

## Facing Jerusalem

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*Parashat Vayiggash*

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Today is *Tisha b'Tevet*, the 9<sup>th</sup> of Tevet – which means nothing. There's another “*tisha*,” *Tisha B'Av*) that matters a great deal, but not this one. Tomorrow, though, is a date worth mentioning: *Asarah B'Tevet*. The tenth of Tevet is the first in a cycle of minor fasts which include *shiva asar b'Tamuz*, when the walls to Jerusalem were breached by Nebuchadnezzar and *T'zom Gedaliah*, occurring between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which marks the assassination by a fellow Jew of *Gedaliah ben Achikam*, Jewish governor but vassal of the ruling Babylonian Empire. *Asarah b'Tevet*, then, commemorates the beginning of the siege on Jerusalem, a siege that would last a full 18 months and culminate, on *Tisha B'Av*, with the razing and burning of the Temple. (By the way, there is one other minor fast – *Ta'anit Esther*, but it is ahistorical and not connected in any explicit way with the story of Jerusalem).

Jerusalem is in the news a lot, which led journalist Matti Friedman to tweet last week “Sometimes it feels necessary to point out that the state of Israel is one one-hundredth of one percent of the world's surface.” Why so much of the world is so obsessed with Israel is a conversation for another time. Why Jews mention Jerusalem three times a day in our prayers, read about the land of Israel in our *parasha* and *haftarah* today, and – if you're like me compulsively read the Times of Israel, Ha'aretz, the NY Times or Wall Street Journal to see what's going on over there or how Israel is being portrayed – the answer to Jewish focus on Jerusalem begins with King David 3000 years ago, it continues with King Hezekiah and Josiah after him, it was a rallying cry for the prophets of old, a promise of return to Jewish sovereignty and represented the hopes and dreams of Jewish communities in diaspora for nearly two thousand years.

I've been talking about politics a fair amount lately – from the bima and in writing – so I don't want to do that today. I'm not going to dwell on political questions right now like whether the US embassy ought to be moved to Jerusalem nor the ongoing debate in Israel about Netanyahu's alleged corruption, Amona, the United Nations and settlement policy or the current brew ha-ha over whether to pardon Sergeant Azaria after his conviction of manslaughter for fatally shooting an incapacitated Palestinian terrorist. Instead, today, I'd like to revisit this year's thematic question of sacred space and consider our posture – that is that way that we physically acknowledge Jerusalem's centrality during our prayers.

How do we do this? Well, you're doing it right now! What direction do we face when we pray? It's a bit of a trick question because we don't really face east, we face Jerusalem. Maimonides (*Hilchot tefilah u'virkat kohanim* 5:3) puts it this way:

נכח המקדש כיצד היה עומד בחוצה לארץ מחזיר פניו נכח ארץ ישראל  
ומתפלל היה עומד בארץ מכוין את פניו כנגד ירושלים היה עומד בירושלים  
מכוין פניו כנגד המקדש היה עומד במקדש מכוין פניו כנגד בית קדש הקדשים

*“Facing the Temple: What is implied? A person standing in the Diaspora should face Eretz Yisrael and pray. One standing in Eretz Yisrael should face Jerusalem. One standing in Jerusalem should face the Temple. One standing in the Temple should face the Holy of Holies.”*

We understand that our bodies, the very directionality of our posture signals to ourselves, to one another and to God, the centrality of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount where *Beit Hamikdash* once stood. In fact, the Midrash (*Tanchuma Kedoshim* 10) sees a connection between the human form and *Eretz Yisrael*: “just as the navel sits at the center of a person, so too the Land of Israel is situated at the center of the world. This notion, that there’s a *tabor haOlam*, a belly button of the universe, isn’t unique to Judaism, but for us, that belly button is situated firmly in a particular place. Jewish navel-gazing is when we point our own navels toward the ultimate one, the one from which, according to tradition, God fashioned the physical universe. The Midrash goes on: “...and Jerusalem in the center of the land of Israel, and the Temple in the center of Jerusalem, and the heichal, the inner sanctum, in the center of the Temple, and the ark in the center of the heichal, and the Foundation Stone before the ark, because from it the world was founded.”

