“Sacred Space, Sacred Stories: A Central Park Sermon”
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I am very blessed. The liturgy, the texts, the music of Yom Kippur always move me. And to be here for the first year with this clergy team at this congregation - I am filled with gratitude.

And, because this is Yom Kippur, I will also confess that I was really looking forward to delivering a sermon in Central Park! Perhaps, like me, you were eager to spend this sacred day in that sacred space. So while the park is nourished by rain, I will do my best to bring its essence to us this morning.

Central Park is the heart of Manhattan, pumping oxygen and life throughout our congested borough. Genesis sings the story of Eden, “*Vayatzmach Adonai Elohim min ha-adama kol eitz nechmad l’mareh* … And out of the ground, God planted every tree, beautiful to see … “[1] As we walk along surrounding streets and avenues, leafy branches drape from above, beckoning us into our paradise.

With just a few steps, the noisy, hard-edged city falls away, and we are immersed into 834 acres of woodlands, meadows, sloping lawns and shady glens. Concrete is an afterthought. Our feet meet grass, mulch, earth. The air smells and tastes and feels different in the park. I feel different in the park. Do you? Scientific studies prove what we sense - that spending time in forested areas lowers blood pressure and heart rate, improves attention span and elevates mood.

Sparse signage and meandering paths invite us to wander for the sake of wandering, to get lost without panic, to be somewhere, instead of rushing to get somewhere. Here, even the speediest New Yorker slows down.

This park brings out the best in us. As poet, Mary Oliver, writes, “Around me, the trees stir in their leaves and call out, ‘stay awhile.’ The light flows from their branches. And they call again - ‘It’s simple,’ they say, ‘and you, too, have come into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine.’”[2]

The park invites connection. Strangers smile, and chat. We’re in a space welcoming us to practice what theologian, Martin Buber, described as I-Thou encounters. Buber taught that most of the time our human interactions are I-it: we engage with people in a

[1] Genesis 2:9
[2] “When I am Among the Trees,” Mary Oliver

way that relates to our needs, objectifying them. For example, when we ask someone to hold the elevator, or pay the taxi driver, the interaction may be polite or even friendly, but it's not a full encounter with that person.

Buber encouraged us to come to people without judgment or purpose, appreciating the entirety of who they are as unique human beings. He taught that in these moments, when we authentically engage with each other, we encounter God. The atmosphere of the park doesn't ensure that every encounter is I-Thou, but it does inspire that elevated interaction.

Eden had its dangers, and of course, so does Central Park. But overall, it is a sanctuary. Growing up at Emanu-El in the 70's, it was the backyard to my synagogue home. In this building, I learned stories of Jonah's whale and Noah's ark, and on the other side of the street, the original Children's Zoo invited me to step into them!

(As an aside - for those of you who are old enough to remember playing in those Biblical figures, when the original Children's Zoo was decimated to build the new one, Jonah's whale was brought to the Rockaways. It was awaiting repair, when Hurricane Sandy washed it out to sea … but that's another sermon.)

That tiny corner of the park was the seed of my Central Park story, which has continued winding its way throughout my life. I'm sure that most of us have our own Central Park stories. Adding to this park's magic, is its shared delight. It holds millions of lifetimes of stories, even after people move away, or pass away.

Some of these stories are captured on the plaques affixed to many of the park's benches. They have become their own NYC literary genre, revealing something intimate about those who wrote their messages, while reaching out to all.

Like the plaque that reads, "For the rescue dogs of 9/11, loyalty and duty beyond our comprehension." Or, "Happy 50th Mark! With joy, we lived to see the day when we could be married. Love, your adoring husband, Ron."

The plaques reflect Buber's urging: to bond with another person, by cherishing their unique stories. We are relational creatures. We read one plaque and then realize we are surrounded by opportunities for connection. So we read another, and another …

"Bedstefar, may the many Danish stories that you tell me on this bench, help me to grow up to be just like you, Love, your Grandson, Sebastian."

“Sketch here with Jim Citorine, who knew himself, family, and the park through making art. 1947-2020.”

We may not know Danish, or like to paint, but we know what it is to feel love, loss, gratitude. We read these plaques, and connect with someone we likely never met.

The plaques make invisible lines of connection visible. For example, Lou Young, a City Parks Department employee known as “The Bench Guy,” has lovingly affixed the park’s 7800 bench plaques, and continues to tend them through wear and weather damage. Several years ago, he noticed a funny coincidence. He was installing a plaque dedicated to someone with his name. He looked more carefully, and realized it was for him! “Louis Young, for his care and dedication to Central Park since 1985.”

Lou had already left a deeply impactful and lasting imprint on this park and the lives of all who visit. But a grateful donor wanted the story of Lou’s care for Central Park and its people to be made public.

Only a small percentage of the park’s stories will ever be recorded, and those are mostly stories of people with resources and privilege. For example, how much do we know about the indigenous Lenape people, who once hunted beavers in the lake where we now float in rowboats?

And New York City buried the story of an entire community. Inside the perimeter of the park, from west 82-89 streets, is the site of Seneca Village, a mostly African American settlement established in 1825. Three decades later, the community’s homes, churches, schools and cemeteries were razed so that Central Park could be constructed. Some of its ruins still remain. A temporary exhibit of signs sharing Seneca’s history is only promised to be standing through this fall. I urge us all, if we haven’t yet, to go there, pay tribute, educate ourselves, and extend that community's story into ours.

