

Where Do We Find Sanctuary? – Yom Kippur Morning 2025

I don't know about you, but when I look at the news, my first reaction is that it feels overwhelming. There is so much going on, and it's hard to process it, digest it, or explain it. On top of our everyday stresses and commitments to family and work, we are bombarded by war, politics, the climate crisis, and more.

I know it is not just me. Many of us carry constant, low-grade anxiety about the world. Every news cycle, every comment about climate change, the economy, or politics puts us in a never-ending loop. Parents try to hold it together while privately worrying about their children's future. Teachers try to teach while worrying about safety and stability. So many of us carry a double burden: guiding others through fear while managing our own.

When all of this piles on, it's easy to feel weighed down. And yet, the question becomes: where do we turn? On what or whom do we lean? Where do we turn for sanctuary?

When you hear the word sanctuary, the first thing that might come to mind is this room. A holy space. A safe space. But sanctuary doesn't always mean a physical space. It could be a pause in time, a practice, or a person. For some, sanctuary might include going to therapy, where you feel safe to express your vulnerability and feelings. Or perhaps sanctuary is going on a picnic with your family, surrounded by nature. Reading your favorite book that transports you into another world, or listening to music that shifts your mood, these are just a few examples of sanctuary.

My sanctuaries are spending time in nature, reading a book, watching TV, or talking to my family. Yours may look completely different because they are uniquely yours.

At camp, I grew up singing: *Kol ha'olam kulo, gesher tzar me'od, v'ha'ikar lo l'fached klal*, “the whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to be afraid,”

a teaching attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. From a young age, we are taught that while the world can be frightening, we are able to keep moving, to cross the bridge one step at a time. Life will always bring anxiety and uncertainty that we can't control, but what we can control is how we build our personal sanctuaries.

Our ancestors understood this feeling, too. Fear and uncertainty are not new, and Jewish tradition has always offered ways to respond with courage and resilience. Modern psychology echoes this perspective. The American Psychological Association lists healthy ways to cope with stress: cultivating social support, finding moments in nature, and continuing activities that bring you joy, such as reading, making art, or listening to music. These activities reduce stress and improve mood, even in small doses.¹

It's interesting to notice that whether in a centuries-old melody or in the pages of a psychology journal, both point us toward the same truth: sanctuary is built from the practices that steady and restore us. The real work for each of us is discovering what creates that feeling for us personally, our own personal sanctuary.

For some, your sanctuary might be a physical location, like a room in your house where you feel relaxed and separated from your stressors. For others, sanctuary may be a meditation practice. Or maybe your sanctuary is an experience, like a monthly social gathering with friends.

Think about what activities, places, or people help you feel grounded. What brings you calm when you feel overwhelmed? What restores you when your energy feels drained? These are your personal sanctuaries. Nothing is too small. Sometimes sanctuary is five quiet breaths, other times it is a weekend away.

¹ <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/tips>

For me, sanctuary is also about lifting my eyes to something greater. When I encounter moments of awe, or as I explain it to our Kehillah Project students, our *Mah Rabu* moments, I am reminded of the magnificence around and beyond ourselves. *Mah Rabu ma'asecha Adonai*—how wondrous are Your works, O God. There is so much awe in the world. When I stare at the ocean and watch the waves crash, or walk through a forest surrounded by trees, or lie on the basketball court at camp at night, staring at the stars, I feel calm and at peace, surrounded by beauty. These moments of sanctuary, of spirituality, connect us to something beyond ourselves. It does not always mean God, but it is whatever reminds us that we are part of something larger.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls this “radical amazement.” He writes, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. ... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."²

Heschel's language of amazement is now echoed by science today, which shows that "exposure to nature has been linked to a host of benefits, including improved attention, lower stress, better mood, reduced risk of psychiatric disorders, and even upticks in empathy and cooperation." Scientists are only beginning to understand how powerful these experiences can be.³

Up until now, I've been talking about sanctuary in a personal, individual sense: what calms us, restores us, grounds us. But sanctuary is not only something we should seek for

² <https://jewishcamp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/HeschelQuote.pdf>

³ <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature>

ourselves. It is also something we can create and offer to one another. This idea lies at the very heart of Torah.

Our Torah teaches: *V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham*, “Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.”⁴ Notice that it says God will dwell *among them*, the people, not *in it*, the physical structure. The sanctity of God’s holiness is not contained in a building. It is found in the community itself. The Mishkan was holy not because of its walls, but because of the way people gathered, connected, and brought offerings.

Sanctuary moves away from the structure of a building to the relationships created by the people within the structure. When we build spaces of safety and care, we echo this verse. Our synagogue walls are meaningful, but their true purpose is to bring people together, so that God’s presence is felt in relationships and in community.

That is why this year feels especially meaningful as we reflect on how sanctuary extends beyond these walls. Even though this might be the last High Holiday season within the four walls of this sanctuary space, it is not the last High Holiday season of us creating sanctuary as a Temple Beth-El community.

Brené Brown writes: “Connection [is] the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.”⁵ This, too, is sanctuary: when someone feels truly seen, safe enough to speak honestly, and confident that they are valued. Sanctuary is created in the bonds between people. When we build this kind of space, physical or not, we create the modern Mishkan.

⁴ Exodus 25:8

⁵ Gifts of Imperfection, page 19

The Book of Exodus teaches that God dwells among the people. Brené Brown gives us the language for how: through connection, through being seen and valued. Together, they remind us what it means to build sanctuary.

So my question for you now is not only where do we find sanctuary for ourselves, but also how can we become sanctuary for someone else? It doesn't require a big grand gesture. Sometimes it's as simple as slowing down enough to really listen and hear someone's story. Sometimes it's offering comfort in silence. Sometimes it's making space where someone knows they belong.

And even as we offer sanctuary outward, we also need to keep building our own, a kind of toolbox to return to when the world feels heavy. When you have a quiet moment in the coming days, jot your sanctuaries down. When the world feels overwhelming, refer to this list, not as one-time activities, but as practices you can return to again and again.

Sanctuary doesn't have to be big. It just has to be yours. When you know where to turn, you're already halfway to finding strength again.

So let us return to where we began. The news may overwhelm us. But sanctuary, both personal and communal, is always within reach. Sanctuary can be found in therapy, in nature, in music, in community. And sanctuary can be offered by listening, by showing up, by building safe spaces. In every act of care, we fulfill the Torah's call: *v'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham*—let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. Holiness dwells not in walls, but in the love and connection we create for one another. May each of us find our sanctuaries, return to them when the world feels too heavy, and offer them to others, so together we create a world of safety, connection, and hope.