



Rabbi Michelle Medwin



Rabbi Medwin was ordained as a rabbi in May, 1997 from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Since then, she has been working as the assistant rabbi at Temple Shalom in Broomall, PA. Her duties include officiating at life-cycle events, leading worship services, teaching high-school kids and adults, and working as the youth advisor and rabbinic advisor to Reform Jewish teens in the Philadelphia area.

Previous to becoming a rabbi, she was in private practice as an optometrist. Having always been active in Jewish life, she decided to sell her practice and go to seminary after being inspired by a woman rabbi at her synagogue.

S *habbat Shalom**: **In Jewish understanding, what is the significance of the sanctuary or temple?**

Medwin: As I answer these questions, I will approach them from a liberal Jewish perspective.

First I would like to define terms as I understand them. The Sanctuary/Tabernacle was a mobile worship site that was carried with the Israelites as they wandered throughout the wilderness. The Temple refers to the Temple that was built on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem after the Jews entered the Promised Land.

God commanded Moses to have the Israelites build a Tent of Meeting. The Tent would contain the Ark which contained the Tablets of Stone upon which

God wrote the Commandments.

After having lived 400 years among pagan worshipers in Egypt, it was very difficult for the Israelites to understand the concept of an “invisible” God. As long as God was doing something visible, such as causing the Ten Plagues or parting the Reed Sea, the Israelites were able to keep their faith in God. When God was not so obvious, it was harder for them to continue to believe that an invisible God existed.

The Tabernacle was a way for the Israelites to symbolically always be aware of God’s presence. In Exodus 25:8 God tells Moses, “Let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” Even though it was understood that God did not really have a

“home” as the pagan gods did, and that God was everywhere, the Israelites still needed a physical place that could help them relate to God. It is important to note that all the Israelites were invited to bring gifts of their heart and to participate in the creation of the Tabernacle. This gave them a sense of ownership, of helping to build God’s “home.” It is also important to note that the Tabernacle was built portable, so that the Israelites could take God with them wherever they went. This was an important distinction and a new concept in theology. In pagan religions, gods had set locations. If people moved, they found new gods. In Judaism, God was everywhere. The Tabernacle was also a constant visual reminder for the Israelites of the covenant they made with God and the laws/commandments that the Israelites agreed to follow. God tells Moses in Exodus 25:21, “Deposit inside the ark, the Pact that I will give you.” The Israelites knew that this Tent of Meeting contained these important Tablets that God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Shabbat Shalom: How did each part of the temple/sanctuary function in Jewish worship?

Medwin: The Tent of Meeting was a large tent that contained all of the following: (1) The Lamp which was to be continually burning—this was a sign of God’s continual presence among the people; (2) the Table for Bread used for rituals; (3) the Ark of the Pact and its poles—The Ark contained the Tablets, and the poles enabled the Ark, and therefore the Tablets, to be carried with the Israelites wherever they went; (4) the Curtain—to partition off the Holy of Holies, because only the High Priests were allowed to go near the Ark, and thus the curtain

kept others out; (5) the Altar in the Holy—for burning incense; (6) the Altar in the courtyard—for burnt offerings; and (7) the Laver for Washing—for ritual purification.

Shabbat Shalom: How did the temple/sanctuary change Jewish worship?

Medwin: The building of the sanctuary in the desert was really the beginning of Jewish community worship. Before then, individuals such as Abraham and Jacob had their own personal way of worshipping God. When Abraham’s descen-

Sacrifice has been replaced by prayer.

dants had been brought down to Egypt by Joseph, they grew into a large people. As slaves, they were not allowed to worship God freely in their own way. Once they were set free, God found it important to create a center of worship for the Israelite community. This gave the

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people a physical symbol of God in their midst. It also created a set location in which to make sacrifices to God which could be made holy. The Temple in Jerusalem signified a change of worship in that the Israelite people now had a permanent place of worship.

Shabbat Shalom: What does the temple/sanctuary teach us about God?

Medwin: God is both immanent and transcendent. On one hand, God asks the Israelites to create a “dwelling place” for God among them. This enables the people to feel closer to God, knowing that God is ever present. At the same time, the true place where God “dwelt,” the Holy of Holies, was off-limits to all but the High Priests. Anyone who tried to get that close to God would be killed.

Shabbat Shalom: What role did the Temple play in early Jewish life?

Medwin: The Temple became the center of Jewish religious life. While individual communities had community centers,



the most important worship of God took place during the three festivals, *Sukkot*, *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, when all Jews would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to make sacrifices to God.

***Shabbat Shalom:* How did the destruction of the Temple(s) change Jewish life and worship?**

Medwin: Since official sacrifices to God could only be made at the Temple in Jerusalem, the entire structure of worship changed when the Temple was destroyed. After the destruction of the first Temple, the Jews were exiled to Babylonia. There they had to establish *Batei Knesset* (the modern Hebrew word for synagogue which actually means House of Assembly) so they could worship God. Worship of God was transformed from sacrifice to verbal prayer. When the Jews were able to return to Jerusalem, they rebuilt the Temple. The communities still maintained *Batei Knesset* but returned to Jerusalem for the festivals to make sacrifices at the Temple. After the destruction of the second Temple, worship made a permanent transformation from sacrifice to verbal prayer.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What is the priestly function today without the literal temple being present?**

Medwin: The Priesthood, which was a hereditary position, died out when the second Temple was destroyed. At that point, the Rabbis came to power as the new leaders of the Jewish people. Rabbis were ordained based upon obtaining a certain level of knowledge. They became the religious leaders and community judges. The Judaism that we know today is based upon the changes made by the rabbis and is called Rabbinic Judaism. There are some small remnants of the Priesthood in modern times. People with last

names of Cohen or Levy are given certain privileges in worship services in the Orthodox and Conservative movements.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What is substituted now for the various offerings that were given in the temple?**

Modern synagogues are not just houses of worship but are also places for a community to gather, to learn and study together, and to socialize.

Medwin: Sacrifices were made three times a day. The current worship system of Orthodox substitutes three prayer services a day instead.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What do you think of the movement to rebuild and restore the temple? What are some of the problems to accomplishing the restoration?**

Medwin: Most Jews do not expect, nor do they want, a third Temple to be built. For two thousand years Jews and Judaism have survived without the Temple. Sacrifice, an ancient custom not only of Jews but of most religions at the time, has been replaced by prayer. Only the extremists talk about rebuilding the Temple again. Most Jews do not want to revert to animal sacrifice, which would be the function of a newly built third Temple.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What is the difference between the modern synagogue and the sanctuary/temple of old?**

Medwin: The sanctuary and

Temple of old were controlled by the High Priests. They were the location where sacrifice was made as a way to worship God. Modern synagogues are led by rabbis and prayer replaces worship. Also, modern synagogues are not just houses of worship but are also places for a community to gather, to learn and study together, and to socialize.

*Interview by Johnny Groda, graduate student at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.