

It's been about ten years since Feng Shui exploded on the American scene. For those unfamiliar with the term, Feng Shui is not the name of a Chinese noodle dish with scallions and ginger. Rather, it is a body of theory stemming from Tibetan Buddhist and Chinese Taoist beliefs about architecture, the placement of furniture, even the color schemes of different rooms. According to Feng Shui, the shape of the objects that surround us in our homes and their locales impact the quality of our inner lives. Through a judicious use of color, shape and location we can engender harmony, serenity, and good fortune. Conversely, poor design and arrangement in our homes lead to imbalance, conflict and an interruption of the flow of our chi'i, the invisible field of electromagnetic energy believed to determine one's vitality, fortune and love life.

Over time Feng Shui became a big business, though one doesn't hear quite as much about it these days as a few years ago. I do remember reading that before finally closing, New York City's well-known jazz club, the Village Gate, underwent a \$10 million dollar renovation for the purposes of bringing its design into conformity with the principles of Feng Shui. High-end consultants charge as much as \$1,000 an hour for advice concerning the application of the principles of Feng Shui to one's home or business. Nice work if you can get it!

Undoubtedly, there are snake oil purveyors of Feng Shui out there to make a quick buck through quakery . . . just as there are so-called Kabbalah masters ready to sell you red bracelets and mystical energy water (by the way, anyone interested can see me after services for a good deal!). But hucksters and fakes don't detract from the authenticity of Feng Shui any more than they do from the legitimacy of Kabbalah. You don't have to be a student of Feng Shui or conversant with its principles to grasp the truth of its most basic assumption, namely the idea that we are affected by our surroundings. What we furnish our homes with provide even the casual visitor with clues to our values, tastes and priorities in life. Even more important, the things with which we surround ourselves influence our moods and thoughts, sometimes in very subtle ways.

This fundamental teaching of Feng Shui is not alien at all to the spirit of Judaism. Indeed, this week's Torah portion with all its detailed minutae about the building of the *mishkhan*, the portable sanctuary our ancestors used in their desert wanderings, might be thought

of as Jewish *Feng Shui*. As our *sedra* teaches, “ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם” -- Let them build me a sanctuary that I may dwell in them” (*Exodus* 25:8). Note the grammatical confusion -- my mother, the English teacher, would immediately point out that the verse should really read “Let them build me a house that I may dwell in it.” But the Torah knew exactly what it was saying when it suggested that the quality of our spiritual experience depends at least to some extent on our surroundings. Have you ever noticed that prayer has a different feeling to it when services are held in the chapel instead of the Sanctuary? A high *bimah* versus a low one, one at the front as opposed to a *bimah* in the center of the room will invariably create a very different spiritual ambience and change the way in which we feel God touching us . . . or not.

But the Torah’s statement is equally remarkable and startling for its insistence that we must build something before God can enter our lives. A story is told about Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, a great Hasidic leader whose career spanned the first half of the 19th century. Once the Kotzker Rebbe asked the wise and learned men of his community, “Where does God dwell?” Staring at him with disbelief at the seeming idiocy of the question they responded, “There is no place in the world devoid of the Divine. The whole world is filled with God’s glory.” “No,” answered the Kotzker, “The truth is that God only lives wherever human beings allow Him to enter.” The very act of constructing the *mishkan*, the consciousness it engendered in framing a relationship with the Holy One, the adherence to a divinely sanctioned blueprint created the purposeful bridges to the hearts and souls of the people over which God crossed. And this is the essence of ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם. It’s not that God needs an address, but rather as frail creatures incapable of understanding the Infinite, we need concrete places and ways to enter into relationship with the Eternal. That is the ultimate task of all religion and the very essence of Jewish *Feng Shui*.

I am proud to inform you that I am in fact a certified practitioner of Jewish *Feng Shui*. No, I won’t have the *hutzpah* to charge a \$1,000 an hour for my services, but in other ways my “m.o.” would be the same as any design consultant, Feng Shui or not. Let me invite you this morning on an imaginary visit to a fictitious couple, whom we’ll call Harry and Jenny Grossinger -- not to be confused with the Harry and Jenny Grossinger who once ran the famous Catskills

resort of the same name. Mr. and Mrs. Grossinger have asked me to inspect their house with an eye toward advising them how they might create a greater sense of warmth, harmony and spirituality in their lives. I gladly agree and make an appointment to visit (. . .hmm, sounds a lot like a Jewish version of HGTV's "Divine Design.").

My first recommendation comes even before I enter the house. While waiting for them to open the door, I notice they don't have a *mezuzah*. Once the Grossingers greet me and take me inside, I explain the significance of the precept, that it is not a lucky charm or magical amulet, but a powerful reminder of Judaism's ability to touch our lives not only when we are at synagogue, but in the bosom of family, in the place we call home. I show them the words of the *Sh'ma* written on the *klaf*, the parchment within the casing, and talk about how the *mezuzah* is actually a Torah scroll in miniature, and about how the symbolism of placing a piece of Torah on the entry to the place we call home. We discuss how the *mezuzah* can remind Jews to imbue their dwellings and relationships with a sense of wonder and gratitude for God's gifts to us.

