

Rabbi Judith Schindler  
The Burning Bush and Gateways to Holiness  
Temple Beth El  
Parashat Shemot 5775

Where might I go to find You,  
Exalted, Hidden One?  
Yet where would I not go to find you,  
Everpresent, Eternal One?

My heart cries out to you:  
Please draw near to me.  
The moment I reach out for You,  
I find You reaching for me.

Baruch atah Adonai, Ha-El Hakadosh.

- From Mishkan Tefilah

Where would I go to find You, O God?  
Where would I not go to find You?

Our tradition teaches that gateways to holiness are everywhere. Even in the middle of the wilderness of Sinai. As our Torah text from the beginning of Exodus, from Parashat Shemot, teaches, “An angel of God appeared to Moses in a blazing fire out of a bush. Moses gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed.”

Jewish legend teaches that many shepherds passed that burning bush but failed to take notice of its awe.

Rabbi Larry Kushner reflects on how this could have happened, “How long must someone look at a burning bush to know whether or not it is being consumed?” Kushner asked. And he answers, “Certainly longer than most people look at anything. Longer, in other words, than you need to. More than to see it. Or to use it. Long enough to see if it will be for you an entrance. Such a man was Moses, our teacher. And likewise, anyone who is able to gaze on a place long enough without being distracted.”

My little Alec (who is now bigger than I) is fascinated by fire. He always has been. When we go to my friend’s lake house, a highlight for him is building a fire in a designated fire pit. Of course, I make sure an adult is with him. Over Thanksgiving it was I who was assigned to be out in the cold making sure he didn’t set fire where it wasn’t meant to be set.

There is something mystical and hypnotic about stopping to see the flames of a fire dance.

One of my favorite memories from my childhood was coming downstairs on the evening of Shabbat and seeing the Sabbath candles burning. That is still my favorite thing on the monthly

Shabbat evening I have at home. I savor walking past the kitchen when all is clean and dark, and seeing the dancing flames of the burning Shabbat candles.

Entrances to holiness can be anywhere - in Sabbath flames on a table and in campfires where smores are served. We simply need to stop and to see God in the flames.

Entrances to holiness can be anywhere - in children's voices of laughter, in music on the radio that takes us back in time, in the voice of a friend on the other end of the phone, in a song the Cantor sings. We simply need to stop and listen.

Entrances to holiness can be found anywhere - in learning from a poem, a scholar, a sacred text, a prayer. We simply need to stop and meditate on the meaning of what we are reading.

Entrances to holiness can be anywhere - in our acts of compassion. On Wednesday night, our 8th and 9th grade classes made 900 sandwiches for the homeless at Urban Ministry. In fear that informational emails about the event would go unopened, I went to the supermarket on Wednesday afternoon to get four extra loaves of bread and peanut butter and jelly.

Holiness entered the activity center as student after student brought turkey, and egg salad, and cheeses of all sorts, and pb&j, (and yes, some even brought ham) - but WE weren't eating the sandwiches, we were making them for the homeless. One student even made homemade bread for the task. Holiness was found in that act of making lunch for our homeless neighbors.

Then to top it all off, on the coldest morning of the year I drove to Urban Ministry Center - a day shelter for our hundreds of Charlotte's homeless and delivered the sandwiches first thing that morning. How amazing it was to see the holiness of the workers serving, the holiness of our homeless neighbors who smiled and were welcoming despite the miserable cold they were enduring, and the holiness of bringing our Hebrew High mitzvot to make a difference.

Entrances to holiness are everywhere - we just need to open our eyes, our ears, our minds, our hands and our hearts.

Moses looked and saw that the bush was aflame, yet it was not consumed.

A voice called out: "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." And Moses, "Responded Hineini - here I am."

That's all we need to say to open the doorway to the sacred,

"Hineini - Here I am. Hineini - I am here - Ready to see God in the face of others; ready to hear God in the voice of others; ready to understand God in the texts of our tradition; ready to be in the image of God through acts of kindness."

"Hinein - Here I am. Hineini - I am here.