

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
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### The Covenant of a Caring Community

I recently finished the first volume of a five-volume biography. I had mistakenly thought it was only three volumes (only four have been published so far). But now I wish it were ten, because it's the greatest biography I've ever read. Any guesses? It's Robert Caro's biography of President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

I keep thinking about the way Johnson describes describes the small town in the Texas Hill country where he grew up. LBJ said, "People know when you're sick and care when you die." Let me say that again. "People know when you're sick and care when you die." As we begin a year at Kol Rinah dedicated to community, I wonder, isn't that what we all want? For people to know when we're sick and care when we die? To be known, and noted, and cared about, and missed when we're gone?

I've never lived in the kind of a small town Johnson grew up in, but I share that magical, rose-colored nostalgia American culture has for small-town life. It's the same bittersweet collective nostalgia we, American Jews, have for the shtetl, the small Jewish village of Eastern Europe that existed in a time now vanished, in a world now destroyed.

Some of us here may have grown up in such a town, but most of us did not, and virtually none of us here still live in that kind of a place.

But we still crave community, and if we don't, it's often because we've never even experienced deep community, we've never felt the real thing. Facebook, social networking and virtual communities are digital approximations of community, and they're terrific at fostering community across geographic boundaries. What if we spent even a quarter of the time we spend on Facebook instead being physically present and building community with people? There is no substitute for two people talking face to face, for friends breaking bread across a table, for a room full of people singing their prayers and hopes and dreams as their many voices become one.

What happens between these walls, between all of you, between all of us—that's the "new" community, or at least, it could be, if we build it and live it, together. It's intentional, not circumstantial. We're all choosing to be here.

What does, what can, community look like for us—between these or other walls, between each of us? And what do we need community for?

LBJ's Johnson City, Texas, where people "know when you're sick and care when you die" is an important start for a vision of community. Often, the only way we know when you are sick is if you or someone else tells us. But it's not enough for people to know when you're sick—a real community helps take care of its sick. We do that some--and I want to say a huge thank you to the many people here who do this work, as part of our tireless Chesed Committee, and also on their own. And yet, I believe that we can do more, and better. We need more people willing to call and visit and cook and deliver and drive. We need more people who see themselves as builders of sacred community in this holy way.

The other reason we don't do enough is because we're not given the chance to do much, because people find it hard to accept help, and find it harder to ask for help. We build

community when we offer help. But we also create community when we *ask* for help. To paraphrase Lyndon Johnson's predecessor John F. Kennedy, ask what you can do for your community, and but *also*, what your community can do for you!

I know a family that recently had a new baby, and I offered to have people from the shul make some meals for them. The meals, I know have been so helpful, and what I might love best is that most of the people making the meals and delivering them didn't even yet know the family receiving them. Those who cooked knew they were cooking up community, and the family that accepted the meals felt the embrace of community at a joyous yet stressful time.

Please, I ask you, let us all know when you need help, and let us help. Think of yourselves as messengers--when you hear of someone who could use the embrace of community, let us know, and help be a part of that embrace.

In a small town people cared when someone died, because in a small community, the loss of any person was a tear in the fabric of the community, because each person was a thread of that fabric, by their presence in that community. If I want people to care about me when I die, I have to weave myself into the fabric of a community—I have to be there so much that my absence is palpable. There's no particular thing I must do beyond simply being present and being a part of the community. But there's no substitute for showing up.

The covenant of a caring community is that you'll help when you can, you'll accept help when you need it, and you'll be there, you'll show up. Weaving the fabric of community takes time. Learning about others, becoming known yourself, is an investment of time and energy. But I think, no, I know, this community is worth your investment, and mine, because the potential is so huge--for each of us, and for all of us together.

Community, though, is not solely for the benefit of the "members," and I use that word in a loose, not technical sense. If we are only for ourselves, what are we? the sage Hillel famously asks.

