

Yom Kippur sermon-Kol Nidrei-2014-5775
You Don't Have To Bowl Alone; Join A Team
by Rabbi Lisa S. Malik, Ph.D.

"Shabbos cereal." In the Malik-Wyner household, as well as in the households of some other religiously observant Jews I know, this is a phrase we use to refer to those sugary breakfasts that we don't serve to our children on weekdays, but that we do serve on Shabbos mornings, as part of our way of making Shabbos special and different from all other days of the week. In our household, some of my kids' favorite Shabbos cereals are Waffle Crisp, Reese's Puffs, Fruity Pebbles, & Cocoa Pebbles.

Pebbles cereal boxes used to feature images of cartoon characters from the 1960's TV show, The Flintstones, because the cereal's namesake is Pebbles, the lovable red-headed daughter of Fred & Wilma Flintstone. For most children of my kids' generation, Pebbles Flintstone is merely a character on a cereal box. But for me, and for people of my parents' and grandparents' generations, Pebbles and her family were pop culture icons. In fact, everything I learned about bowling (and that's not much) comes from watching reruns of The Flintstones. One of Fred and Barney's favorite leisure pastimes was bowling; in many episodes of the show, they bowl together with other members of the Rockhead & Quarry Bowling Team.

With my 'vast' knowledge of bowling, from The Flintstones and from conversations with friends and acquaintances who love to bowl, my understanding has always been that bowling is a communal activity. Either you bowl on a team that is part of a league, or you go out bowling with friends or family as a fun weekend social activity. That's why the Men's Club is sponsoring a Family Bowling Night on October 19. Bowling is usually done in the company of other people. Even if you bowl on the Wii at home, you usually play with someone else.

So, I was quite surprised when I saw a book in Barnes & Noble, entitled, **"Bowling Alone."**

In this book, **Robert D. Putnam** published the results of a research study that he had conducted, incorporating data from over 500,000 interviews. One of the study's findings was that, over a 25-year period (from 1975 to 2000), attendance at club meetings declined by 58%, the amount of family dinners declined by 33%, and the amount of times that people had friends over to their home declined by 45%. According to Putnam, Americans today sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that have regular meetings, and are less likely to know their neighbors. Americans have become increasingly disconnected from their family, friends, and neighbors. Social capital, the very fabric of our interpersonal connections, has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and our communities. According to Putnam, **the sense of community, in general, is weakening in American society.**

In the book, whose full title is "**Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,**" Putnam claims that more Americans are bowling than ever before, but they are not bowling on teams or in leagues. **They are bowling alone.**

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Judaism doesn't allow for such trends. **Judaism doesn't allow us to bowl alone.** We can only truly "play" if we are **part of a team.**

Just think about what we will be doing tonight and tomorrow. Throughout **Yom Kippur**, we will recite litanies of confessions, known as the *vidui*. As we beat our hearts, we will recite an alphabetical list of transgressions,

**"Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dabarnu dofi..."**

Every one of these confessions is in the plural. We don't say, "*Ashamtj, bagadetj, gazaltj.*" "I have transgressed. I am guilty." Together, we say, "We have transgressed. We are guilty."

We are concerned that God **forgive the mistakes of everyone in the community**, not just the sins that we personally may have committed as individuals.

**We all stand together and recite our mistakes as a collective.**

The Catholic Church has its congregants confess individually, in secluded places that ensure privacy and anonymity. In Judaism, we do it differently. We stand up in front of the entire congregation and admit to our failings and our shortcomings. We recite a list of sins that, collectively, we have probably all committed. And then we sing.

Why? Because **we're all in this together**, because **we are a community** and **we're accountable for each other's failings, shortcomings, and transgressions**, as well as for our own.

