
***Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam, Asher Kideshanu BeMitzvotav
VeTzivanu, La'asok BeDivrei Torah. Hefoch Bah!***

Texts 1 & 2: Jer. 2:2, Ps. 95:10-11

-Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus said the Lord; I remember you, the devotion of your youth, your love like a bride, when you followed after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.

-For forty years I was provoked by that generation; I thought, They are a senseless people; they would not know My ways. Then I swore in anger, They shall never come to My resting-place!

Text 3: Midrash Tanchuma (Leviticus, Kedoshim 10, ed. Buber IV, p.78):

As the navel is in the middle of the person, so is Eretz Israel the *omphalos* (navel) of the world, as it is written, "That dwell in the navel of the earth" (Ezekiel 38:12). Eretz Israel is located in the center of the world, Jerusalem in the center of Eretz Israel, the Temple in the center of Jerusalem, the Heichal in the center of the Temple, the Ark in the center of the Heichal and in front of the Heichal is the Even Shtiyah from which the world was founded.

Text 4: Commenting on the name "Gershom/A Stranger There", Steve Israel (*adapted*)

What sort of a father would call his own son "Stranger"? If Moses indeed did call his own child "Stranger," it is clear that he wanted to pass over his own feeling of cultural alienation in Egypt and in Midian to his child. He wanted Gershom to grow up with the same kind of cultural alienation that Moses himself had experienced through much of his life in two different societies. ... Moses must have planned the moment when, many years in the future, Gershom would turn round with the question, because he, the father, would have the answer ready, involving an explanation of Gershom's (and Moses') real cultural identity. Moses clearly meant to pass on to his son the feeling of exile, the fact of not belonging...

Text 5: Genesis: The Beginnings of Desire, Aviva Zornberg, p.74

The journey commanded by God to Avram is a divine imperative that articulates and emphasizes displacement as its crucial experience.

Text 6: Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology, Arthur Green, p. 162

We come forth from Egypt, we meet Y-H-W-H in the wilderness and take into ourselves that commitment to know the divine life that lives in all of being. In the light of Sinai we build the community and develop the path that will guide us when we enter the land. We make a dwelling place for God at the center of our camp, one that is with us through all of our journeys. We wander and struggle... But our Torah ends just before the return to our homeland is achieved. We stand with Moses, having wandered through the desert, looking across the Jordan, ready to enter the Promised Land. But the Moses dies, the world is created all over again, and the story begins once more.

Text 7: The Zaddiq as Axis Mundi in Later Judaism (précis), Arthur Green,

Journal of the American Academy of Religion 45:3, pp. 327-347

The Symbol of axis mundi, as delineated in the writings of Mircea Eliade, is said to be religious man's central principle for the organization of sacred space. The present paper, originally offered as a contribution to an AAR session devoted to "Mircea Eliade and the Study of Judaism," seeks to expand the use of that symbol by pointing to a link between the imagery of axis mundi and the tradition of the *zaddiq* or holy man in the mystical sources of Judaism. In the writings of the Kabbalistic and Hasidic masters, the holy man is often described in various terms highly reminiscent of the notion of sacred space. The *zaddiq* may be Zion, Temple, Jacob's ladder, or Holy of Holies. While the transference of sacred space imagery to another realm might seem especially apt for the Jews, given their long history of exile, it is pointed out that such transference never meant the replacement of the geographical Jerusalem or Holy Land by the *zaddiq*, but rather an additional locus of divine presence: the cosmos of *homo religiosus* may know more than one center (e.g., Jerusalem and Rome for the Catholic).

Into the Woods: "Giants in the Sky"

Stephen Soundheim

There are Giants in the sky!
There are big tall terrible Giants in the sky!

When you're way up high
And you look below
At the world you left
And the things you know,
Little more than a glance
Is enough to show
You just how small you are.

