The Gift of Community

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In the summer of 2003, I moved to Israel to begin my rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College. I had just graduated from college and was ready for a new start. It's painful for me to remember, but my college experience was pretty lonely. I was a shy kid from Santa Fe, New Mexico, who found myself in a preppy liberal arts college in New England, where most students were athletes and your team was your main social circle. I arrived in Jerusalem with 65 other rabbinic, cantorial, and education students, and I realized something right away: these were my people. These were people who cared about the same things I did. These were people who were excited to explore Israel and were eager to study Bible and Talmud. These were people who would spend hours singing at the Shabbat dinner table, and entertain themselves by making up silly Hebrew puns. It was a Jewish nerd's heaven. And it wasn't just that we had common interests. Perhaps because of our shared love of Judaism, we also had a shared understanding of how we wanted to relate to one another. When I got sick soon after arriving in Jerusalem, a classmate whom I had met once or twice arrived at my door with food and supplies. When another classmate had to be hospitalized, we all took turns visiting her. We became a community almost instantly because everyone had a

sense that we needed one another and needed to show up for one another. Being part of that community made living in Israel during the Second Intifada not only bearable, but fulfilling and interesting and joyful.

The contrast between my experiences in college and in rabbinical school affirmed what we all know to be true: human beings are social animals. We need community. In the Book of Genesis, after Adam is created, God says, "*lo tov heyot ha'adam l'vado*. It is not good for the human to be alone. I will make a fitting counterpart for him" (Gen. 2:19). Our Torah recounts the journey from the creation of that single human being to the formation of the People of Israel. The Torah contains multitudes, but one of its essential themes is community: who should be in community, how we should be in community, and why we should be in community.

Yom Kippur is a wonderful day to explore these questions. After all, it is the day on which the most Jews gather together - the regular participants and those who come to shul once or twice a year, and everyone in between. In fact, as Rav Soloveitchik declares, "The communal atonement effected by the very day of Yom Kippur… is compromised if any members of the Jewish people are excluded."[1] On Yom Kippur, we gather as an

[1] https://www.brandeis.edu/now/2008/october/sarnaletters.html

agudat achat, a single spiritual unit - the long-time members and the new, those born Jewish and Jews-by-Choice, the skeptics and the believers, the in-person and the livestreamers - to do the work of seeking atonement. It is the ultimate group project.

Our communal observance of Yom Kippur is a model for the kind of community we hope to be all year round. Today's Torah portion, from the end of Deuteronomy, was chosen by the Reform movement not only because it describes a process of repentance and return for the Israelites, but because it also describes this kind of community. As our machzor says, "In Deuteronomy 29-30 we experience a stirring moment of communal solidarity, as all Israel stands before God to make a covenantal oath that includes future generations.[2]" Here are the opening verses:

אַתֶּם נִצָּבִים הַיּוֹם כֻּלְּכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

"You stand this day, all of you, in the presence of Adonai your God–your tribal heads, elders, and officials; every man, woman, and child of Israel; and the stranger in the midst of your camp; from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water–to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God… And not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath, but with each one who stands here among us this day in the

[2] Mishkan HaNefesh, Yom Kippur, pg. 264.

presence of Adonai our God, and with each one who is not here among us this day" (Deut. 29:9-14).

The Torah, normally pretty terse in its language, goes out of its way to hammer home its first point: everyone is part of the covenant – everyone. The leaders and the regular folk, all genders, all ages, all professions, the non-Jew who lives among them, even the people who didn't show up, or haven't shown up yet – *everyone* is part of this covenant.

If we take this teaching seriously, we continuously work to make our synagogue a place of radical inclusivity, stretching our arms open wide to all who walk through those doors. Beth Am's architect, Goody Steinberg of blessed memory, built this beautiful sanctuary in the shape of a tent, with windows all around. It's meant to remind us of Abraham and Sarah's tent, which was open on all sides so that they could welcome travelers from every direction. It is a call to make Beth Am a place that welcomes those who come from all directions, from all walks of life. It is easy for communities to become insular, whether out of fear or complacency. But Jewish tradition insists that we turn our gaze outward, always looking to make our tent bigger.

There is, of course, a challenge that comes with this obligation to be inclusive. The more diverse a community is, the more opportunities there

are for conflict to arise. For any community to endure and thrive, it has to learn and relearn to resolve these conflicts in constructive, healthy ways. Fortunately for us, Jewish tradition has a lot to say about how to live in community, particularly with people we don't agree with. You can insert the joke about two Jews, three opinions here. Somehow, Jews have managed to live together in spite of our differences for thousands of years. Here are just a few of Jewish tradition's time-tested rules for living with other people.