Now, when we talk about human physiology, the navel is not just centrally located in the front of our bodies; it is of course the part of our bodies from which we were nurtured by our mothers in the womb. So facing Jerusalem when we pray, pointing our belly buttons to the east, is also about confronting our own mortality, that we are created beings – created and nourished by our parents, and fashioned as an extension of the world by the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*. According to the Zohar on next week’s *parasha* (*Vayechi* 1:231), “*The world was not created until God took a stone called Even Shetiya and threw it into the depths where it was fixed from above till below, and from it the world expanded. It is the center point of the world and on this spot stood the Holy of Holies.*” Think of it like Superman’s Fortress of Solitude. Superman throws this one crystal and from that grows the entire fortress. I’m not suggesting Kabbalistic science is the same as comic book fantasy. Alright, maybe I am. What is certainly true is that *Evan Shetiya*, the foundation stone, once formed the center of Jerusalem’s holy Temple and is now the “rock” within the Muslim shrine called “the Dome of the Rock.”

But, that stone plays a role not just in human existence, and not just in the world’s existence, but it plays a central role in Jewish history as well. Our tradition asserts *Evan Shetiyah* is *Har Moriah*, the stone to which Abraham bound his son Isaac with plans to offer him as a sacrifice. And this stone is the stone, according to legend, on which Jacob rested his head while dreaming of that stairway to heaven. “*Achen, yesh Hashem b’makom hazeh va’anochi lo yadati...* surely God was in this place and I did not know it,” he proclaims! Remember, prayer is not just an exercise in ongoing revelation, though it is that, and it’s not just about self-reflection, though it is certainly that (the word *l’hitpalel* is reflexive meaning “to judge oneself”). For Jews, though, prayer is also an exercise in genealogy. Jewish identity is first and foremost about family, that is we are all sons and daughters – biologically and/or ideologically – of Abraham and Sarah. What is the central prayer of the service? The Amidah. How is it said? Standing in respect, with our feet together, and facing Jerusalem. How does it begin? God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God of Sarah...Rebecca...Rachel...Leah.” We have the right to pour out our hearts before the Holy One because we embed our own experience within the lived experiences of our people over time. Our God is their God. The land toward which we face, was their land.

So, here's an interesting question: the ark containing the *sifrei Torah* is here over my shoulder. What happens if it's not? What if a prayer space is constructed so that the *aron kodesh* is not to the East? Do you face Jerusalem or do you face the *aron*? This is precisely the issue we had in Chicago when I worked there. We had this beautiful sanctuary with stunning stained glass windows, and this enormous wooden *aron kodesh*. The only problem was that the auditorium style seating with its plush seats and graded floor faces most-decidedly west. Why this is, I'm not entirely sure. Sometimes congregations have to use the lot or a remodeled room in a particular way that precludes facing east. In the Chicago case, Anshe Emet, like Beth Am, did not build its building. Unlike Beth Am, however, Anshe Emet's building was built not by another Conservative shul but by a Reform one – Temple Shalom. This is relevant because in 1910 when that sanctuary was constructed, the Reform movement had not embraced Zionism. There were differing opinions, of course, but the Columbus Platform of '37 was when the Reform Movement official adopted a Zionistic policy. But in 1910, the movement still held by the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform which stated: "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state." So they may have built it deliberately facing west or they simply may not have bothered to check.

But, what do you do if you're a Conservative shul, with allegiance to the State of Israel in your mission statement, and your sanctuary faces west? Some authorities would say try to do both – point your feet generally west but turn your face toward Jerusalem. (I guess that means your bellybutton goes somewhere in the middle!) Others would argue, don't worry about it, face Jerusalem. But, leaving the sloping floor aside, you could imagine it being a bit uncomfortable to simply turn your back to the ark while you pray. Which is why many halachic authorities would say you face the ark, even if your back is toward *Yerushalayim*, the Temple Mount and the Foundation Stone itself!