Human beings are not the only ones whose stories live in the park. Scholar and mystic, Rav Kook, taught that every part of creation sings its song, that every tree and sprout and leaf of grass utters something meaningful in the silence. Central Park’s 20,000 trees make it what it is. They provide us shade, and oxygen, and natural beauty, and so much more, and yet most of the time, we barely perceive them.

Think about it. We tend to consider people and animals as players in the world, but trees blur into the background. This phenomenon is known as “plant blindness,” our inability to fully recognize plant life and appreciate its role.

Judaism has always sensed this tendency, encouraging us to recognize the significance of trees. We are directed to observe the sacred beauty in person, animal, and tree, alike, and then to offer blessing: *Baruch ata Adonai, melech ha-olam, she kacha loh b'olamoh* - Blessed are You, God, for these wonders filling our world!"

It's no surprise that we need this prodding. We've been oblivious as long as we've been human. Adam and Eve lived in their Eden without distraction - no playgrounds or concerts, no cellphones, no other people! But even they didn't absorb the splendor of their surroundings. In shame, they ducked behind branches to hide from God, missing the fact that God was right there, among the very trees they were using for cover.[3]

Martin Buber would say that Adam and Eve's inability to recognize God's presence was a result of their objectification of the trees, their I-it mentality. They only regarded the trees as there to serve them. Buber believed that to be our fullest selves we should strive for I-Thou encounters not only with people, but also with nature.

When we relate to a tree simply for our purposes or pleasure, for its fruit or wood or captivating color, we overlook the tree as a whole being. Trees' intrinsic value isn't dependent on us - on our imaginations, our moods, or our needs. When we consider the fullness of a tree, Buber taught, we become bound up in a mutual relationship with it. It has to do with us, as we have to do with it. That bond leads us to God, and to more godly behavior.

Expressing this philosophy through a story, a student of Rav Kook was walking with his teacher in a field, when he mindlessly pulled a leaf off a tree. Rav Kook shuddered and gently explained, "I never simply pluck a leaf or a blade of grass or any living thing unless I have to." His student later said, "From that time on, I began to feel a strong sense of compassion for all things."

The Torah directly encourages us to relate to trees as we would relate to people. We read in Deuteronomy, "*Ki Adam etz ha-sadeh* - The tree of the field is like a human being."[4] Science reveals this to be true.

Like us, trees hold stories. They literally embody their narratives. Tree rings reveal their age, and the struggle or ease they faced each year, due to climate. Their knots are visible scars of healed wounds and permanent loss. Their shape illustrates relationships; tree branches grow in directions that leave room for their neighbors.

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[3] Genesis 2:8
[4] Deuteronomy 20:19

Like us, trees share stories. We might not hear trees talk, but they are always communicating. Emitting gas and other scent signals, they warn each other about dangers, like hungry animals or parasites.

Like us, trees pass on stories. Dying trees, even dead trees, become home and food to other plants and creatures. They nourish the soil. They live on throughout the environment.

Ki Adam etz ha-sadeh "The tree of the field is like a human being." This verse can also be translated "The human being is like a tree of the field." On this sacred day, when we shake ourselves out of our self-absorption and vow to do a better job of living with compassion, let's hear this verse as an aspiration. Let's teach ourselves and our children to live as trees do, instinctively.

Trees have a keen awareness of others' needs. There is no hoarding of resources. Through massive underground networks of roots and fungi, they share nutrients and water with family, friends, and even competitors. Let's live with this generosity. We only need what we need. Let's help others attain what they need.

Trees value each other. Older, sturdier trees nourish those that are sick or infirm. If those weaker plants die, large gaps in the tree canopy would put all the trees at risk. Let's honor every person, as having an essential role in our world.

Trees do best in community. On its own, a tree exists at the whim of climate. As a forest, trees create ecosystems that moderate temperate, store water, protect all living things. Let's spend less time working to get ourselves and our families ahead, and devote more time working with our community for *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

The trees in the park are starting to change color. Sukkot is almost here. The rabbis discovered continuity in the dying that autumn brings. They taught that we are like the date palm, of which nothing is wasted: its dates are for eating; its *lulavim* are for blessing; its fronds are for thatching roofs; its fibers are for ropes; its thick trunks for building.[5]

So it is with us. We all remain a part of this world even when we are gone. In a moment, we will be saying *yizkor* for people who are no longer sitting beside us, but whose presence fills our lives. This is the way of God and nature.

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[5] Genesis Rabbah 41

Poet and gardener, Ross Gay, expresses this truth in his poem, “A Small Needful Fact.” It’s dedicated to New Yorker, Eric Garner, who pleaded “I can’t breath,” while dying by a policeman’s illegal chokehold:

A Small Needful Fact
Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department, which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,
he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do, like house
and feed small and necessary creatures,
like being pleasant to touch and smell,
like converting sunlight
into food, like making it easier
for us to breathe.

Eric’s story lives on, not only in news articles, not only on the memorial plaque that stands in a NYC Park, not only in the hearts of his family and friends, but in the greenery and life and air of this city. His story is inextricably bound up in ours.

As we step into the new year, let’s step outside of ourselves into our best selves, outside into the beauty of this magnificent world, and marvel. We are threads in this web of connection, a symbiotic, sacred unity binding all parts of God’s creation through time and space.

It looks like tomorrow will be a sunny day! Maybe I’ll see you in the park. I’ll save a seat for you on a bench with a plaque by Sydney and Jon: “A million stories passing by, some new but most are old. Come sit on our bench awhile, and watch a few unfold.”