duties of democracy on our behalf in that space—a space hallowed by our defining national aspiration to enable the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness of every American. There are, to be sure, many differences between the Capitol and the Mishkan; but both are manifestations of communal devotion to a higher cause. Then and now, we need spaces safe from assault where our leaders can work toward realizing our shared values and ideals.

Finally, on this Shabbat of Remembering, let us not forget the millions of people excluded from these diverse spaces far beyond the pandemic: those bound to their homes by disability; seniors whose ill health keeps them in nursing homes; the incarcerated, confined to spaces that are antithetical to the thriving of the human spirit. The protracted spatial deprivation that most are suffering through only temporarily is the long-term reality of so many of our fellow human beings, and the damage caused by their confinement is deep and lasting.

We are, and always have been, hardwired to rely on designated physical spaces to address our core needs. Notwithstanding the unprecedented opportunities for connection made possible by the digital era, Zoom will never replicate the benefits that we derive from the spaces beyond our homes. As I understand the Mishkan in this new, pandemic-influenced light, I pray that we will soon return to the beloved spaces that now stand empty, with renewed appreciation for what they offer us. The human soul needs space—both sacred and mundane—to breathe and grow.

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Remembering Our Sacred Spaces

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On Shabbat Zakhor—the Shabbat of remembering—we recall the Amalekites' vicious attack on the Israelites in the desert, in which they targeted not the fighters but the weaker members of the community (Deut. 25:17–19). This year, however, I suspect many of us will be focused instinctively on remembering something else: the anniversary of the coronavirus pandemic turning our lives upside down.

Shabbat Zakhor of 2020 was the last normal Shabbat service I attended. The Megillah reading on Purim night was the last normal communal event—though the sanctuary was only half full as coronavirus anxiety began to take hold. By week's end, the synagogue, the kids' schools, and my place of work were all physically closed. The shock of that unceremonious and all-encompassing cessation of life as we knew it evokes difficult memories, even after a year of this new normal—a constrained existence that many of us are still struggling to accept.

Countless people have lost loved ones, their own health, jobs, or homes to this pandemic. For those who have been spared these losses, and who have the luxury of working from home, perhaps the most conspicuous change in our lives has been the confinement to our residences. We have been deprived wholesale of entering the many other spaces that have defined the rhythms of our days, weeks, and years, our lifecycle events from birth to death. So it seems fitting for this fraught anniversary to coincide with the part of the Torah reading cycle that focuses on sacred space.

The four parshiyot devoted to the construction of the Mishkan—the portable Tabernacle that accompanied the Israelites through the desert—can be challenging to relate to. What contemporary meaning can we draw from the fastidious attention to detail regarding the specifications for each part of the Mishkan and the many sacred objects within it? This year, the Torah's

preoccupation with sacred space invites us each to consider what we have learned about space in our year without. These are the lessons that my own reflections have yielded:

Details matter. Throughout history, humans have designed specific spaces for specific needs—be they spiritual, social, aesthetic, intellectual, or utilitarian. The Mishkan was a space for encountering God. Considering its lofty and crucial function—along with the need for a stable structure that could be assembled and disassembled many times with limited tools—it's no wonder that the instructions were delivered in highly specific detail up front and then repeated upon execution. The dimensions and materials, the ritual garments and many objects of worship, were of the utmost importance both religiously and architecturally. It had to be done right to achieve its purpose.

Do we pay any less attention to detail in the spaces that we design today? Consider the months and even years that go into the design and construction of synagogues and schools, theatres and museums. We obsess over the marriage of form and function in the creation of these structures, each for its designated purpose. As our physical landscapes have narrowed dramatically over the past year, we have found ways to gather, learn, pray, play, exercise, cook, and even travel from our screens. But we are painfully aware of how these virtual substitutes fail to achieve what physical spaces can.

So much of what we need is, as they say, in the details. A virtual Shabbat service lacks the ambient rustle of tallitot and turning pages in siddurim; the acoustics that allow our voices to soar; the glimmer of light reflecting off the polished brass of the *ner tamid;* the particular religiosity evoked in the final seconds before the ark curtains close. Saying goodbye to someone we love without accompanying their wooden coffin to the grave; without the serenity of a cemetery enveloping us; without the texture of sanctified earth beneath our shoes—how can we mourn and grieve without the physical trappings through which we honor their memory and begin to let them go? Like the many details of the Mishkan, these details of our physical spaces matter. They are crucial tools that enable a space to facilitate the specific experiences that we need. The loss of all that they provide is profound.

We need reassurance that we are not alone. Bible scholar Nahum Sarna (*z"l*) points out that the core function of the Mishkan was "to serve as the symbol of God's continued Presence in the midst of Israel . . . . It is not designed, as are modern places of worship, for communal use" (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 155). From ancient times to the present, people have found ways to connect to the divine in many different places. Jacob became aware of God's

presence in a seemingly random spot along the road upon waking from his dream of the ladder (Gen. 28:10–19). Today, we might feel God at the site of a natural or architectural wonder; in a concert hall resounding with music; in a hospital room with a newborn baby or a soul about to depart from this world.

And yet, there are many times in our lives when it's not so easy to feel that God is there, and so places of worship play a unique role because they are designed with the express purpose of cultivating our awareness of the divine. The words "Know before Whom you stand" are found above the ark in many a synagogue. Church iconography affirms God's presence even more explicitly for those who worship there. So, too, the Israelites derived spiritual reassurance from a physical home for God in their midst; "let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them," God says (Exod. 25:8).

We share that need for reassurance—but we can no longer go to the places where we have grown accustomed to finding it. Religious communities have helped their members cope with the isolation of the pandemic through phone trees, care packages, pastoral counseling, and innumerable Zoom sessions; but I suspect that many people are nonetheless struggling with a sense of disconnection from God out of prolonged absence from the spaces designed to inspire faith and prayer. Spiritual isolation—though rarely discussed in the public sphere—is, I believe, just as prevalent as social isolation in COVID times, and just as unsustainable.

It isn't only the assurance of God's presence that we are missing. The many people beyond our inner circle—the co-workers, coffee shop clerks, gym buddies, and fellow commuters who bring texture and color to the fabric of our lives—have fallen away. In normal times, countless casual interactions serve to assure us that we are not alone—that we are part of the larger project of human life and community. A recent piece in the *Atlantic* powerfully describes how essential to our wellbeing these "weak ties" are, in ways that we tend to overlook. Our expulsion from ostensibly non-sacred spaces—the office, the mall, the bowling alley—leaves us bereft as well.

Our spaces symbolize our values. The Israelites did not gather *en masse* in the Mishkan. Rather, a small number of priests carried out the most sacred functions on the people's behalf. The people aspired to be in relationship with God, and the priests facilitated that relationship through their holy work. The Mishkan thus became "the focus of national unity" even though it was only religious leaders who were there (Sarna, *ibid.*).

I cannot help but think of the US Capitol in this context. Though most Americans never set foot there, our elected representatives carry out the sacred