When the Building Is Almost Done—and the Real Work Begins and Continues

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As I personally prepare for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur this year, and consider the special meaning of the 2019 High Holiday season for the extended JTS family, I cannot help but reflect on the state of the new-and-renewed campus rising just outside my office window. What does it mean to have the completion of a major project in sight, but know you have a way to go before the goal is reached? How do we reckon with the realization that when the work is finally done, other work—the real work—begins and continues?

That's where the construction of JTS's new campus stands right now. The ambitious project that JTS began imagining and planning five years ago—a new library, new residence hall, new auditorium/performing arts space, new conference facilities, and a new atrium or “light court” that will unite all these and bring the JTS community together as never before—is very near to completion. After demolition in 2016, and groundbreaking in spring 2017, here we are in fall 2019, set to dedicate a group of spaces later this year that will not only be highly functional but strikingly beautiful. So much else has been accomplished in the meantime as well: hundreds of students inspired by Jewish history and texts and prepared for positions of community leadership, dozens of faculty achievements and awards, creation of new centers for Spiritual Arts and Ethics and Justice, and expanded access to JTS scholarship for Jews everywhere through online courses and livestreamed events. There is “a time for tearing down and a time for building up,” said Kohelet. It will soon be time at JTS to celebrate what we have built and put it into service.

“To what may this matter be compared?” our sages liked to ask. The rabbis famously compared students and practitioners of Torah to builders—and in that spirit I’d like to suggest that JTS’s construction project might well be compared to the ebb and flow of our personal and collective lives; to the work we do, individually and together, to arrange our surroundings and calendars to facilitate the achievement of our goals, material and spiritual. Most relevantly to this season of the year, what Kohelet called “casting away stones” and “gathering of stones together” might usefully be compared to the process of teshuvah: a renewal and return, correction and forgiveness, improving on what has been and starting from the beginning.

The approach of the New Year is a good time to remember what each of us has accomplished over the years, and over this past year in particular, and to pay special attention to what we have accomplished together with spouses, family, friends, and communities. Almost all of us can look back without smugness or self-deception on achievement that merits a significant measure of pride and satisfaction. Relationships begun barely five or ten years ago have blossomed by 2019. Projects not even imagined then have come to fruition. Love has been given and received. Justice and compassion have won out, thanks in part to our efforts, over greed and cruelty. Suffering has been endured and overcome. Lacking these
achievements, we would have little basis for confidence that we can do even better and do more in the year to come. Recalling them, we are encouraged to try once more to repair what still needs fixing.

Other goals have yet to be met, of course, and these tend to loom especially large as the Days of Awe and Repentance near. The liturgy of the Days of Awe will not let us forget them. So much remains undone, unchanged, unmoved despite our best efforts. We have made mistakes as individuals and as a society. The Ashamnu and Al Het confessionals that we recite over and over on Yom Kippur are too often and too painfully on the mark. Plans have gone awry, we have hurt people we love, and we have neglected others who needed our attention. Goals we were sure to have reached by this point in the year, or in our lives, still lie ahead. In some cases, we can be confident that we are almost there. Others will have to be put off to another day, another year.

In the midst of reckonings like these, I am grateful for Maimonides’ assurance, in his brilliant and ever-relevant meditation on teshuvah in the Mishneh Torah, that each and every human being has the ability to choose wisely, do good, repair mistakes, receive forgiveness, and build a better world. He takes great pains to contest and even ridicule the determinists in our midst who say that all is fated, and our best efforts doomed. He tries to shout down the doubts we ourselves may harbor about our chances of making real changes in ourselves or the world. “Freedom is granted to every human being,” he insists. We can do better than we have in the past and finish what is still undone. Those who want to turn to a good path have that ability, he insists. Those who want to go in the opposite direction are free to do that as well. And because this freedom of action is in our hands, we should “examine our ways and probe ourselves deeply and return to the Lord.” This is the work of teshuvah.

There is something inspiring about watching a building steadily rise, floor by floor, section by section, over the course of months and years. The knowledge that a long, complex, and ambitious project will soon be finished offers additional reassurance. It is hard not to be paralyzed sometimes by the recognition of how much needs to change in our world—and all that needs to change in ourselves. The Jewish community that JTS exists to serve faces challenges unlike any that Jews (or others) have encountered over the course of our long history. The age-old tradition that we at JTS study, transmit, and try to put into practice will need to be brought to bear in creative and unprecedented ways. We know buildings are means to an end rather than ends in themselves, and we are confident that JTS’s new campus will enable us to undertake the work ahead with more energy, efficiency, and determination than ever before. Indeed, the building project itself—made possible by the labors of hundreds of construction workers along with engineers and architects—gives confidence that all of us, working together, can build a better world.

May the new year be one of achievement and fulfillment for us, our families, and our communities.

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