

Please Be Seated

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Yom Kippur Morning 5783/2022

I know for some people, the most well-received words a rabbi could say are: “Please be seated.” And that’s okay, heaven knows, we all could use the rest.

I have been thinking about chairs a lot. Most years, we look out from the pulpit and we see the community, people sitting in their same chairs, some like the front, some like the balcony in the back. Each year, we could see who is here, and who is missing. Parents who recently dropped their youngest child off at college and are here for the first time without them. Friends who moved out of state. Loved ones who passed away.

Over the pandemic, we often led services before empty chairs. Just a livestreaming camera. Other communities also adjusted. Instead of playing for a theater of empty seats, the Barcelona Opera opened for an audience of plants. And the Dodgers put out this promotion: “We may be playing without fans in the ballpark, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be here. Purchase a cardboard cutout and we’ll save you a seat at Dodger Stadium!”

When leading services before empty seats, we filled them with our imagination and experiences of you. And we felt your presence, not in a two-dimensional cardboard cutout way, but the full, vibrant spirit of you, your faces, your voices, your laughter, your personalities. And now you are here. Many of you are in the same seat you always choose, and some in new seats, an indication of how these years have changed you.

Along with “Please be seated,” one of the more wonderful things to hear is, “I saved a seat for you.” Someone’s thinking of you, wanting to share an experience with you. How crestfallen we feel when we get up and ask someone to save our seat, and when we return, the seat has been taken. But we saved a seat for you. And here we are, in this hybrid space, and it is so meaningful to be with you, to fill these chairs, and to be with you who are livestreaming our service, perhaps from your home, in your favorite chair.

My favorite place to sit in my house is not actually a chair, it’s a corner of the couch. When I work from home, it is where I write and research and answer emails, despite the desk chairs and dining chairs available. It is roomy enough for me, my little dog, and my computer on a pillow on my lap. From this spot I can look to the left and see trees, leaves, and the street, with people walking by, in front of me I could watch tv, or look at the art on the walls, and to the right I can see what’s going

on in the kitchen, and have a clear view of my husband in his favorite chair at the kitchen island. I like the lighting, it is right under the air conditioning vent, and I have a glass of ice water and my noise canceling headphones within reach.

In 1888 Van Gogh did two paintings of chairs. One, called *Van Gogh's Chair*, was a painting of his own chair, which he described to his brother Theo as: "a wooden and straw chair all yellow on red tiles against a wall." On the chair he painted his pipe and tobacco pouch, and in the background a box of sprouting onions. The other painting, called *Paul Gauguin's Armchair*, Van Gogh described as "somber reddish-brown wood, the seat of greenish straw, and in the absent one's place a lighted torch and modern novels." The two paintings were painted as a pair, and although they are empty, they are considered portraits.

How is your favorite chair a portrait of you?

"This is the chair of Elijah whose spirit is with us. May his remembrance be for good."

These are words we speak at the beginning of a baby naming or *brit milah* (circumcision) ritual. When saying these words, we point to an empty chair that has been set out to welcome the Prophet Elijah. Why Elijah? Because Elijah is tasked with heralding in the messiah, and since any baby could potentially be the messiah, we set out the chair to invite his presence. The chair is a symbol of all the potential in this child...in any child. The chair isn't really empty, it is filled with hope for the future.

Nachman of Breslov, a rebbe who lived at the end of the eighteenth century, once said, "When one sits on the chair, one is a mensch!" What his disciples understood from this is that a person has substance. You have matter, so you matter. How do we know? Because when a person sits in a chair, the chair is not empty. The German word *mensch* simply means a human being. But what if the person sitting on the chair feels empty? Is the chair still full? Reb Nachman knew about feeling empty. He lived through pogroms, suffered the loss of loved ones, and terrible grief and depression. Still, he said, "When one sits on the chair, one is a mensch!" One is full of potential and purpose. *Mensch* in German may simply mean a human being, but *mensch* in Yiddish means a human being of integrity, and that is what we strive to be. Elijah's chair reminds us of all the potential in every child, and in each of us.

This is the chair of Elijah whose spirit is with us. Yom Kippur is the day of our re-creation, a time to reflect on the human being who fills your chair. A time to confront feelings of emptiness, and to restore integrity.

What are the steps you would like to take to be a mensch? What is your hope for the future?

Elijah has a seat at every baby naming and *brit milah*, and a glass of wine at every seder table.

Rabbi Mark Goldsmith spoke about his family seder growing up, and how they had an empty chair at the Passover table, with a full place setting before it. The chair was for Jewish refuseniks who had applied to leave the Soviet Union and whose applications had been refused. They were often imprisoned.

We saved your seat.

There are many historical times when people saved a seat for those they hoped would return. It is both a protest and a prayer. A protest over the circumstance that displaced them from their seat, and a prayer for their return, whether a beloved's return, or a stranger's return to the safety of their home.

