

The Future of the Jewish Home
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The Jewish Home – Sacred Privacy within Community **By Esther Sperber**

What is a Jewish home? What makes a home Jewish and what makes a Jewish space a home? You might be thinking, “We all know what a home is, so let’s focus on the Jewish aspect,” but as an architect, I think questioning the meaning of a home is central to the topic of this salon.

When I think of my home, I think of a personal space, away from the noise of culture, a place in which I can shape my own surroundings. But a home is also always part of the fabric of the culture around it, and it is the heart of my Jewish, family-centered cultural and religious life.

So what is a home? Is it formed by culture or is it a space we use to escape culture? Can a home express these two contradicting meanings?

The Architecture of the Jewish Home

Given the detailed instruction the Jewish religion offers for many aspects of life, it is surprising how few relate to the architectural structure of the home, from which we might extrapolate Judaism’s attitude to the relationship of the home to privacy and social life.

The Jewish home is marked by a Mezuzah, the scroll affixed to the entry door. While this is a minimal architectural intervention, its exterior placement publicly marks the national and religious affiliation of the home as a Jewish one. The custom of leaving an unpainted patch inside the house – “Zecher LaChurban” (a reminder of the destruction of the Temple), though less common, links the home’s interior to the larger historical Jewish narrative.

While both the Mezuzah and the Zecher LaChurban connect the Jewish home to the Jewish people and their history, other traditional texts can be interpreted as pointing to the home as a private sanctuary, a way to escape the social order.

The concept of *pharhessia*, originally the Greek term for free speech, is used in Rabbinic literature to define an urban, public space. For the rabbis, a transgression enacted in *pharhessia*, and seen by witnesses, can be tried in a court of law and assigned a punishment. While the rabbis’ concept of *pharhessia* creates the legal mechanism for punishment, it also gave birth to its opposite -

protected private space. At home, one's actions are not subject to the scrutiny of the court, and, the rabbis implicitly stated, that the home affords the individual the freedom to diverge from common cultural practices.

Home – Between the Individual and the Cultural

In fact, not only the Jewish home, but all homes, occupy a dialectical position between the individual and the collective. Homes are formed by conventions, styles and building codes, yet they embody the promise of private intimacy and personal freedom. The home is always both the foundation of order and society and a place to seek refuge from it.

We build homes by constructing walls which separate inside from outside, sheltering us from the sun, the rain, and the noise of the metropolis. But homes also connect us to daylight through windows, municipal services through power and water supplies and to our friends who come to visit. As the great modernist architect Le Corbusier wrote, "The house is a machine for living."

The home is not only a functional machine, it is also the center of our emotional lives and basic human needs. At home we cook, eat, bathe, sleep and have intimate relations; we cry, laugh, read, educate, mourn and celebrate.

Homes are ubiquitous and necessary for our survival as a species, but as Robin Evans points out, we rarely notice how much culture and social norms influence the design of our homes. In his essay, "The Translation from Drawing to Building" Robins writes that although we think the conventional home is shaped by "cold reason, necessity and the obvious," this architecture, which emphasizes "privacy, comfort and independence" is recent and expresses a modern life style.

Contemporary homes express current cultural sensibilities: they provide accessibility and promote sustainable practices. Even the names of the rooms in the house have changed over the years, great rooms, master suites and home theaters did not exist fifty years ago. To ensure resale value, most homeowners avoid eccentricities and imitate the style in the latest magazine or home improvement show.

But alongside the wish for one's home to reflect social norms, modernity also introduced the view of a home as an expression, or extension, of the individual. People try to express their unique aesthetics, heritage and interests through the placement of objects in their home (Walter Benjamin).

The Jewish Tent

Now, after we have looked at the dialectical nature of all homes, let us return to the Jewish home, or tent.

"מה טוב אהליך יעקב משכנותיך ישראל"

“How good are your tents O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!”

This blessing, uttered unwillingly by the non-Jewish magician and prophet, Bila'm, was interpreted by Rashi (1040-1105) following the Talmud (200-500AD). They see the “tent” as both the private home and as a metaphor for the communal home, the synagogue.

The Talmud quotes the Mishna: “A man should not open a window across from another window in a communal courtyard.” The Talmud then explains that this regulation was learned from the above verse in which Bila'm praised the order of the Israelites tents which protected the privacy of each family. The Mishna therefore legislated that windows of homes that share a courtyard should not face one another in order to respect the privacy each person and family.

But interestingly, this same verse was chosen to be recited upon entering the synagogue, praising its beauty and goodness. Here, as Rashi writes, when Bila'm speaks of the tents, he does not refer to the private homes but rather to the cultural institutions - house of prayer and the house of study – and his praises are for the historic continuity of these institutions.

These two interpretations of the tents in the “Ma Tov” verse are able to hold the two dialectical meanings of the home we have discussed. The tent is beautiful both because it expresses respect for privacy and because it provides a shared space for social life.

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To close this exploration, I wonder what the dual roles of the home can tell us about the future of the Jewish home.

As we have seen, the home is both the embodiment of society and culture and a respite from those demands. As the opposite of *pharhessia*, the home is a safe space free from the threat of societal conventions.

As we begin to think today about how to strengthen the link between Jewish homes, Jewish culture and Jewish history, we might also wonder how to protect the Jewish home as a private space, one in which individuals have the freedom

to create new social structures and to test societal norms. Could this Jewish home challenge some of the conventions that surround us and create a space for personal values? Could this home reshape gender roles, resist consumerism, foster environmental consciousness, support economic equality, and do all this while maintaining and affirming its connection to Jewish history, ritual and community?

Moses Mendelsohn suggested that one should be a Jew at home and a human in public. Perhaps our charge now is to question the split between private and public, home and community, and to fashion homes that are fully Jewish and fully human; homes that affirm a creative ambivalence and are both havens for individuality and cornerstones of our society.