First, look for common ground. It has become increasingly normal in this country to mistrust or even hate those who have different political views from us. But it is still possible to care for, even to befriend, a person whose beliefs are radically different from ours. I like to remember the friendship between Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia. It would have been easy, and understandable, in my opinion, for them to hate each other. After all, not only did their opinions on the law clash, but those opinions really mattered: they became law. Yet somehow, they found a way to love each other. "In *The Essential Scalia*, Judge Jeffrey Sutton, a former law clerk to Scalia, recalled a visit to Scalia's chambers. The Justice mentioned he had two dozen roses to deliver to Ginsburg for her birthday, a tradition that went back many years. Sutton remarked, 'What good have all these roses done for you? Name one five-four case of any significance

where you got Justice Ginsburg's vote.' Scalia replied, 'Some things are more important than votes.'"[3] Their common background growing up in New York, their shared love of opera, and their true and deep respect for each other superseded their political differences.

In the Talmud, we read that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, two rabbinic schools, disagreed on a number of legal matters, including who a person was allowed to marry and the laws of ritual purity. In spite of their disputes over pretty significant legal issues, the Talmud tells us that they remained in relationship.[4] They married each other's daughters and ate in each other's houses, even though they disagreed about who was kosher to marry and what dishes were kosher to eat from! It might seem inconsistent or hypocritical for these sages not to abide by their own rulings, but they understood that maintaining relationships had to be their highest priority. After all, laws are only meaningful when there is a community to accept and live by them.

Synagogues thrive when they can be like Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. Those who have different views on Israel, for instance, can study Torah together. Democrats, Republicans and Independents can feed the hungry together. Congregants of different backgrounds, interests, and

[3] https://pacificlegal.org/antonin-scalia-and-ruth-bader-ginsburgs-friendship/
[4] BT Yev. 13b

opinions can come together in worship, as we are doing today. Relationships are built and sustained through these simple acts of being and doing together, thinking our own thoughts but sharing common ground. Then in moments of conflict, if we can draw on our memories of trust, cooperation, kindness, and concern, it will make it easier to voice our differences without demonizing each other, and hopefully find a way to move forward together.

Jewish tradition teaches us to keep our differences in perspective and not to allow them to overshadow our commonalities. But we are also taught not to err in the other direction by ignoring our differences, avoiding conflict and hoping it will just go away. That's a second lesson for living in community. In 1948, when Israel declared itself an independent nation, it was assumed that the new government would draft a constitution. But the constitution was never written. Law professor Yaniv Roznai explains that, "Some people, like [Israeli founding father David] Ben-Gurion, objected to the idea of a constitution because they feared that if you would now have to sit and debate all the contentious issues regarding the nature of the state, it would cause great division among the people at a time when the nation must be united against different forces."[5] Israel's leadership decided not to

[5] https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-730474

try to resolve the differences of opinion about how Israel should function as a country, and in particular, what the role of religion should be in the new state. Sadly, the attempt to avoid conflict in 1948 only postponed it; Israelis, particularly secular and ultra-Orthodox Israelis, are as divided today as they ever were, and it seems that there will have to be some kind of reckoning before too long. Healthy communities, like healthy marriages, need to express differences and resolve them, so they can move forward.

I bring up Israel's lack of a constitution because a third time-tested method for living in harmony with others is to establish common rules and standards of behavior that we all agree to abide by. Even if we agree on nothing else, our acceptance of the community's rules ensures everyone's safety and well-being. That's why attacks on the judiciary, like those we have seen in Israel and in the US, or on democratic processes like the peaceful transfer of power, as we saw on January 6, 2021, are so scary. Without agreement on foundational principles like the rule of law, societies can collapse into tyranny or anarchy. It is up to the community, to all of us, to affirm and reaffirm our laws and values, and to insist that every member of the community do the same. The insurrectionists who attacked the Capitol on January 6 are tried and convicted in court. The Israeli

government is met with thousands of protesters, week after week, who say, “We are not going to let you destroy our democracy.”

