

## “Some Enchanted Assembly”

UPJ Biennial 2022, Novotel Brighton Le Sands

Rabbi Nicole Roberts, Senior Rabbi, North Shore Temple Emanuel &  
Chair of the Assembly of Rabbis and Cantors of the UPJ Region

It’s an honour to stand before you today. Being with a gathering, *assembled* and singing together in person, is certainly something we’ve learnt in recent years never to take for granted. At least, I hope that’s what we’ve learnt, but sometimes, lately, I’m not so sure. Every week, it seems, I come across another article with a title like: “Two Years Into the Covid-19 Pandemic, Church Attendance is Still Down” or “Six Reasons People Aren’t Coming Back to Church.” And don’t think that these articles don’t have their synagogue equivalents—they do. Maybe you’ve even noticed in your own shul that, other than High Holy Days, nowadays it takes a special simcha, or a dinner, or bells, whistles, and “tap dancing” as my own rabbi says, to really bring people back in the door. And even then... at 100% capacity? Maybe for a few congregations. But that’s not what I gather from most rabbinic groups I’m part of and from colleagues, Progressive and Orthodox.

Explanations abound for the shrinking of in person worship attendance. But I don’t believe that delving into explanations this morning will serve us as well as equipping ourselves with a compelling articulation of what *assembly* is all *about* in our tradition—why it carries weight and import, and how we all might just be underselling it. If each of us, as a Jewish leader, can leave this conference with a better understanding of why it *mattered* that we came together, what *transpired* in each other’s presence, and what it means for Jews to gather, then we’ll have something of great impact to share with our communities that could help turn things around.

What better place to begin than with our parasha, of course. *Parashat Chayei Sarah* begins with the death of our matriarch Sarah, and then with an assembly—a gathering that bears witness to a transaction of great significance. Abraham needs a place to bury Sarah. But despite God’s promise that Abraham would one day own land, thus far he is still a sojourner in a land owned by other people—the Hittites. So Abraham gives Efron the Hittite, *arba me’ot shekel*—four hundred shekels—in exchange for a burial site called the Cave of Machpelah, the first Jewish stake in the Holy Land.<sup>i</sup>

The Torah takes great care to let us know that this purchase was not made *in private*. There were witnesses. Abraham “bowed low to the landowning citizens.” Efron delivered his terms of sale in the *hearing* of all the Hittites *l’chol ba’ei sha’ar iro*—literally, “before all who came to the gates of his city,” a phrase repeated a few verses later when the property itself changes hands before their very eyes: *l’inei v’nei Chet, b’chol ba’ei sha’ar iro*.<sup>ii</sup> Hearing, seeing, gathering at the gates... witnessing so as to be able to bear testimony to the momentous—this is “assembly.” The assembly attests to something’s authenticity—it really happened! The assembly affirms what changes hands, passes down, or passes by. The assembly holds us each accountable. The assembly makes real, makes consequential, makes trust. Assembly makes the thing, around which we gather, matter more. This is what assembly does, and it’s what we’re doing, right here and now.

We’re an assembly. Sometimes we call ourselves a *kahal*, or a *kehillah k’doshah*—a congregation gathered for holy purpose. Scholar Jacob Neusner, z”l, calls us “that sacred

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society that is Israel, the Jewish people”<sup>iii</sup> and describes some of the holy purposes for which our society gathers. We gather for a Pesach seder, a b’mitzvah ceremony, or a wedding. But when Neusner talks about these gatherings, he doesn’t just refer to them as sacred rites, or rites of passage. He calls them *enchantments*—“enchantments of Judaism,” by which he means that we don’t just “attend.” We don’t just “watch.” We don’t just “observe” something transpire. Enchantment means we get *pulled in*. For instance, he says, when we gather around the seder table, “we, here and now, are really living then and there.” We *all* were slaves, we *all* are freed. My father was a wandering Aramean—wait, yours was too? And we’re sitting across the table from each other, *today*? This should astound us, and impact us, and make us see the world differently than before we came to the table. Enchantment means that when we gather for Shabbat dinner, where Neusner says “hunger and satisfaction stand for exile and redemption,” one person’s presence helps bring another out of exile; we leave *changed, affected*. When we gather for *b’rit milah*, we cringe, turn away, or grow faint, why? Because we feel it too, and in feeling it in our own body, we ourselves are once again brought into covenant, *today*.

Neusner’s language of “enchantment” means that mere deeds become gestures. A gesture points to something greater going on that we cannot see or hear—something of profound import that lies beyond words. A deed is “to light a candle,” Neusner says. “A gesture is to kindle a flame to inaugurate the Sabbath. A deed is to eat a cracker. A gesture is to raise a piece of unleavened bread... and to announce that it is the bread that our ancestors ate, when they hastily left Egypt.” There’s more going on than meets the eye, but only if the assembly shows up to attest that it is there—it happened. The land transferred ownership, gesturing toward God’s promise, because *kol ba’ei sha’ar iro*—they all came to the gates of the city. Because they heard, they saw, they bore witness to a transaction and a transition. Assembly attests to authenticity: she *really* became a Jewish adult; he *really* entered the covenant; we *really* were redeemed. Assembly bears testimony to the momentous, and makes the thing around which we gather... matter more.

So why should Jews assemble *for services*? What’s the thing around which we gather? What’s the enchantment that happens *here*, in worship? Maybe if we understood it better, we’d convey it better, and people would feel it more when they’re there. None of us are Jacob Neusners. But maybe we can begin to think like he does, and help our communities do the same. Our Biennial keynote speaker of a few years ago, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, once introduced a group of us aspiring rabbis to a Lutheran pastor and theologian he regarded very highly, named Gordon Lathrop. Years later, this past March, Lathrop published a book entitled *The Assembly*,<sup>iv</sup> in which he articulates what he calls a “spirituality of assembly”—in other words, how to understand “gathering” in a spiritual or theological sense. What’s going on when we gather for worship, beyond what we see and hear? And though he is speaking about Christian services, his understanding is like a Neusner for the post Covid era, and merits articulation in Jewish terms.

