

יְוֹנָה מְצָאָה בּוֹ מְנוּחָה  
"The Dove Found a Foothold"  
Rosh Hashanah 5772 – Day 1  
Rabbi Uri Topolosky  
Congregation Beth Israel  
New Orleans, LA

Shanah Tovah!

It's nice to see the steel structure of our new shul rising!

So of course, we're not the only Jews that have built a new shul. The story goes that the Jews of the foolish town of Chelm also decided to build a shul. But they didn't benefit from available steel, so they had to arrange for a great deal of wood. Luckily, there was a large forest located on a hill just outside of town. A number of Chelmites went out to the forest the next day and started cutting down trees. They soon had enough to build the new synagogue.

To transport the wood to town, they split into teams of four. Each team carried one tree down the hill and back to town. Just as they arrived with the very last tree, a stranger visiting town asked, "Why didn't you just roll the trees down the hill?" The mayor of Chelm hit himself in the forehead and said, "Of course! Why didn't we think of that?!" He then ordered all the workers to carry the trees back up the hill and roll them down!

Thankfully, we have a terrific team of volunteers and contractors leading this project, but has anyone wondered why this good Jewish operation is hiding behind the name "Goliath Contractors"?!

As I sit in our office and watch the progress unfold next door, it's hard not to think about all the little details.

One of the little details I was thinking about was signage. When people drive by, what will they see?

I've noticed that a lot of churches use witty signs to make a statement, hoping to lure folks in the doors.

There's an Anglican Church just down the road that has one of those signs out front. Have you ever seen it? I get a kick out of reading some of the messages, and the other day I went searching for images online of other funny church signs. Here are some highlights:

"God shows no favoritism, but our sign guy does – Go Saints!"

"Staying in Bed shouting, oh God! Does not constitute going to church."

"Honk if you love Jesus. Text while driving if you want to meet him."

"As you pass this little church, be sure to pay a visit, so when at last you're carried in, God won't ask, 'who is it?'"

"Sermon: Why didn't Noah swat the two mosquitoes?"

And one of my favorites: “Too cold to change sign, message inside.”

I’m not suggesting that we get a message board sign out front – God knows I don’t want the responsibility of coming up with a witty comment every week!

But I like the last sign I mentioned – the one that said that, “the message is inside.”

Instead of a billboard outside, there is an age-old practice of inscribing Biblical verses throughout the inside of a synagogue, and particularly on or above the aron – the holy ark. The verses help focus the worshiper on core values in Judaism and present our people’s mission.

This morning, while we all watch the outside of our shul get built, I want us to think about Jewish signage for the inside – specifically, what message should we write above our aron?

What statement do we want to make to all who worship in that space? Hopefully, people come to shul with what to say and not just rely on what’s in the book. So if we’re going to have the audacity to imply that there is something our shul wants you to think about when you come here to pray, we have to think very thoughtfully about what that text should be.

There are classic phrases that have been used, like “*Dah Lifnei Mi Atah Omed* – Know before Whom you stand.” And this is a fine statement to make, so long as it doesn’t bother you that it’s written in the masculine form and is therefore directed only to the men in the room. It reminds me of a *mechitza* in Chicago which was crafted with exquisite wood work and was topped with hand carved Biblical verses that cut all the way through the wood. The only problem was that only the men could read the words, since for the women, all the letters appeared backwards. From my perspective, a verse like this, or a *mechitza* like that, makes a strong statement about who we consider is our congregation.

But even more disappointing to me is that a verse like “*Dah Lifnei Mi Atah Omed*,” doesn’t communicate anything unique about our space. It is a generic phrase used in hundreds synagogues around the world. I think we are capable of imagining a message that reflects something more particular about this congregation and our goals in service.

I think it would be worthwhile for us to take a few minutes and consider a verse that would be fitting for our new shul and give direction to the ritual sub-committee of our building committee which is tasked with designing our aron.

So I got a bit ahead of myself and I brought in some proposals to share! [unwrap 5’ painted boards.]

1. “*ViAsu Li Mikdash Vishachanti bitocham* – Build for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell amongst you.” The artist, Simon, had a hard time composing this one. He got his Hebrew words mixed up and slightly out of order! Though he had fun writing his name backwards!

This was the verse written on the front of the old shul before Hurricane Katrina and it is sentimental to us – bridging the old and the new. We have used it on our stationary and in our stories.

But I know that we were hoping to use the actual letters from the old shul on the outside of our new building, so putting it also above the ark might be a bit redundant...

2. “*Ashira LaShem Ki Gamal Alai* – I will sing to God for He has brought kindness onto me.”