When you're way up high
And you're own your own
In a world like none
That you've ever known,
Where the sky is lead
And the earth is stone,

You're free, to do
Whatever pleases you,
Exploring things you'd never dare
'Cause you don't care,
When suddenly there's

A big tall terrible Giant at the door,
A big tall terrible lady Giant
sweeping the floor.
And she gives you food
And she gives you rest
And she draws you close
To her Giant breast,
And you know things now
that you never knew before,
Not till the sky.

Only just when you've made
A friend and all,
And you know she's big
But you don't feel small,
Someone bigger than her
Comes along the hall
To swallow you for lunch.

And you heart is lead
And your stomach stone
And you're really scared
Being all alone...

And it's then that you miss
All the things you've known
And the world you've left
And the little you own-

The fun is done.
You steal what you can and run.
And you scramble down
And you look below,
And the world you know
Begins to grow:

The roof, the house, and your Mother at the
door.
The roof, the house and the world you never
thought to explore.
And you think of all of the things you've seen,
And you wish that you could live in between,
And you're back again,
Only different than before,
After the sky.

There are Giants in the sky!
There are big tall terrible awesome scary
wonderful
Giants in the sky!

Living a Mythic Life: *Mythic Places*

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Lesson Plan:

- Bracha
- Framework for conversation

Question: name some special places from Jewish tradition.

- **Myth:** review of basic concept
- mishkan, the very command came from a place now inappropriate as meeting place for God
Jews – Torah as portable homeland, dvir to davar

0--Midbar texts

Texts on the sheet

Sources & notes:

---**Mircea Eliade** ([March 13](#) [O.S. February 28] [1907](#) – [April 22, 1986](#)) was a [Romanian](#) historian of religion, fiction writer, philosopher, and professor at the [University of Chicago](#). He was a leading interpreter of religious experience, who established [paradigms](#) in religious studies that persist to this day. His theory that [hierophanies](#) form the basis of religion, splitting the human experience of reality into [sacred and profane](#) space and time, has proved influential.

Eliade: SACRED SPACE

Eliade claims that, whereas for non-religious man the spatial aspect of the world is basically experienced as uniformly neutral, for religious man it was experienced as non-homogeneous, partly sacred and partly not so. In particular, religious man experienced the world as having a sacred centre and sought to live there.

Eliade qualifies his claim that modern, non-religious man experiences the spacial aspect of his world as uniformly neutral. In fact, the latter experiences particular locations as special on account of personal associations: locations such as his place of birth. This sort of experience is to be regarded as degraded religious experience.

Eliade next discusses sacred places. An obvious example for us is the church, whose door is a threshold between the profane on the outside and the sacred inside. An equivalent to the church in archaic cultures was the sacred enclosure, which opened upwards towards the sky, the world of the gods. Sacred places were revealed to religious man by means of signs of various sorts, recognised as coming from the divine.

Cosmos and Chaos

The major differentiation of space for religious man was that between cosmos and chaos. Traditional societies understood their own territory as cosmos, a world created out of primordial chaos by their gods, with surrounding territory remaining as chaos. Any extension of its territory was understood by a society as a repetition of the cosmogony, of the original divine act of creation of its world.

An example of how cosmogony worked, of how cosmos was imposed on chaos, concerns a nomadic Australian tribe, called the Achilpa. Their divine founder had fashioned and anointed a sacred pole, which the tribe carried with them on their wanderings. Its bending told them in which direction to travel and its very presence ensured that wherever they were they had cosmos, 'their world', around them. At the same time, the pole linked the people with their founder, above them in the heavens: after making the pole, he had climbed up it and vanished into the sky.

Similar beliefs in other pre-modern societies attached to sacred pillars, trees etc. They maintained the cosmos of 'our world' amid the chaos of surrounding space and kept open the connection with the divine founders in the heavens above.

Axis Mundi

In fact, in developed religious systems of this kind, there were three cosmic levels: not only earth and heaven, but an underworld as well. The axis mundi, the vertical feature, was seen as the centre of the world and as linking together all three cosmic levels. Instead of a pole, pillar or tree, the axis mundi might be, say, a ladder or a mountain.

