

The Center Cannot Hold: A Call for Community

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I find myself so moved as we join together for the New Year. We arrive for a lot of reasons. For some, it is the prayers, for others the sound of the shofar. But for all of us, it is the feeling of community, the need to be together at least once a year.

And yet, I feel that we live in a moment when community is fraying, when many of the institutions that have helped sustain us in community are being unintentionally abandoned. And we are living at a moment when we need community as we never have before.

So let me ask you a few questions to illustrate my point. In the last year, how many of you had a subscription to a paper newspaper? How about used a travel agent? What about went to a reference librarian?

Internet search has replaced much of what we used to receive from these mediating people and institutions. We have made in many cases an intelligent decision to travel or search more quickly, cheaply, and efficiently. But in making those changes, we have also discarded places and institutions that build community.

Put another way, Rabbi Google can answer questions, but cannot build community.

Things are changing all around us. In our mad rush into the future, we are rushing away from certain behaviors and institutions that sustain us living lives of meaning.

We are lost; separate and separated.

Creating isolation, loneliness, and even depression where we don't need to.

Hillel taught in his own moment of dislocation and communal breakdown: Do not separate from the community. In other words, we need a collective. The sense of belonging is key and we need to make an affirmative choice to be a part of the community.

I see symptoms of our community breaking down. Moments and places that used to be sacred for human connection more and more being abandoned and depersonalized.

One example: My daughter takes ballet. As she has moved into the classes for teens, the hours of those classes has more and more conflicted with dinner. There are two possibilities for my this is. One is that as we have become more and more overscheduled, there is less and less time free for classes. So we've given up dinner as one last bastion in favor of activities.

The other, more disturbing possibility, is that family dinner is a thing of the past. Teens are looking for something to do at what used to be a time to connect with family. So they would rather be at ballet than sitting on their own at home.

Or the change in tour buses. In 1997 I went on a Rabbinic mission through Israel. The bus was one of the highlights of that trip because that was where we talked, interacted. We were Jewish nerds, too, so we sang and had a blast. Fast forward to another Rabbinic mission in 2012. We're all in the bus again. But this time its quiet, as everyone stares at their smartphones, propelled away to the urgency of their home life. Something vital and community building was lost.

Or watching teens text while they are sitting next to each other. I so want them to put down their phones and look each other in the face, but they get propelled away. I was running recently in Bol Park and I saw an adult pushing a child in the swing. Now, I've done my time with small children. Pushing a kid in a swing is boring. But its also a moment where the children speak and ask in ways that give insight into who they are becoming. But this parent was starting as his cell phone, lost in his own world and losing the moment of connection and understanding.

Torah understands the need for community. The book of Genesis imagines the creation of humanity in a way that shows we are social beings who need each other. In the first chapter of Genesis, Adam is a majestic being who builds and creates. His essential commandment is to fill the Earth and dominate it. This Adam forms utilitarian communities to serve a purpose. If there are more efficient ways of achieving an end, than go for it. This Adam quickly substitutes Google for research and Expedia for a travel agent.

By contrast, in the story of the Garden of Eden, we see an Adam who names and notices. This Adam is lonely- God says of him, "It is not good for Adam to be alone." This Adam craves community and a place where his stories and sadness and joy can be held.

Synagogue is a unique kind of community that benefits from the world of First Adam by thinking about budget and numbers and strategic plans. Yet we really thrive when we are about people and the covenantal community so essential to the mental health and well being of Second Adam who craves community.

Synagogue is one of the few places that doesn't care about the transactional and isn't interested in turning a profit off of you. Facebook and Google talk about community. And they do create platform for many good purposes, but their basic goal is to make money off of the time we spend there and the ads we see. Our goal here isn't transactional but more basically human.

Rav Kook notices the way in which our vitality and health is tied up in community when he says:

One who considers severing himself from the people must sever his soul from the source of its vitality. Therefore each individual Jew is greatly in need of the community. He will always offer his life so that he should not be torn from the people, because his soul and self-perfection require that of him. (p. 144) Kook

We have unintentionally separated ourselves from a source of vitality. No wonder we are less for it.

A book called iGen by Jean Twenge recently came out, profiling my children's generation. She points out that for them, and for all of us, the smartphone has become the new mediating institution. She notes the ill effects generated. Loneliness and depression begin to dramatically increase in 2012, the same year the smartphone becomes ubiquitous. Twenge says,

iGen is showing mental health issues across a wide variety of indicators. They're more likely than young people just five or 10 years ago to say that they're anxious, that they have symptoms of depression, that they have thought about suicide or have even [attempted] suicide. So across the board, there's a really consistent trend with mental health issues increasing among teens.

