

Kol Nidre, 5782

Who Needs Religious Community?

Sometimes, in the face of the world's problems, dedicating oneself to a religious community can seem irrelevant. I mean with climate change, a pandemic, racism and God knows what else, the right kosher certification for a can of tuna fish or whether or not we say a certain prayer on a certain day can seem inconsequential at best.

And yet, if I look a little more deeply, I realize that over these past trying 18 months, sustaining a religious community is one of the most important, if not the most important thing, we can do right now.

Why?

It is trite but true to say that America is more deeply polarized than ever. Almost 40% of Americans say that they would be very or somewhat upset if their child married someone of the opposing political party. 60 years ago most Americans — 72% — said they didn't care.

Many of us no longer know how to talk to one another. The Trump years divided friends and families and the pandemic has only deepened these divisions. Increasingly many Americans do not simply say that they disagree with people in the opposing party; rather they feel that the other's way of life is a threat to their very existence, to America as we know it. With COVID19, the threat has become not only to my **way** of life but to life itself.

This has meant that in the face of the greatest public health crisis in a century, we have been unable to pull together as a nation. We are blessed with brilliant scientists who, in under a year, created vaccines that far exceeded scientists' wildest imaginations about how effective they would be. But despite great vaccines and ample supply, we struggle to get shots into arms. Many others balk at the mundane demand to wear a mask and leaders consistently act against public health recommendations, refusing to lockdown or rejecting mask mandates despite rising death tolls.

More than a deadly virus, Americans suffer from a profound distrust of one another and of the institutions that govern us. We neither agree on science nor do we have a shared understanding of reality. Watching Fox News and MSNBC one would think that these stations were broadcasting from different planets. As journalist George Packer writes, "It was never going to be easy to negotiate the trade-off between the physical health of teachers and the mental health of children, between the guidance of scientists and the livelihood of waiters, between being alive and being OK. All of this required a society where people encountered one another as fellow citizens of goodwill and a government that heard them, and we had neither."

America prides itself on being the "land of the free and the home of the brave" yet freedom has become a toddler's lament — you can't make me — instead of a mature notion that freedom exists only in a context of shared responsibility toward others. My freedom stops at the place at which yours begins. I am not free to harm you.

What we have lost most fundamentally is trust — trust in one another, trust in our government, in our institutions, trust in the goodwill of our neighbors or fellow countrymen. The words, "My fellow Americans," used by so many Presidents, today ring hollow.

And yet, as the rabbi of this synagogue, I have a very different experience. There are a significant number of congregants in this synagogue whom I love and with whom I profoundly disagree — sometimes about synagogue policies, sometimes about national politics,

sometimes about Israel. And although we don't always talk about these issues, we also sometimes do— we have had heated discussions and we have agreed to disagree. But no one has raised their voice, now one has turned their back and walked away. In each of these conversations that we are brave enough to have, I learn something. And it goes without saying that we continue to work together on important things concerning the synagogue willingly and joyfully. I am willing to bet that most of you have had similar experiences.

In other words, our synagogue may not seem that diverse -- all Jews, mostly white, mostly heterosexual, often privileged — but we are, in fact of diverse ages, diverse life experience, diverse politics and diverse world views. This is, by the way, I think increasingly particular to Conservative congregations and something we should be proud of. The Reform movement usually supports views that align with the Democratic party ; it's hard to call Orthodoxy a movement, but most Orthodox synagogues, with a few exceptions, have become solidly Republican. Conservative synagogues remain one of few places in which people with divergent beliefs still share common goals and work toward them. We communicate across difference. We build trust. In this difficult and divisive moment in our country's history, I can hardly think of anything more profound or important.

Packer writes, “The most basic way Americans can acquire what Tocqueville called ‘habits of the heart’ is by killing their Twitter or Facebook accounts and spending time in the physical presence of other American’s who don’t look or talk or think like them. Study after study shows that antagonistic groups begin to lose their mutual hostility and acquire trust when they have to work together, as long as they’re engaged in a specific project...”

Jews historically have not shied away from arguments — you know, two Jews, three opinions. Open any page on the Talmud and you will find famous disputants — zugot — couples — Hillel and Shammai, Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Lakish, Abaye and Rava disagreeing about everything under the sun. These were not trivial disagreements and at the same time they did not fracture the community. The sons of Hillel, we are told, still married the daughters of Shammai. Judaism believes that truth is multifaceted.

Earlier this summer my family spent a week rafting on the Colorado River at the base of the Grand Canyon. We were with 10 other people, dwarfed by the splendor of the Canyon and dependent on one another for navigating the river, for food, and mutual assistance — life itself. We talked a lot and got to know each other well but we never discussed politics. It never came up. Politics would have seemed trivial in the face of nature's magnificence and our mutual dependence on one another.

Working together and working through differences is not superficial. It is profound. It is through this practice that we learn to trust one another.