Beliefs in cosmic mountains included the idea that 'our world' is holy because it is the place closest to heaven. Eliade notes that temples might be seen as equivalents of sacred mountains. Indeed, some, such as the Babylonian ziggurat, were built to be artificial sacred mountains.

Religious man might understand his world as being at the centre of the world on three scales: country, city, sanctuary. That way, Palestine, Jerusalem, the Temple were all seen as the centre of the world.

Imago Mundi

What is more, for religious man, cosmos in its birth spread out from the centre. Consequently, when he undertook new construction work, religious man, by analogy, organised it outwards from a central point. Thus, a new village might be developed from a crossroads outwards, giving it four zones. Such a plan made a new construction an imago mundi, a representation of the cosmos on the ground.

Understanding his world this way, religious man experienced attacks from enemies as the work of demons, enemies of the divine creation who threatened to return that creation to chaos. Typically, such demons were represented as dragons; in fact, chaos itself might be represented as a dragon.

Eliade notes that something of this way of thinking persists in his contemporary world, in talk of dark forces threatening to plunge civilisation into chaos.

Going back to the imago mundi, the cosmic order represented in construction, Eliade points out that religious man saw it in his dwelling. Thus, peoples whose tents or huts had a central post or pillar could understand it as an axis mundi, supporting 'our world' and linking it to heaven.

Sacrifice in Building Work

An alternative way of associating the dwelling place with the cosmic order was to make the building of it imitate the creation of the cosmos. So, we may associate traditions in which new construction work involved blood sacrifice with cosmogonies in which the creation of the world out of chaos was represented as the slaying of some primordial monster.

Overall, Eliade finds a chronological progression in sacred space from that created by the sacred pole of the nomadic Achilpa, to that of fixed dwellings, to that of religious architecture.

Temples

With the advent of the temple, Eliade discerns an altogether new stage in religious man's understanding of sacred space. A temple was an imago mundi, symbolising the cosmos, the sacred order divinely imposed on primordial chaos. But it was more than that: it was the house of the gods and as such positively sustaining the sacredness of 'our world'. This new understanding carried through into the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In his concluding remarks, Eliade points out that religious man's experience of sacred space obviously differed from culture to culture. However, beneath the differences there was an underlying communality of experience that becomes evident in the contrast with non-religious man's non-experience of sacred space.

OTHER

Sacred Space, Holy Places and Suchlike

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Sacred space is a category lifted from the workbench of the phenomenologist of religions. In real life we encounter sacred space as holy places, familiar objects to us as Bible readers and perhaps even also as denizens of the contemporary world. But it is a category that deserves not only a phenomenological analysis but also a critical theological scrutiny.

1. Sacred Space in Comparative Religion

The 'most complete and sophisticated'^{2/} account of sacred space available to us is, by common consent, that of Mircea Eliade, in his books *The Sacred and Profane*^{3/} and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*.^{4/} According to Eliade, religious persons experience a fundamental distinction between the sacred and the profane; and one of the spheres in which that distinction is met with is the spatial sphere: all space is either sacred or profane. Eliade lists four principal characteristics of sacred space.

a. Sacred space differentiates space

'For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.'^{5/} At some points on the earth's surface it makes sense to say, 'Put your shoes from off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground' (Exod. 3.5). Such holy space is significant space, and its recognition, Eliade affirms, is 'not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of a primary religious experience that precedes all reaction on the world'.^{6/} Profane space, on the other hand, is homogeneous, neutral, without orientation, chaotic.

b. Sacred space gives orientation to space

In so doing, it creates meaning within space. A holy place is often regarded as the centre or navel of the world, as an axis mundi, a centre about which the lived-in world revolves. 'Religious man has always sought to fix his abode at the centre of the world',^{7/} for that is the place of meaning that creates the lived-in world. There do indeed seem to be places of meaningfulness in the world of profane experience, 'privileged' places in Eliade's language, one's birthplace, the scenes of early love, foreign sights-but they are really crypto-religious experiences that identify such space as meaningful.

