

Community of Joy
Parashat Vayakhel
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Naomi noted for us the significant use of the verb קהל as in Vayak'heil -- *to gather* - in today's parsha. The kahal or kehila, gathering is a pointedly human endeavor. Rabbi Harold Kushner first taught me that this verb is used only for human activity. It is not used to describe, say, a herd of sheep or a flock of seagulls. (unless you're referring to the one hit wonder band of 1982).

It's important to note that a k'hila is not a random configuration, like all the people who happen to be shopping at Whole Foods at a given time. Rather it is a group of people who have gathered deliberately and with a common goal. The goals may vary but we are probably most familiar with kehilot who gather for prayer or study or a group action devoted to a social cause.

The status of some gatherings is a little iffy. I never considered my exercise class a kehila. I go, I say hello to the regulars, I exercise, and I leave... And yet, I have noticed some similarities to a kehila. We gather several times a week at the same time and place. I actually even have a *makom kavua*, a fixed place where I stand, behind Judy Lee. If I don't get my spot then my routine is off for the whole morning. (Like when some of you don't sit in your regular seats on Shabbat morning.) But my exercise class did not feel to me like a kehila, a community with significant ties and a common sense of purpose until my mother died. Then, all these women traded in their athletic wear for real clothes and joined the rest of my kehilah filling my home during shiva.

We are built to be in community. We see it in Creation itself: every day something else was created, and every day it was good: Sun and stars, water and dry land, birds and fish and trees and it was all good. Some days it was good twice. Life began with an explosion of creation and innovation and it was full of energy and excitement and it was all good. And with the final act of creation, of *adam ha-rishon*, it was very good. But then, upon closer inspection God offered a more nuanced appraisal: *Lo tov heyot ha-adam l'vado*: It was not good for Adam to be alone. That first human had no partner and suddenly all the good and hopeful and



promising was in danger. Our very design requires an *ezer k'negdo* – a helper, a partner, an other. We were not created to be alone.

This need for relationship with others is not considered a weakness in Jewish tradition. It is, rather a mark of our humanity. Jewish law and custom have developed to meet and to nurture this need for relationship. *Al tifrosh min hatzibur*, Do not separate from the community, Hillel taught. Rabbinic authorities debate who suffers more from this separation, but most agree that we all suffer, both the community as a whole, and the one who holds him or herself apart.

Why do we insist that Mourner's Kaddish must be recited in a minyan? In part it's because any Kaddish praises God, and we can only truly praise God in public, in community. When a mourner, still reeling from a loss, stands and proclaims, *yitgadal v'yitkadash shmei raba* – God's holy Name is magnified and sanctified – he/she is saying I will speak God's praise even in the face of my sorrow, even in the face of my rage. And we as a community cannot help but be moved by such devotion, and so God's Name is indeed sanctified. To make a name great we require not exactly an audience – but someone to hear our praise. Otherwise we're just talking to ourselves.

But you know there's more to it than that. There's a message the kehila gives the mourner, without saying a word: Come be with us as you recover from your loss. Don't lock yourself away. Don't think you can grieve in a dark room by yourself. No matter how fervently you pray you will bring no honor to God that way, and more than that -- you will find no healing. Bring your sorrow and your rage to us, and we will comfort you. We insist, we drag you back to your community. For only in community can you praise God authentically. Only among others can you find healing. So don't be alone.

We are quite practiced at this in Jewish life. We have the infrastructure to respond to all faces of loss and sorrow. We know just what to do for a family sitting shiva or managing with a member who is ill. For many of us it's automatic: Put me on the list. Tell me who's in mourning and I'll show up for minyan and roast a chicken for dinner on the third night. Let me know who has a child or partner in the hospital and I'll drop off a lasagna and stop by for a brief visit. If you're in crisis and need someone to meet you right now for coffee and a long walk, I'll be right over. *Bikkur holim*, (visiting the sick) *nichum aveilim*, (comforting the mourner) *hesed* (acts of lovingkindness), we have the halachik imperatives and we have the well-staffed committees. And they serve us well.

