Rabbi Marwick’s Shabbos Shuva Drasha 5780

Tefilla B’Tzibur: The Benefits and Responsibilities of Being Part of a Community

Avoda shebalev, service of the heart, is the definition of tefilla (prayer) in the Torah. Rambam lists prayer, as a Biblical mitzvah, fifth in his listing of all mitzvos in Sefer HaMitzvos. Ramban considers tefilla a Rabbinic mitzvah, but adopts the same definition of service of the heart. By definition then, tefilla is a very personal action. The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim recommends spending some time alone (hisbodedus) to prepare for prayer.

So why, then, should we daven with a tzibbur? Because being part of a tzibbur enhances the power of tefilla in many ways. The gemara in Brachos 8a says that the time that a tzibbur davens is considered an ‘eis ratzon’ (a favorable time), and that Hashem never rejects the tefilla of a group. Hashem’s presence is found in shul and anywhere a minyan congregates for tefilla. Rabbi Ami says (Taanis 8a, Rashi) that an individual’s tefilla is not answered unless they have real and full kavana, but with a tzibbur kavana is not as crucial. The Chofeltz Chaim noted that (in his time!) people were very rushed, which inhibits kavana, so minyan is that much more necessary.

Is minyan an actual chiyuv (obligation) or just a hiddur (enhancement)? Rashi understand Pesachim 46a to say that a person must travel 4 mil (about 72 minutes) when on his way, and 1 mil (18 minutes) out of his way for a minyan, and Tosfos, Rambam, and the Tur agree. On the other hand, the Maharil and Rav Henkin hold that there is benefit to davening with a tzibbur, but this requirement may only be for one who is not fluent in prayer himself. The Shulchan Aruch unusually uses the word ‘yishtadel’, he should try, not that he is obligated, but on the other hand it seems like one is exempt only if he is ‘oness’ (forced). It is regarded that the Shulchan Aruch does regard it as a mitzvah. Rav Moshe Feinstein was asked whether a talmid chochom could daven shacharis alone if he stays up learning very late, and he emphasized the mitzvah and obligation of tefilla b’tzibbur. Rav Chaim Kanievsky agrees that it is an absolute obligation, and the word yishtadel in the Shulchan Aruch emphasizes that one must increase the level of effort to accomplish this mitzvah. (The Rambam also uses yishtadel to refer to doing teshuva, which is a clear mitzvah and obligation.)

What takes priority: kavana or minyan? Rav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul says that while tefilla with kavana (without a minyan) is preferred, this is only on an occasional basis, and the general practice must be to daven with the tzibbur. Rav Moshe Feinstein held that as long as you have basic necessary kavana, minyan is more important than better kavana because it is an absolute chiyuv.

What if you are traveling, knowing that you will miss tefilla betzibbur? Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach said one should not travel to places without a minyan, unless it is for an important reason.

It is encouraged for women to daven with a tzibbur, but not a chiyuv.

What is the special zechus of people coming together to daven? The Sefer Hakuzari says that in a tzibbur people’s tefillos can complement one another, to achieve a complete tefilla. Hillel said that one should never leave the tzibbur because you cannot depend only on yourself. Counting sefiras haomer was placed so that it is joined to the maariv of the tzibbur. Sherry Mandel wrote about Sharansky’s visit one summer to Camp Koby, a camp for bereaved children. When asked how he survived the terrible conditions of the gulag, he said that “he had faith that he was part of a community, of people he had never even met from all around the world, who cared enough to make sure he know that he was never alone.” The Ibn Ezra cites Avraham’s willingness to daven for Sodom as long as there were ten people per city as proof of significance of ten for a minyan. The Maharal understands tefilla to mean thinking deeply, and we do not just think deeply about ourselves and Hashem but also about our community. The Magen Avraham says before one begins to daven, one should accept upon himself the mitzva of ‘ve’ahavta lerei’acha kamocha’, love your friend as yourself.

The Alter of Kelm wrote that a person who wants to merit a good judgment will dedicate himself to the klal, making himself indispensable. Rav Yechezkel Levenstein said this is hinted to in the pasuk ‘Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem’ (you are **all** standing this day); if you are unified you will survive the judgment of Rosh Hashana. The Ponevezher Rav, even when he was in the hospital awaiting surgery, wanted to begin new tasks for the tzibbur, to guarantee the success of the surgery and that he would live. The Zohar in Parshas Noach likewise says that if one is an essential part of the community, he will not be judged for his actions alone. And the Panim Yafos says that counting people individually is dangerous because the people become judged as individuals instead of part of the tzibbur.