c. Sacred space is a point at which two worlds meet

In the sacred space there meet the world of humans and the world of the gods. The Babylonian ziggurat was often called Dur-an-ki, 'the bond of heaven and earth'. As such it could become the vertical axis of communication between heaven and earth, a spot where traffic passed between two worlds, as on Jacob's ladder at Bethel. Not infrequently this vertical axis is represented ritually by a pole, as with the Kwakiutl people of British Columbia, who have the trunk of a tall cedar projecting through the roof of a ceremonial house. Candidates for initiation, who are living in the house, announce: 'I am at the Centre of the world, I am at the Post of the world'.^{8/}

Such a point is typically determined and differentiated from profane space by a hierophany, which may be an unasked for sign or a provoked evocation. For example, a bull may be turned loose and then searched for. Wherever it is found it is killed and an altar is built. Whatever may be the means of identifying the sacred space, there is one certain principle: it is not for humankind to choose. The word of Deut. 12.13 would gain universal assent among religious people: 'Take heed that you do not offer your burnt offerings in any place that you see, but in the place which the Lord shall choose . . . there you shall offer your burnt offerings'.

Among the Arunta people of central Australia, a gum tree is carried around in their nomadic wanderings. It is the gum tree on which their divine ancestor climbed into the sky after establishing their world. They must carry this cosmic axis around with them, for, as Eliade says, 'it is around the sacred pole that territory becomes habitable, hence is transformed into a world'.^{9/} Where they should next move is determined by the direction in which the pole bends; and, should it be broken, their world collapses into chaos. Two anthropologists recount that once, when the pole was broken, 'the entire clan were in consternation; they wandered around aimlessly for a time, and nally lay down on the ground together and waited for death to overtake them'.^{10/}

d. Sacred space represents the primordial act of creation

Either the holy place is regarded as sacred from the very beginning of time, or else the act of its consecration mimics or replays the work of the gods in creating a cosmos: consecrating a territory is a cosmogonic act.^{11/} Because of the link to primordial time, sacred space also functions as a temporal bond between the present and the Great Time (illud tempus) of primaeval creation.

Eliade's analysis is not, of course, infallible, and even the outsider to the world of comparative religion studies may recognize some implausibilities in his account. Perhaps the most questionable of his assertions is that the religious person experiences profane space as homogeneous and without orientation, and that any apparent experiences of meaningfulness in the non-sacred sphere are to be regarded as 'crypto-religious' experiences. There is an unmistakable circularity of argument here.

This point in particular is taken up for criticism by Larry E. Shiner,^{12/} who argues convincingly against the polarization of the categories sacred/profane with which Eliade works, and suggests rather that sacred space and meaningless profane space are at opposite ends of a continuum, the middle of which is 'human' or 'lived' space. Whatever may be the experience of the religious persons Eliade is describing, we can certainly be conscious, even if we are religious people, of non-sacred space as a meaningful environment which we inhabit. 'We are not "in" space as shoes are in a box.'^{13/} We have more or less meaningful relations to the space we experience, whether familiar space or strange and novel space.

Lived space is known primarily through our moving about in it. The three-dimensionality of space is experienced through walking or moving through it—an experience that cannot be gained by mere perception. Town planners and architects explore the environment they intend to create by computer simulations that give the impression of walking through it. It is physical space, measurable space, metric space that is homogeneous; human space, on the other hand, is 'hodological'^{14/} space, space humanized by the trackways we make through it.

Lived space or human space is also experienced not just as paths but as unitary wholes; the market square, the railway terminus, the hotel foyer, each distinguished qualitatively from the other and from others of the same level of generalization. Territoriality, as Konrad Lorenz^{15/} and Robert Ardrey^{16/} showed us in the 60s, is a fundamental aspect of human as well as of animal life. We have our 'own' street, neighbourhood, suburb and town that constitute in their complex interrelationship, our 'world' and make it meaningful.

Lived space, further, is not something handed to us on a plate by the divine: it is something we create by our movement, our territorial instinct—and by our shaping of our environment. The design and construction of the buildings around which our life revolves is a world-creating activity; Le Corbusier said, 'Architecture is one of the most urgent needs of man, for the house has always been the first tool he has forged for himself'^{17/}—but planting a garden, arranging the furniture in a room or even the books on a shelf are world-creating activities too.