One place we can look to learn about this kind of trust is our Torah. According to many readings of the Bible and to Greek mythology, the human being was originally created male and female — that is, one androgynous being, with a female side back to back with a male side. When God pronounces Adam lonely, He creates the panoply of animals, all of whom Adam rejects as fitting partners. In the end, God performs the first surgery ever on Adam, putting him to sleep and dividing him in half to create man and woman. When Adam awakens he exclaims, “This one at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; She will be called Isha, woman, for from Ish, man, she was made.”

In Greek thought the separation of one androgyne into man and woman is tragic. Instead of perfect unity, human beings are now cursed with eternal longing. Although Christianity does not locate original sin in the moment of the division of man and woman, it nevertheless views

their longing for one another and the ensuing sexual act, absent in the Christian understanding of life in the Garden, as sinful.

In Jewish tradition, the opposite is true. Symbiosis, as we see in the original androgyne, is barren. There is no communication; without sex, there is no regeneration. It is only because the human androgyne is divided into man and woman, that the two can face one another, and it is through the face to face encounter that empathy, partnership, disagreement, progeny, and love are possible. Philosophers like Levinas, Buber, and Heschel, coming from vastly different places, understand the human encounter, face to face, to be the place of encounter with God. Being face to face is necessary to human flourishing.

Not only does being together in community enable us to work together across difference, but there is a different and special joy that comes from being together. Americans uniquely seek happiness as if it were an individual pursuit; we are instructed to follow our bliss. If we find ourselves unhappy, we are told to do more things that make us happy — take a walk, get a massage, go on a vacation.

But one thing I have surely learned in this pandemic is that there is a unique kind of joy that comes from being together with others. We laugh together, rarely alone; although we can sing alone, we can only make harmony together. Playing on a team is not the same feeling as going out for a run. Many of us even choose to do seemingly solitary pursuits, like work or yoga, in coffee shops or yoga studios where we can do them together. Love is not a solitary act.

This summer we attended a family wedding. The joy that we experienced on the dance floor was, to my mind, unique, stronger, more powerful than I usually experience at wedding. It was partly that this groom, who had suffered severe depression, had found himself and found a wonderful partner who loved him quirks and all, and their joy was contagious. But I also think it was the very special joy of being together after long absence, after such a long time of not seeing one another, not celebrating together, not dancing, not having that collective feeling of joy that we create together. If you haven't seen the youtube of the first Broadway rehearsal since the pandemic of the Lion King, google it. You hear the opening chords, you watch the faces come alive, and you weep for joy.

The sociologist Emile Durkheim called this special joy collective effervescence — the sense of energy and harmony people feel when they come together around a shared purpose. We are social animals and our emotions are not individual, they are contagious. As our synagogue came back together at services, in the tent, over lunch, I felt that deep sense of joy people felt, just seeing one another, just being together again. Creating things together, solving problems together — this is some of the deepest fun we can have. And a synagogue, pandemic notwithstanding, is a place in which we come together. The Hebrew word Beit Knesset — means a house of gathering. The word synagogue derives from the Greek roots sun, meaning together, and agein meaning bring — a synagogue is a place that brings people together.

Most of us, even introverts, during this pandemic have felt that something important has been missing — that unique joy of being with others, that chance encounter with a stranger, sharing a meal, singing in unison. Adam Grant writes in the New York Times that “joy shared is joy sustained.” I might add that pain shared is pain eased. A synagogue is a place where we share both and this coming together, this face to face encounter, is necessary to human flourishing.

Finally, I believe that religious community provides a unique container for hope and hope is the thing we cannot live without. One can be hopeful on one's own and some people are more hopeful than others. But sustaining hope over time usually requires the presence of others who lift us out of our own doubts. At moments of despair in my own life, I needed someone else who could say, “You will get through this.”

Hope often taps in to narratives of redemption — our journey from Egypt and slavery to the Promised Land, the birth of the state of Israel after the devastation of the Holocaust. Knowing that we are more than individuals, that we are part of something larger than ourselves, that our story belongs to a larger story of redemption, that when we despair we can tap into that larger narrative — that gives us hope.

Yaffa Eliach, in his moving book, “Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust,” tells the story of a group of hundreds of Jewish prisoners marched out to the forest from the camp where they will be shot and unceremoniously dumped into a mass grave. Among them are a rabbi and a faithless Jew. The Nazis, for sport, call out to the Jews, “Jump over the ditch and we won’t shoot you.” As the rabbi and his friend watched their fellow Jews be murdered, they grab one another’s hands and decide to jump.

They open their eyes and find themselves alive on the other side of the ditch. In shock, with warm tears running down their faces, they turn to one another. “Rabbi, how did we survive? How did we get here? The rabbi answers, ““I was holding on to the coattails of my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather. I reached out and there was a line, like a rope swing. I grabbed hold and it carried me across the ditch. I held on to faith. But you, my friend, how did you get across?” “Rebbe,” he answered, “I held on to you.”

When we hold on to each other, we can traverse ditches. We can do seemingly impossible things. In religious community, we encounter each other. We learn to work across difference. We generate joy. We hold on to hope. In this crazy world of ours, I’m not sure that anything else matters more.

