinion/article/opinion-people-have-never-been-meaner-17882191.php>; David Brooks, "How America Got Mean," *The Atlantic*, accessed on 8/28/23 at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/us-culture-moral-education-formation/674765/>

^v Isaiah 58:12

^{vi} BT Shabbat 31a