

“Rings of Wisdom”

A Guide to the Hebrew Inscriptions
in the Oseh Shalom Sanctuary
Commentary by Rabbi Gary S. Fink

The Three Rings: Sanctuary as Torah Scroll

Three rings of Hebrew quotations circle the inside of Oseh Shalom’s sanctuary. The “Rings of Wisdom” are an integral part of architect Travis Price’s original vision of a sanctuary that comes alive with the inspired wisdom of our ancestors.

The Oseh Shalom sanctuary becomes a symbolic Torah scroll, reflecting the highest values of Jewish tradition and Reconstructionist thought. In the words of local scholar Avi West, “the rings of wisdom articulate a ‘mission statement’ for Oseh Shalom as a congregation, and for all of us as Jews.”

The Rings of Wisdom: Creation, Torah and Redemption

The upper ring—at the top of the dome—contains quotes that express the theme of creation. The middle ring—at the base of the dome—relates to the theme of Torah (spiritual enlightenment).

The third ring of Hebrew wisdom circles the entire sanctuary. It reflects the theme of redemption. The themes of creation, Torah, and redemption form the core structure of the traditional prayer service.

Selection of Quotes

Each quotation articulates a core Jewish value, expresses a Reconstructionist Jewish perspective, and represents an aspect of our synagogue community.

In some cases, the sanctuary inscription (indicated in italics) contains words from a longer text, all of which is cited in this brochure. The quotations start near the right side of the pulpit area (bima).

Upper Ring: The Light of Creation

ויאמר אלהים יהי אור ויהי אור

“God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.” (Genesis 1:3)

בצלם אלהים

“God created humanity in the image of God, in the image of God were humans created.” (Genesis 1:27)

הנה טוב מאד

“God saw all that had been made, and found it very good.” (Genesis 1:31)

וביום השביעי שבת וינפש

“On the seventh day God ceased, and drew a breath of rest.” (Exodus 31:17)

עושה שלום במרומיו הוא יעשה שלום

“May the One who creates harmony above, make peace for us, for all Israel, and for all who dwell on earth.” (Kol Haneshamah p. 323). [The name of our congregation comes from this prayer: “oseh shalom” means “one who makes peace.”]

כל הנשמה תהלל יה

“Let every living thing sing God’s praises.” (Psalm 150:6)

זה היום עשה יהוה נגילה ונשמחה בו

“This is the day that God has made, let us exult and rejoice on it.” (Psalm 118:24)

באורך נראה אור

“With You is the fountain of life; by Your light do we see light.” (Psalm 36:10)

ברוך שאמר

“Blessed is the One who spoke and all things came to be.” (Kol Haneshamah p. 177)

ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם

“Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” (Exodus 25:8)

Middle Ring: The Light of Torah

והאר עינינו בתורתך ודבק לבנו במצותיך

“Enlighten our eyes with your Torah, cause our hearts to cling to your mitzvot.” (Kol Haneshamah p. 275)

כי נר מצוה ותורה אור

“For the commandment (mitzvah) is a lamp, the teaching (torah) is a light. (Proverbs 6:23)

אהבה רבה אהבתנו

“With a great love have you loved us...imparting to our ancestors laws of life.” (Kol Haneshamah p. 273)

כל דברי תלמוד תורתך באהבה

“Place into our hearts ability to understand, to see, to hear, to learn, to teach, to keep, to do, and to uphold with love all that we study of your Torah.” (Kol Haneshamah p. 273)

לא בשמים היא

כי קרוב אליך

“Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond your reach. **It is not in the heavens**, that you should say: ‘Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe

it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say: 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' **It is very close to you**, in your mouth and in your heart." (Deut. 30:11-14)

עץ חיים היא

וכל נתיבותיה שלום

"It is a tree of life to those who hold onto it, all who uphold it are happy. Its ways are ways of pleasantness, **and all its paths are peace.**" (Kol Haneshamah p.441)

