

## Reflections on the Pelham Jewish Center's New Home Rabbi David A. Schuck

אָבן מֵאָסוּ הַבּוֹנִים “THE STONE WAS REJECTED BY THE BUILDERS”

PSALM 118

Once upon a time, there was a stone that was very precious to its owner, a young contractor just getting his feet wet. It was beautiful to him not because its color was striking, and not because its shape was perfect. Not because it was worth a lot of money, and not because it would seduce his bride. In fact, aesthetically, many would say it was just plain ugly. But the owner cherished it because he knew that it could weather any storm, it would be untouched by the violence of the rain and wind and it would resist the weight of heavier stones piled on top of it. The builders, the contractors of his town dismissed the man as foolish and his stone as unsightly. They knew better. People want stones that sparkle and shine. The luster of the stone matters. “Young man, if you want to be taken seriously, change your stone,” they chided him. “Dusty, jagged stones make good mountains, but they don’t make 1<sup>st</sup> rate buildings.”

This rock was our old synagogue- simple, durable, and charming in its imperfection and dustiness. Things were somewhat in disrepair, but it was beloved to its owners. It was a romantic little *shteibel*, a sweet little charming synagogue. But there is another side of this coin, a less romantic side. When we allow things to exist in disrepair, when we stop worrying about the details, we are essentially saying that we don’t fully value it, and for a religious community, this can lead to spiritual collapse and lethargy. This manifests itself in many ways. A few months into my job here at the PJC I gave a sermon after which a congregant presented me with feedback. This person very sweetly

reassured me of her good intentions by saying, “Rabbi, this feedback will help you when you become an important rabbi...” It was such an interesting phrase to me. I responded by saying, “I *am* an important rabbi. I’m *your* rabbi, the rabbi of your synagogue.”

Congregational low self esteem is a side effect of a synagogue that is in disrepair. Every religious community should think of itself as a community of great consequence, but when a synagogue is in poor condition, it is very difficult for its members to fully appreciate its true spiritual value, and folks stop reaching toward new spiritual heights.

They run the danger of becoming their building. This is a basic principle of architecture.

We are deeply affected by our surroundings. Ernest Dimmet said, “Architecture, of all the arts, is the one which acts the most slowly, but the most surely, on the soul.” The

condition of a synagogue affects one’s soul, and over time, despite the charm of the old PJC, my sense is that it contributed to a creeping sense of inconsequentiality.

**אֶבֶן מְאֻסוֹ הַבּוֹנִים “THE STONE THAT THE BUILDERS REJECTED”**

**הִיְתָה לְרֵאשׁ פְּנֵה: “HAS BECOME THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE”**

The jagged, imperfect, dusty stone, rejected by the great builders of the day, was cherished by the young Solomon. He understood that its value would increase because of the meaning ascribed to it, because of the holy purpose it would serve. He loved the rock for its simplicity, for its allure. Its simplicity captivated him. It stood in contradistinction to the perfectly cut and shiny marble that built imposing institutions, institutions whose soul was as cold as the marble that was its floor. But until Solomon used the rock as a foundation upon which to build something new, its potential to be transformative remained untapped. He discovered that his new building, his Temple could be as riveting

and warm and charming as the simplicity of the first rock. The first rock consciously spread its character to the rest of the elements used to build the Temple- the fine wood, the Jerusalem stone, the gorgeous mosaics of the Temple floors all evolved out of the simplicity of the initial rock. Its character was memorialized in the structure of the completed Temple, and people flocked to it for worship.

Like Solomon's stone, the old PJC, its charm and the values it represented are truly manifest here today in our new building, a remarkable accomplishment. We are so fortunate to have inherited from the tireless building committee a synagogue that retains the charm, warmth, and anti-institutionalism of the original building. It is elegant in its simplicity- an aspiration that I hope will influence our spiritual lives- complex simplicity. Part of the religious significance of this renovation is the emerging shift in self perception- it is a bold declaration and reaffirmation of our value and values. We are declaring that as individuals, we can teach one another and grow old together, enriching one another's lives in significant ways, and we take seriously that mission. As a synagogue, we are declaring that we have a lot to offer the larger Westchester Jewish Community, and we take seriously that mission. As a community we are declaring that we have a lot to offer the larger Pelham, New Rochelle, and Mount Vernon communities, and we take seriously that mission. And as Jews, we are declaring that God and Torah are of central importance to our lives, and we take seriously the deeply enriching and daunting consequences of such recognition. This synagogue has something special and unique and we should wear that as a badge of honor. We are not perfect, far from it. There is a lot of room for improvement, but today, we are on the right path.

