

JEWISH PEDAGOGY: CREATING SACRED SPACE

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The Pedagogy

Creating sacred space refers to deliberately defining, giving express purpose to, and sanctifying space through restriction/limitation. After having spent many years teaching in a variety of different settings—both formal and informal—and after more than 20 years of building a home as a laboratory for my family’s growth and education, I am prompted to step back and reflect on the principles that underlie the spaces we design and the practices they inform. We construct spaces all the time. How deliberate are we about their purpose? Do we infuse them with sanctity? If so, are we conscious of how we might preserve that sanctity?

Offering educators and parents alike a practical toolkit, a set of practices, and questions for reflection offers me the chance to be an architect for the sacred spaces constructed by others.

Some questions that have emerged from my teaching, thinking, parenting, and constructing include:

- In what ways can and do we invite our students and children to be partners in the process of creating sacred spaces?
- Are we deliberate and intentional in our design and use of space in our homes so that those values are elevated?
- How do boundaries, limitations, and restrictions serve to sanctify space?
- Who has the authority to define those boundaries?
- How can our homes become sacred spaces for Jewish education?
- Does the nature of what is sacred shift? How can we adapt our spaces for different activities and modalities of the sacred?
- How can we construct sacred spaces when we are on the go? Is there a model for itinerant sacred space?
- What do jointly crafted sacred spaces look like?
- How can overlapping maps of sacred—i.e., one space that is deemed sacred to different people/groups for different reasons—co-exist?
- How can our sacred texts inform our practices?

For an educator, or anyone designing a “sacred space”—be it a sanctuary or a salon, a *beit midrash* or a bedroom—deliberate planning is required. One cannot just walk into a space and expect it to magically transform itself into a sacred one, just by virtue of the activity taking place there.

As teachers, parents, and spiritual leaders, we often hope that spaces will transform us and our children/ students, but we are reminded that first we must transform them.

Such transformation can be achieved through:

- Developing a set of practices to give learners/family members an opportunity to define both sacred activities and sacred spaces, and delineate those spaces together.
- Developing frameworks for the imposition of restrictions and limitations whose aim would be to preserve the sanctity of space.

The Worldview

Torah as Blueprint for Design

God's creating is not haphazard; there is vision and deliberate planning from the outset. The midrash in Genesis Rabbah 1:1, a rabbinic text composed in 5th-century Galilee, tells that just as a human king builds a palace, he does not build of his own knowledge but uses the knowledge of an artisan, and an artisan does not build of his knowledge but has parchments and wax tablets to know how to make the rooms, so too God looked in the Torah and then created the world. There is a blueprint for God's design.

Burton Visotzky has pointed out that this midrash agrees with the surmise of art historians and archaeologists that ancient artisans consulted scrolls, plan books, design templates, and pattern-books to lay down their mosaics. Constructing sacred space involved deliberate planning and artistry. With this knowledge of archeology, the reader can appreciate the appropriateness of this metaphor in the midrash: "Without scrolls and codices, God could not engage in the works of creation. It is as much to say that without both the written Mosaic Torah scroll, and its oral Torah of *midrash* on the *pinax*, there would be no universe."¹

In the Jewish worldview, the narrative of the creation of the world is also the model for creative work. God crafted the world deliberately and with express purpose, and then sanctified it. Midrash Tanhuma on *parashat pekudei* points to the many verbal parallels between Creation and the construction of the *mishkan*, drawing the conclusion that "the place of the *mishkan* is equivalent to the creation of the world." In both narratives, there is "seeing," "finishing," "blessing," and "sanctifying." Humans, therefore, emerge as partners in the creation of the world, which is only truly completed when the container that is to house God is completed. On the sixth day of creation, the composite parts of the physical world are there, ready and waiting to be infused with purpose. The ultimate purpose—dedication to service—is only realized once man and God are creative partners, the sanctuary is built, and space is deliberately defined, given express purpose, and sanctified through limitation and restriction.