The point of all this is to deny some of Eliade's claims. It is true, no doubt, that sacred space differentiates space, but untrue that profane space is homogeneous or without meaning. Perhaps the old adage will suit our purpose best if we allow that Eliade is right in what he affirms—about sacred space—but wrong in what he denies—about non-sacred space.

2. Holy Places in the Old Testament

All of these aspects of sacred space are recognizable in the Old Testament literature.

1. Sacred space as the differentiation of space. There is one parcel of land that is a primary differentiation of space: the land of Israel. The patriarchs, for example, are always being found at holy places, usually places already known as holy in a pre-patriarchal religion. The movement of Abraham is from holy place to holy place, to the 'place' of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh (Gen. 12.6), to Bethel, 'God's House' (12.8), to the sacred oaks of Mamre by Hebron (13.18). The negative side of this is the wilderness wanderings that pass through an aimless space of no holy place, the stations on the route being names without significance, non-places. To create significance it is necessary to carry a portable holy place that will give orientation to the community.

2. Sacred space as the centre of the world. In cultic texts in particular, Jerusalem is conceived of as sacred space in typically mythical language. It is 'the city of God' (Ps. 48.1), the 'mountain of holiness' (48.2), the 'perfection of beauty' (50.2), the 'joy of all the earth' (48.2). More strikingly, it is 'in the recesses of the north' (48.2), an outcrop of Mt Zaphon, 'Mount North', home of the gods of Canaan, and though it is inhabited by mortals it is symbolically one with the mythological mountain of the gods. It is the highest place, 'beautiful in elevation' (48.2), the place that cannot be submerged by the flood of cosmic waters (46.2-3). It is, like every holy place, at the 'navel of the earth' (Ezek. 38.12)-just as is Shechem (Judg. 9.37). The mythic imagery depicts the holy place as the channel of vitality from the divine sphere to the human: 'as the umbilical cord is the source of the infant's life, so the world is formed and maintained around its navel'./18/

The idea of Jerusalem, or the land of Israel, as the centre of the world is not developed explicitly and at length in the Old Testament, but the well-known passage from Midrash Tanuma is undoubtedly in harmony with more venerable Israelite ideas:

Just as the navel is found at the centre of a human being, so the land of Israel is found at the centre of the world . . . and it is the foundation of the world. Jerusalem is at the centre of the land of Israel, the Temple is at the centre of Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies is at the centre of the Temple, the Ark is at the centre of the Holy of Holies; and the Foundation Stone is in front of the Ark, which spot is the foundation of the world./19/

3. Sacred spaces as determined by the deity. Typically the holy place in Israelite religion is 'the place which Yahweh your God shall choose to put his name there' (Deut. 12.5), that is, the place of theophany. G. van der Leeuw echoes this commonplace of religious persons in writing: 'We cannot make shrines and cannot select their "positions", but can never do more than merely find them'./20/ Israel is to 'take care' that it does not choose its own holy places (Deut. 12.13), every one doing what is right in their own eyes (v. 8); the criticism of other religions is that their adherents do not follow this fundamental precept, but worship wherever the fancy takes them, on the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree (v. 2). That is polemic, of course, which would be stoutly denied by every pious Canaanite; in reality Israelites and Canaanites are on the same side in this question: How do you decide where to worship? The answer for both is: Only where the deity has dictated.

4. Sacred space as a bridge to primordial time. The mythological language of the Psalms provides more than one illustration of how the holy place, Zion, is viewed as a replica or extension of primaeva Eden. In Ps. 46.4 we find a 'river whose streams make glad the city of God'; physical Jerusalem has no real river, and certainly not one with 'streams' (פְּכוֹכִים), or delta branches into which that river divides. But Eden does; a river went forth from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divided and became the source of four rivers (lit. became four heads) (Gen. 2.10). In Ps. 36.8 those who take refuge in Yahweh 'shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house; and thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures'. God's house is poetically parallel with the river of pleasure, where the very name of Eden is the term used for 'pleasure'; through Zion, evidently, flows the primordial Edenic river of fruitfulness.

