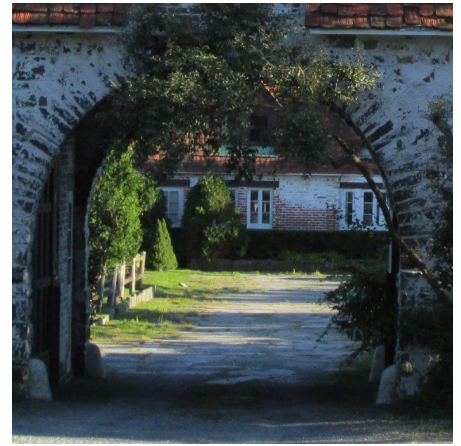


Our Winter Holidays: Gateways to “Enchantment”

Cantor Shoshana Brown

I have always loved exploring new areas, or deepening my knowledge of an area that I think I know pretty well already...you never know, there might be some corner around which you've never looked, some trail never tried, a door or gate opening onto a world unknown. I also love to photograph the places I have been, and one of the benefits of this is that after I have loaded these pictures onto my desktop computer, they start to come up on my screen-saver. On weekday mornings, I will turn my machine on in advance of the time that I intend to say my prayers, because then when I begin my devotions—most of which I know by heart—I look up and see wonderful images: waterfalls in the Smokies, a sunset over the Grand Canyon, a field of pumpkins in Tiverton, dear friends and family members, a beloved pet...how could I not feel gratitude to God for the wondrousness and variety of God's creation, and thankfulness for the people and creatures I love?



One thing I have noticed as I watch these images during my prayer-time is that I have a penchant for photographing trails, pathways, gates and doors. There is something about this kind of image that is so alluring to me...what is around the next bend? Where might this door- or gateway lead? When I was a child, I adored C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* series, and just last night I finished reading the 7th and last of the *Harry Potter* books to my own son. Both series involve children who enter into another world through magical portals: in Lewis' most famous book, it is through a wardrobe filled with fur coats that the children travel, stepping out into a snow-covered forest of fairies, fauns, and talking animals. In *Harry Potter* the aspiring wizards must run headlong into a brick wall in King's Cross Station to reach "Platform 9 and ¾" in order to board the Hogwarts Express which will take them by rail to their boarding school of "witchcraft and wizardry."

Are these longings to pass through some portal to a magical world akin to our yearning to return to Eden? Hardly! In both books (and typically, for many of this kind of story or film...think of *The Wizard of Oz*), the world on the "other side" is both dazzlingly beautiful and darkly dangerous. (However, come to think of it, there was danger lying in wait in Eden, too.) Our "heroes" do not discover a pricetag-free Club Med with daiquiris delivered to their hammocks, but instead worlds with the potential for such beauty, goodness and love—if only they can manage to defeat the powerful dark forces that threaten to destroy all goodness and rob all liberty. There is *work* to do in these worlds!

So if it is not a life of ease and pleasure that we long for when we think of stepping into enchanted worlds, what is it that so allures us? If I could step through one of the gates that I have photographed and enter into an enchanted world of my own design, what would it look like? Would I have a "task" to accomplish?

One of the things that I so love about these children's books is that the evil lurking there is unambiguous. There may be characters who turn out to be other than they seem, but the evil is purely evil and the mission is clear: stamp it out once and for all. In these tales the only consequence to accomplishing the task is that all may live in peace and freedom again. In our world, however, nothing is this clear. We make alliances with our enemies when we need them to help fight a worse enemy; we overlook grievous human rights abuses or environmental degradation when a greater danger seems to loom. We want to champion religious freedom in America, but begin to see trends within some religious communities that worry us, such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation, or encouragement to acts of terrorism.

Both Christmas and Chanukah, which come when our world is coldest and darkest, have the potential to be "portal" holidays for us and our families. In a society where every important issue is multi-faceted, we will probably not be able to "save the planet"; however, it *is* a great time to be charitable. We can also use these holidays of hearth and light to foster worlds of love and kindness within our own homes and communities. Rather than fight dragons, we can try to tame the dragons *inside of us*--do an extra chore, an extra act of kindness, create a "magical" time for our children to cherish in their memories—not by giving expensive gifts, but by sharing a special meal, singing songs, telling or reading stories, walking through the doorway of your place of worship, taking a hike...you never know where the path might lead.

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