A Jewish community like ours must see its mission and purpose as not just for those who are already part of the community, but for those who are not yet part of the community. We must be a place that welcomes not only regulars, but welcomes anyone, regardless of their Jewish observance, their abilities and disabilities, the color of their skin, or who they choose to love. And welcoming doesn't mean "permitting to sit in our chairs." Welcoming means smiling, talking, asking, sharing, offering, helping, smiling, explaining, embracing, and smiling. Did I mention smiling—no matter what? Ironically, welcoming does not actually have to involve using the word, "welcome." And welcoming is not only the rabbi's job. It's not only the greeter's job. It's not only the membership committee's job. It's everyone's job all the time. It's your job.

So let's practice for a minute. Turn to each person around you, say hello, introduce yourself with your name, wish them a Shana Tova, a good year, and say, "I'm so glad you're here." There's your script (because it can be hard to figure out what to say). Don't forget to smile! Ok, go!

And why? What's the point of this? Community is certainly an end in itself. And engaging Jews in Jewish life and Jewish community is its own laudable goal. But we must not only be for ourselves, but collectively, we can do more for our larger community and our neighbors than we could do on our own as individuals. We have a long, robust commitment as Jews to repairing the world, to making the world as it is now more like the world as it should be,

or put differently, to make God's presence manifest and felt on this world by making our world a world where clear justice and abundant kindness kiss.

Together, we can accomplish so much more than we can by ourselves. My prayers, my work, my caring, mean something. Our prayers, our work, our caring, can remake the world.

And here's how teshuvah—our own, personal turning and repentance, renewal and reflection fit in. Our personal teshuvah “is only part of a larger, more epic project,” to quote Rabbi Noa Kushner, of The Kitchen in Marin County, Ca, and one of the most innovative rabbis in the biz. She asks, “How would it change our grasp of the hard slog of teshuvah—of looking within, admitting where we went wrong, and approaching others and God to make it right—if we believed that this personal work came with ultimate significance, not just for our own lives, but also for”<sup>1</sup> humanity, not to mention our own community? If we work on ourselves for ourselves, but also for each other, then our work matters that much more.

Not all of you here are “members” of Kol Rinah. There are people in town just for the holiday, others who are checking us out. To all of you--welcome, and I'm so glad *you're* here!

Not everyone can or will want to be a part of this blossoming community. We are all members of so many different overlapping communities. But for those of you are interested, this year at Kol Rinah, our theme will be community. We'll be studying about community, and creating community, building community one conversation at a time, one communal moment at a time. And the theme of community will infuse our meetings, our prayers, our programming, and our communications. I'd love to hear your ideas about how to make Kol Rinah a stronger, more closely-knit community, as well as a more open, more inclusive community. I need *your* help!

I want to tell you something that I love about Kol Rinah. When it's time for quiet personal prayer, as it will be in a few moments when we begin Musaf, there are an amazing number of people who take that time seriously, who use it, whether they are saying the words in the book, in English or Hebrew, or the words in their hearts. Will their prayers be heard, will our prayers be answered? I don't know, but ברוב עם הדרת מלך, “In the multitude is the King's glory,” teaches the book of Proverbs. God is more present in a crowd. To translate more literally though, “In a large people is the King's glory.” When we come together and become one עם, one people, then, God is more present because each of you--because each of us--is here. Maybe that presence is itself the answer to our prayers.

This day, this birthday of the world, this day of remembrance, this day of judgement, this day of horn blasts, this Rosh Hashanah, and this year, 5776, may we build inclusive community, through food and fun, songs and smiles, conversation and connection, in the times of joy and celebration we hope for, as well as in the inevitable but we pray few times of grief, struggle and solace. And through creating sacred community, may we increase the holiness in our lives, in our homes, in our shul, and in our world.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Noa Kushner, “They Are Us: *Uv'khen* and *T'shuvah*,” in *All The World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holy Days*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2015), p. 198.