This verse communicates to me the message that we are a congregation built on kindness. First of all, our new shul is in a significant way financed by gifts from people all around the country who reached out to us after the flood to offer their support. The Ark that will bear this message is filled with Torah scrolls that were gifted to us after ours were destroyed. These scrolls represent the most incredible kindness - one from a bar mitzvah boy and another from a bat mitzvah girl, and the others from shuls and families around the country who cared. We have felt God's goodness reflected through all of these people. This verse also underscores a core mission for us – that our future will be secured on our ability to build a caring congregation.

### 3. "Shalom Y'all"

It's simple. It's southern. It's warm and inviting. Works for me! But maybe it's a bit jarring for the Aron...

There are many other verses we could consider together, and I invite that discussion, but for this morning, I'd like to suggest one in particular. And I make this suggestion humbly, only because our ritual subcommittee asked for my opinion. So this is one text that I think would best convey our mission, our shul, and our values. A unique text just for us:

### 4. "Yonah Matzah Bo Manoach - The Dove Found a Foothold. - יוֹנָה מְצָאָה בּוֹ מְנוּחַ I want to thank Hannah Chalew for creating this beautiful piece.

Since Hurricane Katrina, we haven't had a building. But we haven't been without an identity. In all our correspondence, we've included a blue logo – a dove with an olive branch in its mouth.

It is the image of hope. Of rebuilding. Of resolve. The strength of this congregation allowed it to find a foothold, and here we are today watching the steel rise on our new home.

*"Yonah Matzah Bo Manoach - The Dove Found a Foothold."*

The dove in Jewish literature is often symbolic of Israel. And this is "Beth Israel – the House of Israel." This dove has found its foothold for the past five years in a place few would have expected it to – inside the multipurpose room of a Reform Synagogue. An incredible relationship has formed between our two congregations bridging reform and orthodox Jews in a story that has been appreciated all over this country. With tremendous gratitude to our friends on the other side of this wall, we can say that this room has been our foothold after the flood.

Or perhaps this room was our floating Ark. And that steel next door our foothold to the future.

*Yonah Matzah Bo Manoach.* The verse tells our story.

And we can unpack this simple phrase even more – it conveys our values and our mission.

If we look at the actual text, this phrase, *Yonah Matzah Bo Manoach*, is not quite accurate.

8:6 וַיְהִי, מִקֵּץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם; וַיִּפְתַּח נֹחַ, אֶת-חַלּוֹן הַתֵּבָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה.

After forty days, Noah opened a window on the Ark...

ז וַיִּשְׁלַח, אֶת-הַעֹרֵב; וַיֵּצֵא יָצוּא נְשׁוּב, עַד-יָבִישׁת הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ. ח וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת-הַיּוֹנָה, מֵאֵתוֹ--לִרְאוֹת הַקָּלוּ הַמַּיִם, מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ. ט וְלֹא-מְצָאָה הַיּוֹנָה מְנוּחַ לְכַף-רַגְלָהּ, וַתָּשָׁב אֵלָיו אֶל-הַתֵּבָה--כִּי-מַיִם, עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ

*"ViLoh matzah HaYonah Manoach - But the dove didn't find a foothold!"... so it returned to the Ark. Noah waited seven more days and then sent out the dove again.*

וַיִּחַל עוֹד, שְׁבַעַת יָמִים אֶחָרִים; וַיִּסְרֹף שְׁלַח אֶת-הַיּוֹנָה, מִן-הַתֵּבָה. וַיֵּאָמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַיּוֹנָה לְעֵת עָרֵב, וַהֲנִה עֹלֶה-זֵית טָרֵף בְּפִיהָ; וַיָּדַע נֹחַ, כִּי-קָלוּ הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ. וַיִּבַּח וַיִּיחַל עוֹד, שְׁבַעַת יָמִים אֶחָרִים; וַיִּשְׁלַח, אֶת-הַיּוֹנָה, וְלֹא-יָסְפָה שׁוּב-אֵלָיו, עוֹד.

This time the dove did not return.

Using these verses, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, the famous medieval poet and philosopher, composed a classic Shabbat zemer/song that is still commonly sung today at Shabbat lunch tables around the world.

The song goes as follows [SING]:

The Shabbat day is unforgettable,  
Its memory is a sweet fragrance,  
The dove found it a resting place,  
And there rest the laborers as well.

*Yom shabbaton ein lishko'ach,  
Zichro k'rei'ach hanicho'ach,  
Yonah matza bo mano'ach,  
V'sham yanuchu y'gi'ei cho'ach.*

The poem opens with the assertion that Noach's dove did indeed find its *MaNoach*, its rest, when it discovered the olive branch, as is implied in the text. And Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's language has been the standard language for how we remember the story – that in the end, *Yonah Matzah Bo Manoach*.