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An assembly of prayer—what we call a *minyan*—Lathrop says, is not just a gathering; it’s “an expression of... meanings.” One meaning that a *minyan* bears is that God is present. The Talmud says: “How do we know that when ten people pray, the Divine presence is with them? From the Psalm that says *Elohim nitzav b’adat El*—God stands in the *congregation* of God (Ps. 82:1).”<sup>v</sup> The *minyan* itself attests to, stands for, gestures toward God’s presence among us. That’s our starting point, signalled by the call to prayer, the *Barchu*, which is only recited if a *minyan* of ten is there to be called.

Another meaning our *minyan* expresses is that each of us is standing again at Sinai. God shared the Torah’s teachings with Moses, who shared it with the people; we remove the scroll from the ark and carry it through the congregation. When a parent passes that scroll to a 13-year-old, our assembly bears witness to a transition in Jewish status that we can’t see but we know exists: a coming of age. When we’re called to Torah with the Hebrew name we were given at birth, we are symbolically surrounded by the loved ones of our youth, once again entering the covenant of our people, once again becoming part of something greater than ourselves, and then... we give that gift of belonging to one another, just by being there to bear witness, because if we’re not, then none of this can happen—without a *minyan*, the Torah stays in the ark, and atop the mountain.

What other meanings does the *minyan* stand for? Well, that we belong to a *movement*! When we read or hear the same Torah portion, or recite the same *Shema*, as a *minyan* in Europe, Israel, the Americas, Australia, NZ, and Asia, we become part of Neusner’s “sacred society that is Israel.” We’re affirming that we understand ourselves, in Lathrop’s words, “to be in communion with all the assemblies where this text has lived.” Sure we can read Scripture and recite the *Shema* on our own, but when we step into a *minyan* and recite these, in Lathrop’s terms, “the individual [is] being grafted into the living thing that is assembly.” We would say each of us becomes a branch on the tree of life, transcending time and space. Sound far-fetched? Supernatural? The assembly affirms its authenticity. When you’re among us, you can believe this, and Jews everywhere will support you.

In a *minyan*, you can also believe in *Olam Haba*—that there’s a better World to Come. Our sages held that every Shabbat is a foretaste of the Eden to come at the end of days. *Bayom hahu*—on that day, we’ll know the world’s perfection. We gesture toward that day, Neusner would say, when we ingest the wine’s sweetness, raising up the cup as we recall *ma’aseh v’reisheet*—the Creation, the first Eden. Lathrop calls the assembly itself “a means to see the Day.” Sure, we could spend Shabbat at home alone, but when we share it in community at services, we help others in the *minyan* taste its sweetness too, affirming that the Jewish destiny includes you and me and everyone else who’s come.

The conclusion to the *minyan* also signals inclusion in God’s providence. When we gather at kiddush to tear and share the challah, we’re being fed by God’s manna, reminding us that we’re an object of God’s concern. We feel God’s care in our own wilderness today,

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and by physically *handing* the loaf to the next person, I offer reassurance that God cares about you too; that no matter how hard your present reality, there’s a place for you in this *kahal* where God dwells among us, and things will get better.

But breaking bread also comes with a charge, a responsibility. Lathrop calls the Lutheran version of *kiddush* “the Sending.” We don’t just partake of the bread, or of all the profound meanings our gathering has to offer, and keep them to ourselves; in Lathrop’s words, our “Meal in the assembly turns us toward the hungry others, to be ourselves as bread.” To feed those in need of sustenance and nourishment. *Aleinu*, we sing at the conclusion of our worship. “It is upon us” *I’takein olam b’malchut Shaddai*—“to perfect God’s world.” Lathrop calls the assembly “our training ground for walking in the world.”

God’s covenant, God’s nourishment, Jewish destiny, Jewish peoplehood, grafting onto the tree of life, transmission from generation to generation, inclusion, connection, social responsibility... all this and more is what we reap when we gather. Maybe we lost sight of these meanings and gleanings when we couldn’t gather for so long, or maybe we never articulated them very well in the first place. But we were certainly more practiced at gathering before the pandemic than we are now, and this should concern us. What would have been lost, had our forebears not been so well practiced before the Temple fell? What will happen after the next pandemic, or a war, or the climate crisis sends *us* into exile from one another again? Who will be well practiced then? Who will know the “assembly by heart,” Lathrop asks, remembering what to do when we gather, what it means, and why it’s important? Now, while “we have the unutterable gift of being free to assemble,” he warns, “we need to build securely the ground of those memories.” He asks, or maybe pleads, “Can we see... how important—even urgent—this gathering is?”

*Aleinu*. The urgency is “upon us”—*kol ba’ei sha’ar Novotel*—all who have come here today, leaders of our communities, who’ve now borne witness to what was passed on from Efron to Abraham and Sarah, from Neusner to Hoffman to Lathrop to Roberts and now to each of you. Learn by heart the meaning of Jewish gathering, bring it home to your *kahal*, and may you be met at your city gates, by its enchantments.

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<sup>i</sup> Gen. 23

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iii</sup> *The Enchantments of Judaism: Rites of Transformation from Birth Through Death*, Jacob Neusner, New York: Basic Books, 1987.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Assembly: A Spirituality*, Gordon W. Lathrop, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022.

<sup>v</sup> *B. Berakhot* 6a