All these points at which Old Testament thinking blends with religions generally are means of affirming that sacred space really does exist, that God is really present in particular holy places. Indeed, as Karl Barth noted:

The very passages which bear witness so emphatically to the general presence of God (Ps. 139.5ff., Amos 9.1ff.) do not make this a law which then finds special application also in his presence to man, or the people of Israel . . . On the contrary, it is in view of this special presence that His general presence is recalled and asserted . . . We must not think . . . that it . . . has to be understood only symbolically, pictorially and indirectly when . . . God is constantly characterized and described as the possessor of a place or location . . . If we read in Psalm 103.22: 'Bless the Lord, all his works in all places of his dominion', these places of His dominion may be innately many. Yet they are in no sense identical with the whole of created space, but are special places within this space. There exists a kind of rivalry between these places and other places. 'Why leap ye, ye high hills? This is the hill which God desireth to dwell in; yea the Lord will dwell in it forever' (Psalm 68.16)./21/

However, and this is where it begins to get interesting, the Old Testament breaks significantly free from the conventional ideology of sacred space, and presents what we may call, following Brevard Childs's term, 'broken myth'./22/ The mythological language is there, but Israel's heart is not fully in it. Three observations will substantiate this point.

1. The emphasis in the Old Testament is on sacred places as chosen by God rather than sacrosanct from of old. Of course, as we have seen, both these concepts are well attested in religions generally, but for the Old Testament, as far as I can see, the holiness of a place tends to be a quality acquired through becoming in history a place of divine manifestation rather than an inherent quality it has had from *primaeva* times. Zion is not a holy place since the *Urzeit*, but has become a holy place-for Israel-with experienced time./23/ Of course its holiness is older than David's time, but the Hebrew story is that the site of the temple was no sacred spot hallowed from time immemorial, but a place originally profane: a threshing-floor belonging to a Jebusite (2 Sam. 24.15-25; 1 Chron. 21.15-16). It is not Zion, but God's heavenly throne, that is established from of old (Ps. 93.2).

2. While God is really present in particular places-as we have noted earlier-there is another strand in Hebrew thinking that claims that God will not dwell in temples. It expresses itself sometimes in the form of a tension between God's real presence and his equally real freedom to be absent from his temple. Solomon declares, 'I have surely built thee a house of habitation, a place for thee to dwell in forever' (1 Kgs 8.13), but-in almost the same breath-questions that same programme: 'But will God in very deed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded!' (v. 27). The theology of the 'name' of God which dwells on earth, while God himself dwells in heaven, is an attempt, though not a very convincing one, to handle this very problem. 'Let thine eyes be open', Solomon prays, 'toward this house night and day, even toward the place whereof thou hast said, My name shall be there: to hearken unto the prayer which thy servant shall pray toward this place . . . yea, hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place' (vv. 29-30).

3. We find, principally in the prophetic literature, a critique of particular holy places. Such a critique undermines their very status as holy places. We saw in Deuteronomy 12 how the method of negating or desanctifying the holy places of another religion is to deny their divine origin and to make out that they have been casually lit upon by the whim of the worshippers who congregate in them. Within the history of one's own religion, it cannot be denied that 'the place' was chosen by Yahweh; but it is possible to criticize what the place has become, and attack that which denies its legitimacy as a holy place now. This is a prophetic action.

The classic expression of this criticism is in Jeremiah 7. The prophet is bidden to 'stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the Lord . . . Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, are these' (7.2, 4). The prophetic oracle is that to identify the Jerusalem temple as Yahweh's house-that is, as a genuinely holy place-is a falsehood, not because it never has been Yahweh's house, but because its holy status is conditional and not inalienable. Its status as sacred space depends upon the ethical behaviour of those who frequent it. If they 'amend their ways and their doings' (v. 5) the temple may regain its holy status; but meanwhile the numinous is re-interpreted theologically-or rather, ethically.