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The Yom Kippur morning Torah reading from ***Parashat Acharei Mot*** and the ***Avodah*** service that Rav Chaim will lead us in tomorrow afternoon provide us with more examples of **Jewish communal responsibility**. In order to fulfill his responsibilities as a leader, Aharon HaKohen, the High Priest, sacrificed two goats: one to atone for himself and his family & the other to atone for the entire Jewish community. Aaron didn't just ask God to forgive his individual sins & the sins of everyone else in his family; he also asked God to forgive the sins of all Kohanim, & of all other Israelites.

Of course, even beyond the Yom Kippur examples, there are other indications of the **centrality of community in Jewish life**. There are certain prayers and rituals that **require a minyan**. Unless we have 10 people, we may not read Torah or recite the *Kedushah* section of the *Amidah*. An individual is not supposed to recite the Mourners' *Kaddish* alone. According to Jewish tradition, you may only recite *Kaddish* if you are surrounded by at least 9 other members of your community.

So, according to Jewish tradition, **we are supposed to 'bowl' as part of a team**, not by ourselves.

Admittedly, **it can sometimes be difficult to feel like we are part of a team or community.**

We all **want to belong.** And, on those occasions **when we feel like outsiders,** we respond in our own ways to the feelings of exclusion and loneliness.

We may feel especially awkward when we can't 'walk the walk' or 'talk the talk' and we sense that 'everyone' else is more proficient than we are. We've all experienced this feeling of inadequacy before:

- whether it's at the pick-up basketball game in which you are the last to be picked for the team
- or whether it's at the spinning class where everyone else seems to be effortlessly biking up an imaginary hill and you're still trying to adjust your seat or get your water bottle into place,
- or whether it's at a synagogue service, during which everyone else seems to know the melodies & how to read Hebrew, as well as when to bow and when to keep their feet together, but **you feel like a total outsider,** with your prayer book not even turned to the right page.

And you might feel like even more of an outsider if you don't know many people (or anyone for that matter) in a setting where you already feel inadequate, and it appears that everyone else knows each other. You might feel even worse if the few people who do look vaguely familiar to you don't say "hello" or otherwise acknowledge your presence.

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But then I wonder, **is it reasonable to expect to automatically feel included in any team or community,** whether it's a sports team, an exercise class, a congregation, or the Jewish people writ large?

**Rabbi Brad Artson** wrote an article entitled, "**Religion Lite: Everything You Ever Wanted In Judaism, But Less.**" In this article, Rabbi Artson shares an experience that he had with an unaffiliated family who wanted him to officiate at a family member's funeral. When Rabbi Artson found out that the family wanted the body to be cremated, he explained that he could not do the funeral because cremation is contrary to Jewish law. The family became irate. One family member said, "It would have been nice if Judaism could have been a comfort [for us] at a time like this."

Many of us have this tendency: We want Judaism and the Jewish community to be there for us when we have needs. And **we expect Judaism to meet our specific needs at any given time** even if this means breaking the rules. ....

**But is this fair?** Is it fair for us to be disappointed when Judaism and the Jewish community don't immediately cow-tow to our personal needs & desires? Shouldn't we, at the very least, try to create a place for ourselves within our rich tradition and within our community before we have such expectations or make such demands?

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If you feel like an **outsider**, there are actually **some steps that you can take to feel more comfortable**. There are parallels between a bowling team and a synagogue community that are particularly relevant.

First of all, **joining a team may mean investing in some of your own equipment:** whether it's **your own bowling ball** or **your own tallis or head covering**. While you can always borrow a ball from the bowling alleys & you can always borrow a tallit or kippah from the synagogue, having your own "stuff" enables you to play on a whole other level.

To feel more comfortable on a bowling team, you have to **practice & get together with your teammates often enough to improve your performance and get to know the other players**. When it comes to bowling, you have to go to the bowling alley often enough to figure out how to throw the ball in such a way that you avoid the gutter. Then, you have to keep going in order to get better at hitting the pins just right. And the more times you come, the more connected you will feel to your teammates; if they weren't your friends to begin with, you are more likely to become friends, if you show up at the bowling alley more often.