Connection to Jewish Tradition

Sacred space as both framework and practice is deeply embedded within Jewish thought, texts, traditions, and practices. Designing and constructing sacred space presupposes the existence and delineation of categories of the sacred. Creating spaces to serve as containers for sacred realms, activities, and people involves:

- a. Emulating God in creation
- b. Incorporating the three elements that make space sacred: deliberate design, express purpose and restriction

Sanctification of space has its roots in the biblical narrative, and is manifest in the construction of the *mishkan*, the *beit ha-mikdash*, and in all sanctuaries, synagogues, *batei midrash* (houses of study), and homes that are imbued with sacred purpose. The Talmud delineates hierarchies of sacred spaces and imposes laws, restrictions, and limitations on the use of such spaces. The related and all-encompassing laws of ritual purity and impurity help maintain sanctity of space in Jewish law and thought. Sacred space also incorporates many different aspects of the mishnah of *kinyan torah* (acquiring Torah), such as study, attentive listening, awe, fear, and *recognizing one's place*.

Giving Express Purpose to Objects and Space

Jewish texts and sources provide varied frameworks for how we endow objects and spaces with express purpose.

In a technical discussion involving the contraction of ritual impurity, the mishnah in Kelim 25:9 states:

כָּל הַכֵּלִים יוֹרְדִין לִידֵי טְמֵאתוֹ בְּמַחְשָׁבָה, וְאֵינָן עוֹלִים מִיְדֵי טְמֵאתוֹ אֶלָּא בְּשֵׁנוֹי מַעֲשֵׂה,
שֶׁהַמַּעֲשֵׂה מְבַטֵּל מִיד הַמַּעֲשֵׂה וּמִיד מַחְשָׁבָה, וּמַחְשָׁבָה אֵינָהּ מְבַטֵּלֶת לֹא מִיד מַעֲשֵׂה וְלֹא
מִיד מַחְשָׁבָה

All vessels become susceptible to uncleanness by intention, but they cannot be rendered insusceptible except by a change-effecting act, for an act annuls an earlier act as well as an earlier intention, but an intention annuls neither an earlier act nor an earlier intention.

In Jewish laws of purity and impurity, an object can only become ritually impure once it is defined as an object with an express purpose—a *keli*—a utensil. In other words, things are defined by the consciousness of their creation. Only once something is endowed with an express purpose for use can it be said to contract ritual impurity. That very fact is an expression of its value and worth.

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While this mishnah operates in the realm of objects, we can extract conceptual frameworks that can be extended in our thinking about definitions of space. Spaces are defined by the consciousness of their “express purpose.” We could say, then, that something is not a classroom until *I say* that it is a classroom. Giving space an express purpose elevates its status, thereby making it sacred.

Sanctification through Restriction/Limitation

There are two elements to what makes something *kadosh* (holy) in Jewish thought.

1. Something sacred connects to a transcendent purpose. This is a category that is not just “special” for use, or set aside at random, but rather allows one to connect in a deeply existential way to oneself, to others, or to a higher being/God.
2. Something *kadosh* is something that can’t be instrumentalized, can’t be used for a purpose other than the express one for which it is deemed sacred. The concept of *kedusha* (holiness) has at its core the giving up of dominion over something and creating boundaries for limitation.² The more sacred something is, the more restrictions and boundaries will be placed upon it.

Sacred spaces in Jewish tradition are those that we don’t have the immediate ability to approach; we can’t just come when we want, act however we want. There are regulations to follow and protocols to keep. The more sacred something is, the more boundaries there will be.

A classic example of restriction as giving up dominion, and therefore sanctification, is that of the *kodesh kodashim*, the innermost sanctuary of the Temple, a space designated and restricted for use by one person on only one day of the year, the *kohen gadol* (high priest) on Yom Kippur.

A much more common restriction on sacred space is the law that a synagogue may not be used as a *kapandaria*, a shortcut between two thoroughfares. There is a relinquishment of activity and control over this space—one cannot use it as they please—which allows it to retain its sacred purpose and nature.³

The Practice

While the worldview and theoretical constructs developed and outlined above offer a distinctively Jewish guide to inform our practice, the pedagogical tools offered below invite us to act.

The core practices outlined in the following sections rest upon deliberate and conscious planning, building, marking, and restricting of space as a mode of sanctification. How we mark, construct, use, and sanctify space deepens learner engagement and results in intensification of experience. The hands of the designer guide at every moment.

To illustrate how a pedagogy of sacred space works, we will explore the core principles and practices in two different settings: the family home and the campsite.