The truth is, this never used to be a problem. Until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish sacred space did not include a fixed ark where the scrolls were kept. The focus of davening was east (or north from Yemen or west from Persia) but the service leader led from the center of the *beit k'nesset* and the *sefer torah* was read on the central *bima*. Once, though, synagogue architecture began to include a fixed *aron kodesh*, we had a new problem: do you face the spiritual and national homeland of the Jewish people where the Temple once stood or do you face the ark which represents, after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple itself? Why are there two pillars behind me? Because *Beit Hamikdash* in *Yerushalayim* included two pillars. They even had names: *Boaz and Yachin*. Why is there a *parochet*, a curtain? Because there was a *parochet* before the *Kodesh Kodashim* in the Temple. Why are there *Menorot*? Clearly, an homage to the menorah in the Temple! Same with the *Ner Tamid* and the Ten Commandments up above which were contained within the *Aron Habrit*, the original *aron* in Solomon's *Bayit Rishon*.

To where did our rabbinic authorities look in order to sort this out? Even though they didn't have the issue of a fixed ark, there were cases in ancient times when one could not guarantee facing the right direction. What if you were blind? What if you were traveling in a caravan and physically couldn't stop to pray the preferred direction? Maimonides (*ibid*) says:

## סומא ומי שלא יכול לכוין את הרוחות והמהלך בספינה יכוין את לבו כנגד השכינה ויתפלל

“A blind person, one who is unable to determine direction, or one travelling in a boat should direct his heart toward the Divine Presence and pray” (ibid 5:3).

Still another consideration is how one even faces Jerusalem considering the curvature of the earth! You might think you're facing Jerusalem when you face east, but that is hardly the most direct route. Anyone who's flown from the US to Europe or the Middle East knows you don't fly due east. You take what's called the Great Circle Route – on a flat map, it appears to be an arc. Michael Broyde of Emory University [points out](#) “The shortest route between New York City and Jerusalem is 5686 miles, and it travels the Great Circle Route from New York with an initial heading of 54 degrees East-North. If one wished to travel to Israel by the compass route from New York, one would have to travel 6091 miles (over 400 miles farther) at a heading of about 95 degrees East-South.” He notes that the main *Bet Midrash* at Yeshivah University faces not east but northeast according to the Great Circle Route. And Beth Am? Only Efrem Potts can tell you if it was intentional that those who initially created the Baltimore street grid put Eutaw Place on a trajectory Northwest so that, one day, Chizuk Amuno would build this sanctuary perpendicular to Eutaw Place, thus facing northeast, our prayers traveling efficiently toward heaven by way of Jerusalem!

So whether we daven in our historic sanctuary, our Kaplan social, or one day soon in our new Beit Midrash (which will face closer to true east), we have the good fortune of having our arks line up with our historic inclination toward Jerusalem and our ideological inclination toward Israel. Tomorrow, some Jews will fast for *asarah b'tevet*, many Jews will not (perhaps because excessive fasting for the cessation of Jewish sovereignty in *Eretz Yisrael* seems a strange response to the reality of Jewish sovereignty in *Medinat Yisrael*). But whatever our practice, today, for the *Musaf Amidah*, just as we did for the *Shacharit Amidah*, we will stand and face the rock (*Even Shetiyah*) and the Rock (God). As we do so today, I would ask that we consider the parasha. Because today, with *Vayiggash*, we encountered the first Jewish diasporic experience. It is in today's portion Jacob establishes the *B'nai Yisrael*, the 70 souls constituting the first extended Jewish family, not in the land of Israel, but in Egypt. We know that story. We know about the years of slavery. We know about the return to the Promised Land. We know the pain of Jewish exile time and again for myriad lands, the return to the land in '48, the return to the Old City in '67. And we also know that for all that time and since, for the many Jews who do not live in Israel, we continue to incline our hearts and our attention there. We may do so by scouring headlines or calling relatives. We may read *Biblical Archaeology Review* or the Jerusalem Post. Or we may be more nostalgic, inclining our thoughts toward a time long past in a place far away, a place where our ancestors first became a nation, a people within which our path has been forged and our destiny realized.