From these words we learn the following...

1. When the dove found its foothold, it signaled the renewal of the covenant, and God finally tells Noach to leave the Ark, saying,

חַי וְאֵמַר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-נֹחַ, וְאָל-בְּנָיו אֲתוֹ לֵאמֹר. ט וַאֲנִי, הִנְנִי מְקִים אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם, וְאֶת-וְרֵעֵכֶם, אֶחָרִיכֶם.

“I establish my covenant with you and with your offspring after you.”

These words capture the moment in time when our story began, and they express our commitment *L'dor V'dor*, to pass on our traditions from one generation to the next.

2. The Rabbis of the midrash teach that the dove found its foothold on Shabbat. This is hinted at where the text says: “on the seventh day” the dove was sent and resented to search for dry land.

When we say or sing, *Yonah matzah Bo Manoach*, we celebrate the renewal power of Shabbat. We make the claim that we should never wait more than seven days to seek a spiritual foothold in the fast-paced world we live in. It is the core of every synagogue's mission – to help create a sacred space in time.

3. When we see these words, *Yonah Matzah Bo Manoach*, we also remember that the dove's flight began through an open window. The olive branch – symbolizing peace in our community and world, was discovered when Noach finally opened a window, breaking the seal between the little world inside the four walls of the ark, and the larger world outside.

I have often talked about the importance of windows and their symbolism in the synagogue. And we can recall the midrash which suggests that when the sea split for the Jews to cross, it opened into 12 walled paths – one for each of the tribes. But there were windows in the walls, offering each tribe a view of all the other tribe's unique paths across the sea, even as they proudly walked along their own.

In our new shul, the front sanctuary wall will have windows that bring in light from the direction of a playground that sits between our synagogue and our Reform neighbors at Congregation Gates of Prayer. While it is their playground, we will have shared access. The playground will be a beautiful symbol that

while our congregations have different beliefs and practices, we are still one Jewish family. And our children can certainly play together and build our future.

4. Another image that comes to mind from these words is The State of Israel. The olive branch, and even the dove itself, are classic representations of the Holy Land. The branches, along with the menorah, make up Israel's national symbol. When we see *Yonah Matzah Bo Manoach*, we are reminded of the centrality of Israel in our Jewish lives. It is our national home – our resting place. And we must all remain committed to its security, peace, and development.

5. A final image – that of the famous prophet “Yonah” – which means a dove, who incidentally features prominently in the Yom Kippur service. Yonah was given the task of saving the citizens of the "Great City" of Nineveh. God had decreed their destruction because of their wickedness, but at the same time sent Yonah to allow them the opportunity to avert their fate by repenting. Yonah struggles with this task. Some say it's because in his eyes, they didn't merit redemption.

But the Rabbis in a moving midrash recorded in the *Yalkut Shimoni* (Rav Shimon Hadarshan, 13c.) say that when God saved the city, Yonah did finally find peace. The Midrash says, “At that moment, Yonah fell upon his face and said: “Conduct Your world according to the attribute of mercy, as it is written: To Hashem, our God, are mercy and forgiveness (Daniel 9:9).”

In the end, *Yonah Matzah Bo Manoach* – Yonah finds peace in the appreciation that all people are created in the image of God and deserve the opportunity for freedom and redemption.

Friends, I don't get to choose which verse we put over our Aron - even if we put one at all. These boards were all created for our home. My goal is simply to make us think thoughtfully about the various religious symbols in our new synagogue and to envision what messages we hope to convey to ourselves and to others in shul. Perhaps this exercise also helps us each think about a verse in the Torah that might capture a bit of each of our own missions in life...

This verse, in particular, is just one example of how we can convey our synagogue's mission statement with a few simple words.

For me, this verse represents our synagogue's rebirth, just as it points to the ancient covenant that this synagogue has upheld for over 100 years.

This image captures the meaning of L'dor V'dor – the sacrifices and dreams that keep the chain of tradition moving from one generation to the next.

This verse underscores our commitment to the sanctity of Shabbat and its power to renew our lives.

It speaks to our hopes for peace – in the world and especially in Israel.

These words remind us of windows and the need to build community with all our component parts.

This pasuk calls us to the State of Israel and our responsibilities to our sacred home.

This verse symbolizes our belief that all people are created in the image of God.

And finally, *Yonah Matzah Bo Manoach* reflects the hope and strength of this community, that in the face of destruction and despair, we will always believe there is a foothold to find. Shanah Tovah.