Kli Yakar points out the when it says that we entered the covenant it uses the singular, l’avrecha bivris, because of the concept of arvus, being responsible for one another. The Meshech Chochma points out that the Torah was given to the Jewish people as a unit, which can only be fulfilled when they join together, because no one person can do all the mitzvos (kohein, king, house owner, etc). There are two famous meshalim regarding people being a unit. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai gives the mashal of two people in a boat. One begins to drill under his own seat, and tells others to mind their own business because it is under his seat. The Yerushalmi Nedarim 9b says taking revenge on another Jew is like the right hand cutting off the left hand.

We all know the famous Rashi on ‘vayichan shum Yisrael neged hahar’ (Israel camped (singular) at Har Sinai), like one man with one heart. Rav Hutner points out that there is a singular verb used for the Egyptians running after Klal Yisral, but there Rashi reverses the order, saying with one heart like one man. The Egyptians were unified because of a shared mission, unlike the shared identity of Klal Yisrael. Rav Soloveitchik wrote that in some cases we can greet or respond to greetings even during the recital of the shema, because recognizing someone does not contradict the performance of accepting the yoke of Heaven. The egla arufa also teaches us that we are responsible for one another, we should take care of strangers in our city. Rav Yisrael Salanter said that if someone speaks lashon hara in the Beis Medrash in Kovna, Jews will be mechallel Shabbos in Paris. The gemara in Kiddushin, and codified in Rambam’s Hilchos Teshuva, says we must imagine the world is in the balance and one’s next mitzvah can tip the scales. The Maharal notes that the wicked son of the seder is called this because he separates from the community. The Medrash Tanchuma brings a mashal that a single reed is easily broken, but a bundle of reeds is virtually impossible to break. Esther asked the Jews to gather (Knos), because Hashem listens to a united tzibbur. Haman came when the Jews were not united (mefuzar umeforad). Similarly Kli Yakar says Amalek came when Jews were in Refidim=Peridim, scattered and not united. Rav Moshe Tzvi Neriah, a talmid of Rav Kook, said the Jewish people captured Yerushalaim in the Six Day Was, because the army and the world Jewish community were united then, but not in 1948. As Prime Minister Levi Eshkol said, “The unity of our people has been forged anew in these days.”

Klal Yisrael as an entity is beautiful. Rav Yaakov Galinsky, quoting the Ran, said that Moshe’s sin at Mei Meriva was calling Klal Yisrael ‘hamorim’, the rebellious ones. Even if each and every one of them was rebellious, the tzibbur as a whole cannot be called rebellious. Rav Yisrael Salanger says on the pasuk in Shir HaShirim, kulach yafa ra’yasi, that Klal Yisrael as an entity is a tzaddik, a gaon, a kadosh. Rav Elya Lopian once passed the Mediterranean Sea, and said—look how magnificent it looks—but if you took a cup, the water would be murky. This is Am Yisrael. And Balak tried to place Bilam where he could only see part of Klal Yisrael, so the unity of the whole would not be appreciated. It is the tzibbur that gives the Jewish people eternity (Tolstoy: “A Jew is eternal; he is an embodiment of eternity.) {It occurred to me when writing this summary that, in English, ‘eternity’ and ‘entirety’ are composed of the identical letters. JS}

When Moshe tells Klal Yisrael that he is not only making a covenant with those who were there, but also for future generations, part of this is accomplished by teaching our children. But it is more direct than that. Rav Schwab notes that, because of cellular turnover, our bodies are not the same as the bodies we had when we were children. But would it be wrong to point to our hand and say this is the hand I broke when I was 6? Similarly for Klal Yisraoel, the connection between all of Klal Yisrael through the generations makes us a part, metaphysically, of everything that happened, happens, and will happen to the Jewish people.

Rav Soloveitchik writes that there is a special kapara for the Jewish people as a people, and to achieve that kapara one has to connect to the tzibbur. Fast days remind us of the tzibbur, which is why we invite even the excommunicated to daven with us on Yom Kippur. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein notes that the gemara states that a fast that excludes the sinners is not a fast. It is not enough for those who follow the Torah to beseech Hashem for mercy; the entirely of the Jewish community must be included in the prayer. Moshe prays for the entire nation after the sin of the spies. When we ask Hashem for mercy, the only proper way to ask and be answered is to include the entire nation. On Yom Kippur, we must have in mind the entirety of the Jewish people, regardless of the religious observance of any particular Jew. This is why minyan is learned from the Meraglim who were evil—knesses Yisrael includes everyone.

There are two ways to become different and do teshuva. One, emphasized by the Rambam, is that we change our character as individuals. The second, as articulated by Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, is that we connect to Am Yisrael, metaphysically. We then become part of something larger than ourselves, something eternal and timeless and holy.