

## YK AM 5783 2022: HOLY COMMUNITY: What it is and why it matters

Back at the start of April this year, NY Times journalist Michal Leibowitz penned an Opinion piece entitled 'I didn't feel like going but I'm glad I did.' It was, she explained, her 'motto of the moment.' Now I'm sure that there are some of you here who, back in April, were already bounding around the neighborhood in full-on '*back to life, back to reality*' mode [ok, that's an age-specific music reference that just went over the heads of some of you and was a shot of nostalgia for the rest of you]. But many others of you, and maybe, just maybe, this includes a higher proportion of the introverts in the room, might have *thought* about booking some tickets to a show, or going out to a local restaurant with some friends, but instead ended up with a glass of wine and several episodes of a cooking show on Netflix instead. I certainly did. Although it was more often a dram of whisky than a glass of wine.

Leibowitz echoes these sentiments. What I found interesting was the thing that *she* persuaded herself to get out for. She writes: *One recent snowy Saturday morning, I coaxed myself out of bed, into semiformal attire and through the door to synagogue. It was the latest in a series of attempts to force myself to, well, do stuff, the kind of stuff that takes me out of my one-bedroom apartment and into human society. During the service, I stood when everyone else stood, sat when everyone else sat, sang when everyone else sang. I made awkward small talk with my seat neighbor and high-tailed it home before the socializing began in earnest. But once I was safely ensconced on my couch and my frozen feet were slowly turning back to pink, I found I was glad I had gone.*

She admits that every time she pushes herself to go out and interact with people again *it feels as if it's going to be difficult – and it often is, at least a little – but I am always glad I did it.*

If it feels like it is going to be hard, it is because, after two years of our worlds getting much smaller and staying home to help keep our communities safe, psychologically speaking it actually *is* something that is hard that we have to actively work on. We might get frustrated by people around us acting in ways that are not always just as we would like. But, as Leibowitz points out: *“shared social space also introduces the possibility of surprise and the chance of unexpected delight, which is half the joy of living near other people in the first place.”* Think, for example, of folks in your town or right here in your congregation who maybe you've sort of kept up with via facebook posts. And then you bump into them at an outdoor summer concert, or at the farmer's market.

When that has happened to me it has been positively joyful! I've made it a point to go out on the front lawn every week that we've hosted the Farmer's market this season not only because the Bread Guy sells the most amazing sourdough, but because I love bumping into people that I've not seen in *ages*. I missed those spontaneous meet-ups. And even the annoying things, Liebowitz point out, are important. *The way that the behavior of others ... tested our patience and our empathy, reminded all of us, constantly and sometimes gratefully, that **our** wants and needs and concerns were just one person's among billions.*

Brad Stuhlberg, in another NY Times opinion piece also published this past April, points out: *Even before Covid, a stark and disconcerting trend was underway: a decline in meaningful relationships and a rise in social isolation. A 2019 survey found that a whopping 61 percent of Americans reported feeling lonely.* We've embraced certain efficiencies, some of which were furthered by our responses to the pandemic – food deliveries instead of grocery shops, working out at home instead of the gym or at the park. In doing so we've lost many opportunities for the kinds of spontaneous connecting with others that is essential for forming friendships and creating a more connected community. But efficiency without sustainability is not a worthy goal.

Stuhlberg shares the story of Jonathan Tjarks who, facing a cancer diagnosis and thinking about who would be there for his young son if he died, invested in making friends in a “life group” at his church: *“Life group is a different kind of insurance,” he writes. “People talk a lot about medical insurance and life insurance when you get sick. But relational insurance is far more important.”*

Kathryn Smith writes about how hard it is to make new friends as we get older in a piece in The Atlantic. She shares: *The average American spends just 41 minutes a day socializing, but Jeffrey A. Hall, a communication-studies professor at the University of Kansas, estimates that it typically takes more than 200 hours, ideally over six weeks, for a stranger to grow into a close friend.* [maybe that's why Jewish summer camp is such a powerful experience for our kids.] She goes on: *As we get older, the space we used to fill with laughter, gossip, and staying up until the sky grew light can get consumed by more “adult” concerns, such as marriage, procreation, and fully developed careers—and we tend to end up with less of ourselves to give.*

So many of us close ourselves off to the possibility of meaningful new connections because we think we already have all the friends that we need. But anyone who has gone through a divorce, had a loved one die, or whose kids left home and the ‘friends’ that we thought we had because they were the ones we schmoozed with while the kids were playing baseball, or hockey, or football ... well, we might not have the friends that we thought we had.

So we know it is hard to get back out there and it takes effort to make new friends and connections. But we are also increasingly isolated and lonely. So what is the answer? David Brooks, in yet another recent NY Times opinion piece, shares that, when we do push ourselves beyond our comfort and actually make eye contact and speak to strangers, the experience is almost always a whole lot more positive and meaningful than we had anticipated.