I saw a funny article in the Wall Street Journal making the same point. Igen and Millennials have an aversion to doorbells. They are too sudden and intrusive. Better a text upon arriving than involving the whole house.

Yet it doesn't have to be like this. Google is a great reference librarian but not so good about listening to our troubles. The internet is a fine place to get news but not a good friend. I love getting my groceries from Amazon. Social media in particular has confused us; the world of transactions, of first Adam, has made an appeal to second Adam who craves real relationship. And so we feel lonelier the longer we spend on social media because something deeply unsatisfying is taking place. What we need is human connection and we get is cat pictures and photos of the BEST FAMILY VACATION EVER. We use our technology to get rid of the bank and then throw out community as well.

(4) **"Do not separate yourself from the congregation":** but rather share in their troubles. As anyone who separates from the congregation will not see the congregation consoled (Taanit 11a).

What does it mean to build community? My wife's idiosyncratic definition: community is putting with people who aren't perfect. Which, by the way, means all of us.

I believe Jewish community in general, and Synagogue in particular, is a solution. Because here we strive to build such community, to create a sacred place to hold us and our stories in love.

About a month ago I went to the shiva for Jerry Kamchi. Some of you know him- he was Jay's father, who moved here later in life. Even if you don't know him you may have seen him because he wore a bright yellow M&M jacket to shul with regularity. He was a character. And the Shiva was very special because people listened. They held Jay's stories of his father in love. We laughed too, because our sacred vessel had room for both joy and sorrow. Dale Pearlman shared an anecdote and we listened and held it. Our sacred attention created a space for stories that could bring real comfort to a family in mourning.

Or in our religious school. We have a parent suffering from a severe illness. I won't here go into his courage and strength in this ordeal, but rather about the students who have gathered around his daughter. They were all friends before, but now they are even more tight knit and supportive. A parent from the class called me around a recent hospitalization, worried about her friend and what the students were going through. As we finished talking, she said, "I joined for the religious school. I never knew this was why we needed a Synagogue."

Or the role models we find here. Alice and Rich Stiebel have been married a long time, and they still hold hands and go to Torah classes together. I kind of want to be them when I grow up. Or Al Kuhn, a holocaust survivor, pushing us to remember the Holocaust and especially kristalnacht.

We have here a contrast to the carefully curated world of social media. Here is a broad richly varied community that challenges and inspires.

Like the French community celebrating three consecutive bnei mitzvah this summer, singing and dancing together in a new place they are carving out into a home.

We have allowed ourselves to become isolated- we have separated from the community and worse done so without intentionality.

In seeing how smartphones can make our lives more efficient, we've also let them make our lives more lonely. We've made wise decisions about cost savings and efficiency but given away community unintentionally.

We need a sacred place to tell and learn our stories- isn't that what Jewish continuity is really about?

We need a place to learn how to be better, how to fulfill Abraham's task of being a blessing for the world? Isn't that Synagogues are for?

We need a place to be together amid our loneliness and together to search for God, however we understand that quest? Isn't that a key reason Kol Emeth exists?

Im calling on us to reengage and rebuild

Hillel says don't separate from the community. Well. come to Kiddush on Shabbat. We have the most wonderful afternoon as we gather and eat and share Shabbat together. Or form a havurah- reach out to me or Elaine and we'll suggest some ideas and even some people

Hillel goes on to say: make time for Torah- I think he says that because Torah is the great mediating institution of the Jewish people. So, come to our learning and enrich your life. Or form a Torah study group and contact me or Lisa Peckler to help find teachers, students, whatever.

Volunteer for Hesed or for our homeless shelter in January so you use the Synagogue as a platform to do good in the world

A week or so ago I was sitting in the living room at the end of the day. I'm not sure what I was looking at on my phone. I may have been scanning the articles that come up on my feed. You know, the really important ones about comic book movies and celebrity gossip. Or I might have been playing cribbage on my cribbage app.

Maytal comes into the room. Her eyes are shiny. She isn't crying, but it is close. She's sad. She had a hard day and she is missing her sister who just started college. And I'm looking at my smartphone. Somehow finishing my cribbage hand has become more important than paying attention to my daughter. I look up, and see that she is teary. I put the phone upside down on the table and look at her, face to face.

We've been lost; separate and separating. Creating isolation, loneliness and even depression when we don't need to.

Lets find each other and connect. Let's build connections, friendships, and sustaining communities because we so desperately need them.

Lets see in Kol Emeth a mediating institution for second Adam, a place where we can find face to face relationships of meaning

Then we can have a year of connection, friendship, and of blessing. May it be so.

Lshana Tova.