These examples are presented as case studies of more broad categories of fixed/permanent (*keva*) spaces and malleable/impermanent (*arai*) spaces. The principles outlined in these particular settings are representative models which can then be expanded into other, similar educational settings. The core practices implemented in the fixed space of a home can be transferred to other fixed settings, such as the classroom or the board room. The core practices modeled at a campsite—which is much more malleable—can be used in other transient settings such as travel programs and immersive environments.

For each setting, we will look at the three components involved in creating sacred space—deliberately defining, giving express purpose to, and sanctifying through restriction/limitation—and offer core practices that can be utilized at each step.

We will then briefly consider the unique space of a “Zoom Room,” a setting which has a hybrid identity, with some dimensions that are more fixed in their nature and others that are more flexible, and offer core practices and points to consider when designing and sanctifying online spaces.

Two notes of observation:

1. The Order

The three components involved in creating sacred space are presented in the same order for each of the settings explored below. That decision is primarily for ease of use. However, it may be useful for the educator-parent-designer to ask themselves at the outset whether the order makes a difference for the particular setting and situation at hand. It may or may not matter. The order in which the components are presented below is—in many ways—a natural one, with each prong building upon the prior one, but it is not the only way to move through the progression.

2. Implicit/Explicit

The practices outlined and modeled below are explicit in their definitions and design of sacred spaces. They do not rest on subtle design choices of the educator/designer, but rather all learners are actively drawn into the process of design and sanctification. It can be useful to call attention to the pedagogy in action—learners are deliberately conscious of their surroundings and are active stakeholders in the design and sanctification decisions that are made. This will hopefully result in deeper engagement and more committed buy-in on the part of the learner. On the other hand, being explicit does come with its drawbacks—the power of a learner being transformed by the purity of experience is potentially minimized when they know they are going through the process.

Fixed Setting: The Family Home as Template

a. Deliberate Design

- Offer recognition that construction of sacred space is a collaborative project between the creator and user, the educator and learner, the parent and child.
- Encourage family members to **walk around** their home with a sketchpad, envision how the space can be arranged and **draw** what it can be used for.

b. Express Purpose

- Arrive at joint definitions for “what is a sacred activity” that would take place in a “sacred space” at home. Sacred activities might mean different things to different people. For some, it might mean *tefillah* (prayer), Torah learning, Shabbat cooking, spending special time with grandparents.
- Ask family members to **list** sacred activities that take place in a home.
- Ask family members to **make a list** of areas where they have spontaneously felt a special connection with themselves and/or with others. Leave space for flexible arrangements—both physically and socially—that allow for the opportunity to assess, take stock, and make changes.
- Provide family members with a blank map, or blueprint/model of the home and have them **mark off sacred spaces** keyed in a different color or texture. (What is essential is not the art, but the deliberate act of defining spaces as sacred.)
- Then ask them to **brainstorm and write down** strategic ways/rules to put in place to preserve the sacred nature of the space. (See section on limitation and restriction below.)

c. Restriction

- Technology Restricted Zones

One example of an imposed restriction in a home where the goal is to foster connections or a sense of higher purpose is the creation of technology-free zones. In my own home, our design principles and home construction were motivated by creating spaces that were ripe for gathering and activities, including the use of technology, while deliberately keeping technology out of other zones. There are no phones, computers, televisions allowed off the main floor of the home. Such a restriction designates bedrooms (on the upper floors) as sacred spaces for connecting with one's partner or one's self. Our lives are filled with the blessings and distractions of technology, but to truly connect with another, and oneself, the space must be restricted to its core essential purpose, and not instrumentalized for other purposes.

There are many variations on how such connection can be achieved, but the key take-away is that restriction of an activity or presence in a space is a way to maintain its sacred nature. This will look different for different families, and at different stages of life, but the framework is a universal and timeless one.

- Ask family members to **brainstorm and write down** strategic ways/rules to put in place to preserve the sacred nature of the space.
- **Write down** a set of family space-related rules.