Synagogues, too, are strongest when they uphold shared understandings of how their members interact with one another. And we are blessed with beautiful guiding principles, spelled out in loving detail by our Sages, who in spite all of their debates and disagreements, were pretty unanimous when it came to how we ought to treat one another. Here are just a few of our most cherished principles from the Bible and Talmud: “*Olam chesed yibaneh* - the world is built on lovingkindness” (Ps. 89:3). “Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, and loving humankind…” (Pirkei Avot 1:12). “Do not judge your fellow human being until you have reached his place” (Avot 2:4). When you do pass judgment on others, judge them *l’chaf zechut*, on the side of merit (Avot 1:6). That is, tip the scale in their favor. Give them the benefit of the doubt; assume that they have good intentions and motives. “Guard your tongue; be careful in your speech, for life and death are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 21:23;18:21). Don’t let anger at others fester within you. If they’ve done something that hurts you, speak honestly with them about it, but do so privately, tactfully, and sensitively, without shaming them (Lev. 19:17, Ar.

16b, Avot 2:10). Don't do to others what you wouldn't want done to you (Shab. 31a). That is to say: love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18).

We all have a role to play in defining and reinforcing the standards of behavior that we expect of ourselves and one another. Judaism has long advocated for a sort of positive peer pressure to encourage people to behave morally. Each time we act according to those standards, we strengthen the sense of what kind of behavior is normal, expected, and desired in our community. We're all responsible for upholding the values of the community, lovingly and respectfully helping one another to live by them.

One final lesson about how to be in community is actually about why we are in community, particularly this one. The lesson is, focus on our common purpose, the greater purpose that is our reason for being. Do you know what Beth Am's mission is? Many of the Beth Am staff put it in our email signatures, so we can be reminded of it often: "We strive to live as a holy community whose study and practice of Judaism inspires and challenges us to 'do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God' (Micah 6:8)."

I love this community, and I love the purpose that brings us together. We are here to create a space for each of us to live our Jewish values, to

learn and grow as people and as Jews, to help us all live meaningful, purposeful lives, and to pursue the mission of the Jewish People, which is to bring more justice, more kindness, and more humility into the world. Each of us might bring our own needs to this place: the need for companionship, the need for spiritual uplift, the need for bagels and cream cheese. But we fulfill our own needs so that we, as a community, can fulfill the needs of the world. As the author and theologian Frederick Buechner writes, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”[6] Beth Am is the place where we listen for God’s call. It is the place that nourishes our deepest self; and it is the place that summons us to go beyond ourselves to serve others.

Beth Am is by no means perfect, but I have seen this congregation fulfilling its mission in so many ways. I want to tell you about two particular examples. The first one happened just this year, when a family who was new to the congregation was preparing for their son’s Bar Mitzvah. The problem was, they didn’t really know anyone here and didn’t have a lot of family coming into town, and so they had a very short guest list. But they wanted to celebrate their son’s Bar Mitzvah in community. So Cantor Shpall rallied the troops, and they answered the call. On that Shabbat morning,

[6] *Wishful Thinking,* pg. 119.

around 50 of our members came to celebrate with this family, whom they had never met. Even congregants who usually participate in our services virtually because of health concerns showed up. It was, by all accounts, a moving, joyful, prayerful experience for everyone, and this family felt that they were welcome here, that they belong to and can count on this community.

The other example I want to share is about a member who joined our community about a decade ago. She came to Beth Am to study for conversion to Judaism. She was single, with no children and no family close by, and one of the things that drew her to Judaism was the sense of community. Through her conversion process and thereafter, she became a beloved member of this congregation. In her conversion statement, she wrote, “I can not recall a happier and more positively engaged time in my life! I am grateful for... the people who I have met at Beth Am, who have welcomed me and personally reached out to me about events and social justice programs and made sure I had someone to share the Holidays with. I have engaged with life again and feel energized. I feel that I have a purpose and a safe home with my Jewish Community.” When she was diagnosed with a terminal illness, her community was there for her. Congregants fed her, drove her to appointments, managed her finances

and affairs. One couple even had her move in with them during the worst part of her illness. Her last days were during the first few months of the pandemic, and even then, when everyone was supposed to stay home, congregants refused to leave her side. She was loved and cared for, held in the arms of this community until she drew her last breath.

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"You stand today, all of you, before Adonai your God…to enter into the covenant of your God יהוה" (Deut. 29:9-11). This covenant is a great gift. It holds in it the promise of a life of blessings: a life of meaning, joy, love, and peace. But it's a gift that must be shared. The words of Deuteronomy are written in the plural because we can only live out this covenant together, as a holy community. Holy doesn't mean homogeneous, and it doesn't mean conflict-free. A holy community commits itself to working together, in spite of its differences, towards a holy purpose.

We live in difficult times, times of conflict and division and hate. So it is all the more important to remember what a precious gift we hold. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: "A community is like the ark of Jewish tradition. We lift it, and discover that it is lifting us."[7] On this Yom Kippur, let us promise to lift up this community together.

[7] *Celebrating Life,* p.41