Let me not minimize the importance of that. Empirical studies have demonstrated the healing power of friendship and community. We know from our own journeys the comfort of human touch and a home cooked meal when we are in pain.

But today I want to make a push for a different manifestation of *kehilah*. I don't generally tell you what to do, but I've become convinced of the need to attend to a different aspect of community. To quote the title of an article by Ben Steverman, in Bloomberg News, I suggest: "The world depends on you throwing a party."

That's right. I'm telling you you should host a party. I'm telling you your religion demands it.

As Steverman writes, "Sociologists have been fretting over our fraying social bonds for a while, but the warnings are getting more dire. Research in the Public Policy and Aging Report considered social isolation a public health threat worse than obesity or smoking...Teresa May – otherwise quite busy—appointed a minister of loneliness for the more than 9 million adults in the UK who report they are 'often or always lonely'. In the US an AARP survey found that one in three adults older than 45 is always lonely."

Sociologists debate the reason for this loneliness epidemic. Some conclude that the internet, ironically is the greatest contributor to loneliness. "Our innate desire for community and connection is why we rushed onto social media in the first place." But as scholars from Harvard Divinity School's institution summarize, "young people (those more inclined to embrace social media) are both more globally connected and more locally isolated than ever." It is not just the older generations.

Other experts argue that as a society we have come to neglect the institutions that once supported our communities. We no longer build Elks lodges or union halls. We don't join bowling leagues and we're not enrolling our children in boy scouts or girl scouts. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg notes other social trends that he writes, "make us feel more untethered than previous generations: People are less religious, marrying later, having fewer kids at older ages and more likely to live alone."

Whatever the reason for the growing sense of loneliness we must realize, as Steverman writes, "our jobs and our spouses can't fill this community-size hole in our lives. The missing ingredient is what Ray Oldenburg calls the 'third place' – spots beyond home or work – where people can gather and connect."

Institutional responses to the loneliness are all over the place: Starbucks opening new outlets that are part theme-park part coffeeshop/bar, part hangout. Upscale apartment buildings offer grilling stations, lounges, party rooms.

All that's missing is an invitation. Someone has to say, sit here with me while you drink your coffee. Come watch the game on the big screen in my apartment building's private theater. Steverman again: "The most urgent need is for people who assertively take on the role of host. Every time people gather they are brought into the opportunity to help one another, to do what they couldn't do or think up or heal alone.... The job of host is to fuse people, to turn a motley collection of attendees into a tribe."

I know it's a little intimidating. Especially that part about a motley collection of attendees. So think of it as a mitzvah. Think of it as building kehilah. So invite people you don't know well. Keep everyone's expectations in check. Put out some food and a punch bowl. Turn the lights down and no one will see the dust. Experts recommend experimenting: Country music or jazz? Tuesday evening potluck or Sunday picnic? Do whatever works to create something increasingly rare: a group of people laughing and talking, phones safely secured in their pockets. The only ingredient you really need is the willingness to step up. Be that person. Invite a handful of people, open a bottle of wine and call it a party.

Am I exaggerating when I say it's a mitzvah to build community this way? Listen, we're good at connecting and supporting in time of challenge and sorrow. We know how to respond to grieving and suffering. It's time to focus on the joyful aspects of community. *Because we are in need of community all the time.* We are hungry to connect and not just when we are in crisis.

It is no small thing to be happy. I would suggest that lately it feels like a significant accomplishment to be happy.

R. Beroka of Khuzistan used to frequent the marketplace of Be Lapat, where Elijah often appeared to him. Once he asked Elijah, "Is there anyone in this marketplace who is to have a portion in the world to come?" Elijah replied, "No."

In the meantime two men came by and Elijah said, "These two will have a place in the world to come." R. Bekora went over to them and asked them, "What is your occupation?" They replied, "We are jesters. When we see people depressed, we cheer them up; and when we see people quarreling we work hard to make peace between them." For that they merited a place in the world to come.

It is no small thing to be happy. And it is an act of hesed and community building to reach out and invite others to be joyful with you.