כי מציון תצא תורה

"For instruction shall come forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." (Isaiah 2:3)

משפט אחד יהיה לכם

"There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you." (Lev. 24:22)

הבינוני ואלמדה מצותיך

"Give me understanding that I may learn Your commandments." (Psalm 119:73)

לעסק בדברי תורה

"Blessed are you Adonai, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, that sanctifies us with your mitzvot, and ordained that we occupy ourselves with words of Torah." (Kol Haneshamah p.169)

ותורתך שעשעי

"Your teaching is my delight." (Psalm 119:174)

Lower Ring: The Light of Redemption

Redemption in Jewish Tradition

In Jewish tradition, redemption describes a state of fulfillment—individual, communal or ecological. The mission of the Jew is to move the world closer to redemption through everyday acts of tikkun (wholeness and healing). Literally, tikkun means “repair,” and refers to our obligation to bring fulfillment to an imperfect world.

According to Jewish philosophy, the world was created incomplete. The purpose of humanity is to participate with the Divine Spirit in order to complete the work of creation and to bring about redemption.

The Ring of Redemption circles the sanctuary on six sections of wall. Each section describes a particular aspect of redemption. The following commentary begins with a description of the wall above the center pulpit area, and continues counterclockwise (right to left):

First Section: Redemption as Personal and Universal

יברכך יהוה וישמרך

יאר יהוה פניו אליך ויחנך

ישא יהוה פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

“May God bless you and keep you. May God’s Presence shine upon you, and show you favor. May God’s Presence be lifted toward you and bestow upon you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26)

לא ישא גוי אל גוי חרב ולא ילמדו עוד מלחמה

“God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; **nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.**” (Isaiah 2:4)

Second Section: Non-Violence

וגר זאב עם כבש ונמר עם גדי • ונער קטן נהג בהם

ואריה כבקר יאכל תבן • לא ירעו ולא ישחיתו בכל הר קדשי

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, ...and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the poisonous snake, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” (Isaiah 11:6-9)

Third Section: Peace

ופרוש עלינו סכת שלומך

“Spread over us the shelter of your peace.” (Kol Haneshamah p.81)

שים שלום טובה וברכה בעולם חן וחסד ורחמים עלינו

וטוב בעיניך לברך את עמך ישראל ואת כל העמים ברב עז ושלום

“Grant peace, goodness and blessing in the world, grace, love, and mercy over us and over all your people Israel. Bless us, source of being, all of us, as one amid your light, for by your light, our God, you give to us Torah of life, and love of kindness, justice, blessing, mercy, life, and peace. So may it be a good thing in your eyes, to bless your people Israel, and all peoples, with abundant strength and peace.” (Kol Haneshamah p.321)

וברית שלומי לא תמוט

“My covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord.”
(Isaiah 54:10)

Fourth Section: Righteousness

צדק צדק תרדף

“Justice, justice you shall pursue.”

ואם לא עכשו אימתי

“And if not now, when??” (Pirke Avot 1:14)

וארח צדיקים כאור נגה הולך ואור עד נכון היום

“The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.” (Proverbs 4:18)

Fifth Section: Hope

אשא עיני אל ההרים מאין יבא עזרי

“I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1-2)

גם כי אלק בגיא עלמות לא אירא רע כי אתה עמדי

אך טוב וחסד ירדפוני כל ימי חיי ושבת י בבית יהוה לארך ימים

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” (Psalm 23: 4-6)

הפכת מספדי למחול

“You turned my lament into dancing.” (Psalm 30:12)

Sixth Section: Liberation

וזכרת כי עבד היית

“Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there.” (Deuteronomy 24:18)

והוצאתי אתכם • והצלתי אתכם • וגאלתי אתכם • ולקחתי אתכם

“I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians; **I will deliver you** from slavery to them. **I will redeem you** with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. **I will take you** as my people, and I will be your God.” (Exodus 6:6-7)

וקראתם דרור בארץ

“Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.”

(Leviticus 25:10)