I remember when many synagogues were keeping an empty seat in their sanctuaries for Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier who was abducted in 2006, promising to keep the seat empty and waiting for him until his release.

There is an Empty Chair memorial in downtown Juneau, Alaska, a single empty chair, dedicated to the residents of Japanese origin sent to internment camps. The single chair was inspired by Juneau High School students who saved an empty chair at their graduation for their classmate John Tanaka who was forcibly relocated a month before the ceremony.

Kailash Satyarthi, a social reformer who campaigned against child labor in India, said when accepting the joint Nobel peace prize, "I am representing here the sound of silence. The cry of innocence. And, the face of invisibility. I represent millions of those children who are left behind and that's why I have kept an empty chair here as a reminder..."

Dan Gill, a social studies teacher in Monclair, New Jersey, always keeps an empty chair in the center of his classroom. He tells his students about the time he and his best friend Archie went to a birthday party. They were nine years old. Dan is white and Archie is black. They rang the bell and the mother of the child having the party looked at them and said there weren't enough chairs. Confused, the boys offered to sit on the floor. The woman repeated that there were no more chairs. Finally, the boys realized that it was Archie who was not welcome. They left in tears. Dan says that the chair in his classroom is a reminder that we can do better.

Who would you save this seat for? Who are you praying will return? Afghan, Ukrainian, Venezuelan, Syrian, South Sudanese, Ethiopian, Myanmarrese refugees and asylum seekers, those displaced by the catastrophic flooding in Pakistan? Who are you saving a seat for, the hungry, the thirsty, the ill, the homeless, the unemployed? Who doesn't have a seat at the table? The displaced, the oppressed.

The empty chair is also a protest and a prayer over the ones who did not survive, did not return. It is a commitment that they are not forgotten. There is a memorial in Krakow, Poland, of empty chairs, representing the over 65,000 Jews of Krakow who did not return from the Holocaust. In October 2020, 20,000 empty chairs set up near the white house mourned the 200,000 lives lost in the US from Covid 19.

In early June, the clergy at Fairmount Temple in New York set out twenty-one chairs on their front lawn to pay tribute to the nineteen children and two adults who were killed at the Robb Elementary School in Texas. Rabbi Joshua Caruso wrote, "Since we put up the chairs, something unexpected has happened. Yes, there are many cars that have stopped or slowed down to take pictures of the installation. That I would have expected. More illuminating is how some have made the time to pull into our driveway, park their cars, and 'visit' the empty chairs. A particular guest even placed one flower upon each seat, one for each soul taken from this world far too soon. On another day, a couple sat down at a nearby bench to take in the display... The dramatic yet peaceful appearance of those chairs has beckoned passers-by to make a pilgrimage to this informal memorial. As if one's proximity to the chairs will somehow awaken – and honor – the memories of those who perished."

The chairs are not really empty. They are portraits. They are filled with imagination and experience. Relationship. They connote a face, a voice, laughter, personality, dreams. The *absence* of a mensch, but the *presence* of story and conviction.

Who do you set a chair out for this year? What martyr whose life ended far too soon do we dedicate this chair to?

In the Book of Samuel there is a verse in which Jonathan, the son of King Saul, says to David when David leaves for a treacherous journey: "I will miss you and your chair will be empty."

In 1870, Charles Dickens hired a young artist, Sir Samuel Luke Fildes, to illustrate his novel. However, Dickens died before the novel was complete. The artist visited the family, the day of the funeral. The artist said, "In the house of mourning, I conceived the idea of 'The Empty Chair,' and at once got my colors from London, and, with their permission, made the watercolor drawing a very faithful record of his library." It is a beautiful picture, the writer's chair slightly pushed away from his desk, a blank page awaiting a pen stroke, the page and the chair illuminated by sunlight. Van Gogh said it inspired his paintings of the two empty chairs.

I think of the time I visited temple member David Gantz, of blessed memory, at his home, when he was ill. He was sitting in his favorite chair, a beautiful Eames lounge chair, with the deep black leather and molded wood. It is an iconic chair. The designer, Charles Eames said he sought to design a chair that had "the warm receptive look of a well-used first baseman's mitt." David and Laurie's home is humble and lovely. This chair was very special to David, and he looked serene and happy in it. It held him, and reflected the appreciation he had for all that he embraced, his children, his home, his wife who was the love of his life. And the next time I saw that chair, it was at the shiva gathering at their home, and it was empty. But it was still a portrait of a wonderful mensch.

When we talk about shiva, we say we are "sitting shiva." We lower ourselves, rest our grief-racked bodies. Traditionally, mourners don't sit in chairs, but on low stools.