If you want to feel more connected to your synagogue community, the process is similar; you have to come to shul more often in order to feel like you belong! By coming to services on a regular basis, you become more familiar with the prayers. And once you learn how to pronounce the words and you become more familiar with the melodies, you can then move on to a more advanced stage, during which you can ponder the meanings of the prayers and find your own individual voice, rhythm, and space within the service.

And, even beyond becoming increasingly comfortable with services, you will feel more comfortable with the people of Temple Beth Ahm the more you actually show up! Even if you're more interested in the communal aspects of congregational life than in the religious aspects, the only way you're going to feel more socially integrated into our community is by coming to shul! You should know that it is OK to come here Shabbos mornings J.F.K. ("just for kiddush")!

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**If you feel like an outsider, there is much that you can do** to feel more comfortable in the Jewish community in general, and the Temple Beth Ahm synagogue community in particular. If you feel like an "outsider", think about how you can become an insider & how you can find your place within this community in the year ahead. **Connecting with the team** that is Temple Beth Ahm **can offer a most profound and rewarding sense of belonging**. In this spiritual community, you will discover that there are others with whom you can share holidays, life cycle events, and other experiences.

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But the onus should not just be on newcomers and others who feel disconnected from synagogue life (or who don't feel as connected as they would like to be).

Those of us who already feel comfortable at Temple Beth Ahm have a responsibility as well. How will outsiders ever feel a sense of belonging if **insiders** don't reach out in a welcoming, **inclusive** manner?

Earlier this evening, the **Kol Nidrei** service began with an open declaration that conveyed that we are all in this together, that we are all **part of the same team**. Rav Chaim and I sang the following words, proclaiming that our community is open to all:

"Anu matirin l'hitpallel im ha-avaryanim"

"All of us come to pray, even the transgressors in our midst."

With this annual declaration, **we essentially assert that our community is inclusive and welcoming to all**--- the most moral person & the one who has sinned, the insider and the outsider alike.

On Kol Nidrei evening, we should be reflecting not only on our own shortcomings and opportunities for growth as individuals, but also on our areas for improvement as a community. Tonight is the ideal time to reflect upon the question: **Are we doing the best that we can to be an inclusive community?**

Some of you might have seen the article about Temple Beth Ahm's sanctuary renovation in the September 9 issue of the NJJN. The headline read, "Renovation reflects temple's 'inclusiveness.'" Lara Moehlman, the reporter, referred to our shul's **"heightened attitude of inclusivity."** In her words, "With input from the renovation committee, [Michael] Berkowicz decided that the shul's high bimah and straight pews, all facing forward, no longer reflected the congregation's personality. That is why the renovated sanctuary was designed with a half-circle formation," so that it feels like an embrace of inclusivity. The ramp for handicapped-access is another feature of the design that highlights the inclusive nature of our community.

Being an inclusive community means welcoming everyone to Temple Beth Ahm: whether they are guests or members. The curves in the new design, as well as the new ramp, express this ethos...

(PAUSE.)

But design can only go so far.

Ideally, the **inclusive** elements in our new sanctuary should inspire us to be inclusive in our attitudes and behaviors to all who enter, not just to the people we already know. We should strive to be inclusive to all types of people, whether they are Jews by birth, Jews by choice, or non-Jewish people who are married to or are part of the extended families of Jewish people.

We should **ask ourselves if we are being as welcoming as we can to all individuals** in our midst, regardless of religious background, regardless of emotional or physical disabilities, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, regardless of level of Jewish education or religious observance.

I am hopeful that our inclusive sanctuary design will inspire us to keep striving to be an inclusive community: to cultivate a spirit of inclusion so that all who want to be part of our community can live fully integrated Jewish lives and be fully embraced:

not only by our pews, but by each and every one of us.

In the coming year, 5775, **let's all strive to connect** with each other as part of the Temple Beth Ahm community. **Let's not settle for bowling alone & let's not make others feel that they are alone when they come here to 'bowl'.** Belonging to **this team and making others feel that they are also connected will fill our lives with blessings that are beyond measure.**

Ken Yehi Ratzon.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.