Passing into the den, I notice an empty shelf on a bookcase next to the couch. What a perfect spot to create a basic Jewish library, one which includes a *siddur*, a prayerbook, a Hebrew Bible in the original and translation, a few classics of Jewish literature and a couple of reference books on holidays, practices, laws and customs.. "Knowledge of your heritage isn't the property of the local rabbi," I tell them. "It's your birthright and belongs equally to you. Having books of Jewish content handy will not only allow you to answer questions that come up, but can also inspire study and reflection on your own. And through such exploration of the endless facets of Judaism you may find nourishment and stimulation for both mind and soul."

We move into the living room, and my eyes come to rest on a large imposing china cabinet -- an ideal location to keep the various ritual objects Jews use to sanctify the rhythms of time. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out a printed list of things for the Grossingers to consider keeping in their cabinet, items guaranteed to enhance the Jewish chi'i of their home: A pair of silver candlesticks for use on Shabbat and holidays, a *hallah* cover, a *kiddush* cup, a *havdalah* set, a *seder* plate for Passover, a *hanukkiyah* for the kindling of Hanukkah candles. I explain that none of these items need to be expensive, but that their spiritual power is enhanced when they

are aesthetically pleasing or are family heirlooms.

As we tour the remainder of the Grossingers' lovely home, I make other Jewish *Feng Shui* recommendations as well. They have a nice backyard -- a great place to build a Sukkah for the celebration of Judaism's fall festival, a way of getting in touch with God's miracle of nature, an opportunity to share fellowship with friends and family during the temperate fall days before winter. In their kitchen, I talk about *kashrut*, and how the Jewish dietary laws can imbue the simple act of cooking and eating food with religious significance, so that our tables are transformed into altars, and our meals elevated from the biological satisfaction of hunger to a spiritual plane.

Preparing to take my leave, I offer the Grossingers an important piece of advice. "Having all the accouterments of a Jewish home will not lead automatically to the results you seek. You must make them a part of the fabric of your lives to feel their power. The more you sanctify the precious moments of your lives through the fabric of Jewish ritual the more you will make time itself a holy experience. And in the process of sanctifying the time you spend with family, the more you will discover that you have also sanctified the space in which you dwell, the home you share with each other and your children."

And then I share with them a final story. Found in the tractate *Shabbat* of the Babylonian Talmud, it is a legend we teach every school child. According to the story, on Friday evenings two angels visit every Jewish home. One angel represents the serenity and joy, the togetherness and love that epitomize the celebration of Shabbat as a family. The other angel is the representative of a different set of feelings: barrenness, disorder, cynicism, a sense of being closed to spiritual possibilities. As these two angels peer into the windows of Jewish homes, should they witness a family gathered around a festive table with candles and a palpable atmosphere of harmony and love, the angel of light joyously exclaims, "May it be just this way next week," to which the darker being reluctantly grumbles, "Amen." Yet if they visit a home in which the light of Shabbat does not burn, a bare table at which the Sabbath spirit is absent, the dark one gleefully shouts, "May it be just *this* way next week," to which the angel of Shabbat tearfully responds, "Amen."

“The story is not about angels who are peeping toms or snooping yentas from on-high,” I tell my fictitious clients, the Grossingers. “You are the angels, whether of one sort or the other. You create the context of the blessing or its lack by choosing whether or not to use the powerful spiritual tools at your disposal. For God to dwell in you, you must first make a place in your heart where He may live.”

And it is this, my friends, which distinguishes *Feng Shui* from the building of a *bayit ne’eman b’yisrael*, a home rich in the life-affirming traditions of Israel. In the Chinese system of design, it is sufficient merely to arrange objects in a certain way; the forces of chi’i do the rest. In Judaism, however, it is more than the mere acquisition of ritual objects which makes the atmosphere around them so special. The more they grow dusty on a shelf, the weaker their spiritual potential; conversely, the more worn they become -- the *haggadah* with wine stains, the *kiddush* cup tarnished with regular use, the candlesticks covered with the wax of a thousand Shabbatot -- the greater their effect on the user and his or her environment.

In my mind’s eye, I imagine walking past the Grossingers’ home on a Friday evening a few weeks later. It is a warm spring evening and their windows are partially open. I hear faint strains of music wafting toward me on the breeze, the music of a family singing *Shalom Aleikhem* at the Shabbat dinner table. For a brief moment, I glimpse what appears to be two luminous shapes standing by the window. I look again, realizing I’ve only seen the reflection of their Shabbat candles flickering through the glass pane. Looking into the dining room I see a contented family standing around the Shabbat table with bright faces and joined hands. “May it be just this way again next week,” they say to one another. “And I answer softly, “Amen -- for them and for us, each and every one of us.”