Shortly before Rosh Hashanah, 1808, one of the followers of Nachman of Breslov, the Rebbe who said "When one sits on the chair, one is a mensch!", brought him an ornately carved chair with a velvet cushion. Reb Nachman died two years later, at the age of 38. During the Cossack raids against the Jews in Ukraine, his chair was dismantled and smuggled to Kremenchug, and eventually brought to Jerusalem where it is displayed in the Breslov synagogue. It is a portrait of a leader, a mensch, who continues to inspire his devoted followers hundreds of years later.

In our Torah study class on Saturday mornings, when Joe Gillerman, of blessed memory, died, no one wanted to sit in his seat at first. We even put a little plaque with his name on it. But eventually, people did sit in his seat. Others in our group have died, and new people have joined. And each has

a literal or figurative seat at the table, their wit and wisdom mixing with the ancient script, their names a part of the living light of Torah.

There is a poem, poet unknown, that reads:

Look beyond the empty chair
To know a life well spent
Look beyond the solitude
To days of true content
Cherish in your broken heart
Each moment gladly shared
And feel the touch of memory
Beyond the empty chair.

Who are you remembering this Yom Kippur? Whose memory, laughter, hobbies and habits fills up this chair?

The Hebrew word 'Shabbat' which we translate as...Shabbat, and define as the Day of Rest, would more accurately be defined as the Day of Sitting, because it shares the same root as the Hebrew verb *LaSheVeT*, to sit. It is the day of sitting down, taking a load off, unburdening from the long week.

In Genesis it reads: "God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy – having sat down from all the work of creation." We don't often translate it that way, we translate it as: "God rested from all the work," because it's weird to imagine God having a seat.

But there is something theologically meaningful in the idea that on Shabbat, God joins us, takes a seat at the table, sits with us on the sectional sofa.

Years ago I was in a therapist's office, sitting on the couch, and I was talking about mortality, death, what does it all mean, like I always do, and I was thinking, what is this poor therapist going to say, I am asking for the meaning of life and death, what people have been seeking for millennia, and I am expecting her to tell me the answer now? And then she did something remarkable. She pointed to an empty chair and said, "God is sitting right there in that chair. Tell God what you want to say." I looked at the chair and the words came pouring out.

On Yom Kippur we come to temple to have audience with God. Imagine you are talking to God.

When you say, *Baruch Atah Adonai*, blessed are You, who is the You in your prayers? What do you want to say?

One day, we too will be absent. The corner of the couch where I love to sit with a blanket and a book, all of our favorite chairs, will be portraits of us, our spirit and substance, honor and integrity, laughter and relationships. And that is hard to contend with. And when we contemplate that, instead of trying to fill up every empty space with our sound and fury, we become gentler with ourselves, and with each other.

And there is another seat that is saved for us, at God's table. In Psalm 23 we read, "You prepare a table before me."

And between the Elijah's chair at our birth and the chair at God's table after we die, there are many chairs, each a portrait of a particular moment in our lives: highchair, school chair attached to the desk, sideline bench, chair lifted in the air at a bar mitzvah or wedding, sanctuary pew, swivel office chair, armchair, folding chair, bar stool, theater seat, wheelchair, massage chair, rocking chair, easy chair...

And we've saved a seat for you as well, at the temple. On our Temple Isaiah website, under the COMMUNITY tab, you will find many of the chairs we've saved for you. Pull up a chair at one of our Small Groups, consider a fishing group, an interfaith solidarity group, running group, canasta group, bourbon group. Or pull up a chair at a support group, we are offering facilitated support groups to our members, for mental health, grief, caregiving, LBGTQ+, parenting, chronic pain. Sign up and if there is enough interest, we will create a meaningful group with a trained facilitator to support one another. We are forming school groups for Isaiah families who share the same school community. Pull up a chair with our sisterhood, Isaiah Women, or with ChaiVillageLA, our dynamic 55+ community, or our new Young(ish) families community which comes together for meaningful social and spiritual connections, or TING, Temple Isaiah's networking group, or our 30-Day values Based Challenge Groups, or at Torah study where the text we delve into is really the Torah of our lives, or our choir. Have we saved a seat in the choir for people to join? Yes!

And so please, pull up a chair, and be seated, next to me, next to someone new. In this chair, we have imagined Elijah, artists, refugees, martyrs, loved ones, and God, and finally, you.

What new table, new group will you pull up a chair to this year? How will you participate?

There's coffee and tea, and good company. There are ideas, insights and stories, and we want to hear yours. May you be blessed when you take a seat and when you take a stand. May the empty chairs that stand awaiting the lost, the oppressed and displaced be filled with their happy return. May the empty chairs that stand as tribute to those fallen who will never return continue to remind us of the work we need to do. May the empty chairs where our loved ones once sat cradle us with memory and gratitude.

Please, be seated. We've saved a seat for you.

Shana tova.