Flexible Setting: The Campsite as Template

a. Deliberate Design

- A campsite provides a more flexible opportunity to establish sacred spaces, since it is characterized as a place with no pre-existing or defined "spaces" and can be imagined from scratch each time one goes camping.
- Before immediately pitching tents and collecting wood, have campers walk **around, survey, and assess** the area, looking for "ideal" conditions for "sacred" activities.

b. Express Purpose

- Like in the home, have all camping participants **list** activities that are to be defined as "sacred" while camping. These might include *tefillah*, space for quiet reflection, singing together, meditation, art, lying in a hammock.

- Have campers come up with different plans/models for how the area can be divided into sacred and non-sacred uses. **Write them down.**
- Empower campers to **demarcate** the spaces using objects, strings, posts, signs, and rocks to offset and bind spaces.
- Use camping rope/cord and **decorate** with casual art/drawings hung with clothespins, to delineate spaces that are “sacred.”

c. **Restriction**

- Eiruv construction

Camping on Shabbat is an opportune way to experientially create sacred space through boundedness and restriction based on the prohibition of carrying outside an *eiruv*. While camping on Shabbat, arrange the tents and eating areas in such a way that each serves its function but preserves a central space that will be sacred. Then enclose the area with an *eiruv*, the boundedness and demarcation collectively defining the entire camping site as a sacred one. The very act of coming to a vast forest, or an open field, and enclosing it, fosters the sense that any domain can be sanctified by closing it off to others. By enclosing a space around a collection of tents, picnic tables, and firepit, even with just a few wooden stakes and a string, and limiting carrying objects to the space inside of it, one can take what would previously have felt like a random placement of tents, bags, picnic tables, fire pit, camping chairs, blankets, beach balls, books, and board games on the grass, and make it a domain for Shabbat. The power of doing so is real and shared by all who partake in the experience.

- Have campers **define the boundaries of the eiruv**, and, in accordance with halakhic requirements, then **tie** wire to outline and define the space.
- **Select** an item and **place it** (strategically) to serve as the focal point of the defined space.

Hybrid Setting: The Zoom Room

The Zoom room and all virtual learning platforms occupy a niche that is a model of hybridity in its nature—they contain dimensions of both a fixed setting as well as a flexible one; users are tied to a particular platform and model, but there is also room for individualized and creative arrangements.

- As we shift more and more to permanent online spaces, how do we apply the theories articulated above to a virtual world?

- In what ways can online spaces be deemed sacred?
- What restrictions are required to be put in place in order to sanctify them?

Core Practices

a. Deliberate Design

At the beginning of a Zoom session, **give learners the opportunity** to look around their space and

- **remove** physical items of distraction
- **close** any unnecessary computer tabs
- **collect** an object, book, or learning tool to keep close by

b. Express Purpose

- At the beginning of a Zoom session, **provide a roadmap**—an oral outline, and/or physical schedule of what will take place in the duration of the session, thereby limiting the virtual space to the express purpose for which it was designated.

c. Restriction

- In advance of a virtual session, **provide** learners with license, agency, and encouragement to shut out all “non-sacred activities” (if possible)
- **Encourage** the muting of cellphones
- **Outline** the parameters of chat usage, muting, and unmuting
- In advance of a session, establish the **norms** by listing/outlining a list of what the space is designed for and what it’s not.

Summary and Expansions

Sacred space as a guiding principle for both conceptual reflection and practical pedagogical implementation is deeply entrenched in Jewish texts and thought and can be adapted for a variety of educational settings, both formal and informal. Inhabitants of a home, and learners in both physical and virtual spaces, can be transformed by their setting. With strategic and deliberate articulation of principles and implementation of limitations, the arts of learning and living can be elevated, no matter where one finds themselves.

The analysis, framework, theory, pedagogy, and practices outlined here are limited to conceptions of space (deliberate definitions, express purpose, limitation through restriction), but can be expanded to other areas such as time, objects, people/relationships, and language.

¹ See Burton L. Visotzky, "Genesis Rabbah 1, 1 – Mosaic Torah as the Blueprint of the Universe – Insights from the Roman World," in *Talmuda de-Eretz Israel: Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine*, Steve Fine and Aaron Koller, eds. (De Gruyter, 139).

² For a lengthier discussion, see Moshe Halbertal, *Makom Ha-Mekudash* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7rTXFHBbgY>

³ See b. Berakhot 62a..