Many of us hold back from conversation, especially with someone we don’t know because of our own anxieties about how we come across. But, Brooks shares, *research suggests that when people are looking at you during a conversation, they are not primarily thinking about your competence. They are thinking about your warmth. Do you seem friendly, kind and trustworthy? They just want to know you care.*

Brooks identifies our social isolation as something in urgent need of address. He boldly states: *... the fate of America will be importantly determined by how we treat each other in the smallest acts of daily life. That means being a genius at the close at hand: greeting a stranger, detecting the anxiety in somebody’s voice and asking what’s wrong, knowing how to talk across difference. More lives are diminished by the slow and frigid death of social closedness than by the short and glowing risk of social openness.*

Community in the larger culture has been unraveling and the pandemic intensified a trend that had already been noted. *‘All the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?’*

Jewish community has not been immune to these larger trends. How could it be? We all live in the wider world, and we bring those values for good and for bad into our Jewish spaces and Jewish lives too. Robert Putnam was noting the diminishment of civic organizations as fewer people engaged in locally-based opportunities for community connection back in the 1990s:

*The causes for such declines appear to be aligned with time pressure, economic hard times, residential mobility, suburbanization and the stresses of two-career families. (Windmueller, 2022).*

Jewish sociologist, Steven Windmueller points to some other kinds of communities that have emerged that are filling the void; ones that are online and based on shared values rather than geography. This can be wonderful for professional networking or sharing of hobbies. But it has also led to the echo chambers and the spread of conspiracy theories that have undermined civil society, increased distrust across the board, and actually make it *more* difficult for people who don't share everything in common investing time and energy to connect with each other at the local level.

So let's take a look now at some of the amazing Jewish resources that we have that are right here, in this room. Each and every one of you – the people who are part of the Jewish families who have gathered here to be part of Jewish community. Windmeuller reminds us: Community has been understood as a *sacred organizing concept in Jewish thought and practice. The centrality of community has served as a binding and essential value for the Jewish people.*

Sometimes I get excited – truly excited – by the wisdom that is embedded right in the heart of our tradition that presents itself as an antidote to the ills of modern society. At the very foundation of our tradition is that which the great teacher of the rabbinic Jewish tradition, Hillel, told us was the essence of it all: 'That which is hateful to you, do not do unto others; that is the whole Torah – go and learn it. The rest is commentary.' (B. Talmud Shabbat 31a). This is his rendition of the Torah law, 'Love your neighbor as yourself' – part of the Holiness Code found in Leviticus (and which we will hear read by our teens this afternoon). It gets to the heart of how we treat others. 'You shall be holy because I, the Eternal your God am holy.' This is an aspirational guide to who we are meant to be as a people – as a community.

We cannot love our neighbor if we a) don't notice our neighbor b) don't engage with and get to know our neighbor, c) understand what is hurtful to our neighbor and d) consider what we are capable of doing to be there for our neighbor in their time of need. That is why the Rabbis in the first centuries after the temple was destroyed spoke of a list of mitzvot that were 'without measure' – things that required us to get beyond our own self-centred tendencies and ask ourselves 'what can I do to be of service to you?' On their list were mitzvot like acts of lovingkindness, comforting the bereaved, welcoming the stranger...

This was a moment in time not unlike our emergence from two years of a pandemic. The world as they had known it, centered on sacrificial worship in Jerusalem, had been shattered and destroyed. Our people were scattered in exile in all directions and it would take time to recreate community in new places and new cultures that were not predominantly Jewish. What, if not the spectacle of magnificent ritual on the Temple mount, would hold us together as a people? The answer, they determined, was a life of mitzvot – actions that create connections between us that build strong communities. And simply showing up for each other – being there when we are joyful and when we are mournful, knowing what is going on in each other’s lives – that was the foundation of trust and, in turn, the glue that held community together.

A recent conference that looked to the potential for Jewish community to provide a response to our social loneliness highlighted a number of goals for the work we can do together. Number One is to focus on the ways that we can create community spaces that helps us all feel like we belong. Our mental and physical health, research has demonstrated, benefits from being with others in ways that help us feel truly seen. What we need is a community to identify with that can give us purpose, support for what we are going through, and others to connect and grow with. Allowing people to be themselves creates meaningful connections that are important to bringing people together.

In her address this morning, our temple President, Judy Kalman, spoke of the ways that our congregation – its lay leadership and professional team – are focusing all of our energies in the next few years on making congregational life the antidote to so much that the pandemic took from us. A community that is meaningfully engaged in building the invisible lines of connection that are the foundation for being a holy community – for loving our neighbor as ourself.

Small group connections help us to feel a part of something larger. Your presence in community matters. You matter for who **you** are. So when you get one of those invitations to attend a small group gathering, or help to create a new small group, remember the motto of Michal Leibowitz if you find yourself saying ‘I’m not sure if I feel like going,’ If you can give yourself that little push ‘you’ll be glad that you did.’

This is what it means to be a holy community. It starts with you. It cannot happen without you. It can help overcome the social isolation and those larger cultural trends that are pulling us apart. Join the counter-culture. Invest in holy community. Not just with the vital dollars that help sustain this institution, but with your time,

with your essence, with who YOU are. *Kedoshim tihyu* – we will be a holy community. *Kein y’hi ratzon* – let us make it so!

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