PSALM 118

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זֶה הַיּוֹם עָשָׂה יְדוֹד THIS IS THE DAY THAT THE LORD HAS MADE

וְנִשְׂמְחָה בּוֹ: LET US REJOICE AND DELIGHT IN IT

This is the Biblical verse written on our ark doors. “This is the day that the Lord has made, Let us rejoice and delight in it.” The old undervalued stone becomes the building block for future greatness. In today’s culture of consumerism and obsession with immediate gratification, loyalty to the founding stone and its vision requires a giant act of faith in the values and choices of those who came before us. Zeh Hayom, this is the day on which we remember those who found the first rock, as unlikely a choice as it was, and began carving it into something that acted slowly and surely on our souls. Zeh Hayom, this is the day on which celebrate this legacy and our decision to honor it, to honor the vital work of our founders and those who have given so much of themselves to the Pelham Jewish Center over the last 53 years. This is a day of great joy, a day on which we should burn with pride.

Yet Rashi tells us that our verse is a prophecy, that the day we are celebrating has not yet arrived. We begin the celebration today, but it is a celebration of what will be, a celebration of the power of Torah to transform us into people connected to God and humanity. When you look up at our ark and you see the Etz Hayyim, the Tree of Life, a metaphor for our holy Torah, behind which of course, actually sit our 3 torahs, I urge you to recognize this verse as an aspiration for what can be. We have come a long way from the rejected stone, but we have not yet reached a world in which there is peace, in which

there is enough healing for existing pain, a world in which in which all human beings feel spiritually nourished and cared for. Our mission as a synagogue is to contribute to this *tikkun olam*, this healing of the world. This is the day to which our verse alludes, and when we reach it, and we will one day, we will be able to sing the words not as a prophecy, but as a reality.

Through this renovation project, some very important healing has already occurred. The collective memory of the synagogue reaches back a long time, and the stories of institutionalized anti-Semitism remain fresh in the minds of those who experienced it directly, and in the minds of all who know the origins of this synagogue. The pain caused by such an anguished beginning is real. But the response of the Pelham Churches to our current project, and in particular, the parishes of Christ the Redeemer and St. Catharine's has remarkably healed much of those wounds. The generosity of the churches truly inspired us, and their benevolence stands before us as *dugmaot*, religious examples to which we may aspire. The understanding and hospitality shown to us by these two churches is a reflection of the superior religious leadership of their clergy, Father Peter Bannan and Reverend Randy Alexander. On a personal note, I have felt blessed to have the opportunity to learn from the two of you and to develop friendships with you. I hope we will continue to nurture them and I pray that our communities will continue to strengthen to bonds that have begun to grow between us. We have been profoundly touched by your kindness and inspired by your examples. You and your communities have in a very real way, commenced the process of healing that the verse above our ark aspires to celebrate. This is an incredibly important accomplishment and has truly transformed the consciousness of our community. I think it is accurate to say

that as a synagogue, we have never felt more connected to the town in which we live. Will Father Peter Bannan, Mr. Gregory Delgado, Reverends Randy and Patricia Alexander, and Father George Rogers please rise. May God bless you, your parishioners, and all of the holy work that you do. CLAP In a moment I will ask Father Bannan and Reverend Alexander to share a few words with us.

In conclusion, the *davenning*, the prayer service on the first Friday night back in our building was sublime. The singing was magnificent and the energy in the sanctuary moved some to tears. The energy that night was not simply the result of our excitement about the new building or relief to be back home. It was the comprehension of the religious significance of the moment in our community, we felt it. It was a moment in which snapshots of various moments in time converged with our current seriousness of task. The joyous voices that sang on Fridays nights in the 1960s and 70s were for an instant, singing with us. The poignant and austere voices which, since 1953, in this building, gave voice to the grief caused by loss chanted the Mourner's Kaddish along with our current mourners. The love of Judaism and God that moved congregants over the years adds to the love we feel today, and the pride of our founding members, a pride that only comes from building something that will touch unborn generations, radiates down from the heavens, as those who are no longer with us laugh and dance along with us.

Pirkei Avot teaches us that God passed the Torah on to Moses, who passed it on to Joshua, who passed it on to the elders, and so on. At some point along this chain from Mount Sinai, someone passed the Torah to Graenum Berger and Dr. Morris Goldberg, who through their dedication, have passed it to you. Each person sitting in this room has

to power to be a part of this chain. For those who grab on tight, it is a tree of life, don't let go of it. I hope the carpets quickly fade from the active little feet playing on them, and that some stains appear from Shabbat dinners and the celebration of smachot, of festive occasions. I pray that we properly honor the vision of our founding members, who are undoubtedly blushing right now.

Please join me in the recitation of the shehechyanu, a prayer thank God for allowing us to live to experience this moment:

BARUCH...

Praised are You Adonai our God who rules the universe, granting us life, sustaining us, and enabling us to reach this day.