

Kol Nidre 5782

The Importance of Community

G'mar Chatima Tova,

Father Murphy, Reverend Phillips and Rabbi Nussbaum are all playing cards together and gambling in the back room of the pub. All of a sudden, the police come in and they are all arrested. In court, the magistrate asks Father Murphy, "You are accused of gambling. What do you have to say?" The priest looks up to heaven, winks and prays silently, "Oh, God! Just one little white lie! I'll never do it again. Okay, God?" He then announces to the magistrate, "Not guilty." "Okay," says the magistrate, "you can go." He turns to the reverend. "And what about you, Reverend?" he asks. "What do you have to say?" The clergyman looks to heaven and then bows his head in prayer, "Oh, God! Just one little white lie! I will never do it again," and then says out loud, "Not guilty." "Very well," says the magistrate, "you can go." Rabbi Nussbaum is the only one left. "You are accused of gambling," says the magistrate to the rabbi. "What do you have to say?" "Gambling?" asks the rabbi. "With whom could I possibly have been gambling?"

We all need community. That is universally recognized and it may be why clergy jokes are ubiquitous. There is an understanding that for some clergy, the job can be lonely. That may be why many assume that we socialize together. Actually we do. Friendships between leaders of different faith groups make fodder for good humour, but they also help create solid communities.

The past many months have been very hard for communities. We have been forced to physically distance from our friends and family. I for example only saw my family for the first time in over a year and a half this past July. I know that I am not alone. Many of us could not see our children or grandchildren for months, even those who live here in Vancouver. The shutdown contradicted what it means to be human. We need other people and community to make us happy

and support us. As humans and as Jews we need community to survive challenging times and to celebrate as well. Without the connection to other people we are likely to be lonely which can have serious consequences. Loneliness is a terrible affliction and it has been one of the worst outcomes of the pandemic. While Covid-19 has killed millions of people and sickened hundreds of millions, it has also dealt a blow of loneliness to virtually almost all of humanity.

The former surgeon general of the United States Dr. Vivek Murtha wrote:

Researchers have identified three dimensions of loneliness.. Intimate, or emotional, loneliness is the longing for a close confidante or intimate partner. Someone with whom you share a deep mutual bond of affection and trust. Relational, or social, loneliness is the yearning for quality friendships and social companionship and support. Collective loneliness is the hunger for a network or community of people who share your sense of purpose and interests. These three dimensions together reflect the full range of high quality social connections that humans need in order to thrive. The lack of relationships in any of these... can make us lonely...

Dr. Murtha also wrote that: Dr. Julianne Holt Lunstad did a study which showed that people with strong relationships are 50 percent less likely to die prematurely than people with weak social relationships. Even more striking, she found that the impact of lacking social connection on reducing life span is equal to the risk of smoking fifteen cigarettes a day, and it's greater than the risk associated with obesity, excess alcohol consumption, and lack of exercise. Dr. Murtha also explained that, "The sensory fibres that register emotional and physical pain overlap in the brain. This.. means that loneliness, loss, or disappointment can produce symptoms similar to those caused by blows and wounds..."

Loneliness was a problem before the Covid -19. But the shutdown made the situation significantly worse for many people. The Torah teaches that we all need an ezer Kenegdo,

someone to go through life with. It states in Bereshit “And the LORD God said: ‘It is not good that a human should be alone.’” From here the rabbis learn that we need others. The concept of community dates back thousands of years in Judaism. In Mishna Pirkei Avot, Hillel says: Do not separate yourself from the community. Al Tifrosh Min a Tzibur. This is why Beth Israel has always prized community and why we worked extra hard to save our community during the pandemic. In his commentary on the Mishna, Bartenura states, "Do not separate yourself from the congregation": but rather share in their troubles." Bartenura teaches that a community not only gives to us. But we can give to it. By belonging to a community, we have a shared destiny of support. This idea is backed by Jonathan Reckford, CEO of Habitat for Humanity who wrote,

Being part of a community, being a neighbour, was a two-way street (historically). On the receiving end, you got the benefit of a sense of belonging and knowing that if trouble came your way, you had a whole community of neighbours to help you through it. On the giving end, you got to give back to your community in a very real way by taking care of it and making it a safe and loving place for you and your neighbours.

In our community we look out for one another. It is why we have the Mitzvot of Tzedakah, visiting the sick and even redeeming Jewish captives just to name a few. In the middle ages pirates would target seafaring Jewish merchants because they knew that Jewish law mandated returning home members of our community. The first chief Ashkenazi rabbi of Israel, Avraham Yitzchak Kook wrote,” The soul of the individuals is drawn from ... the community...One who separates from the people severs his soul from the source of its vitality.” According to Kook there is something far greater to be derived from the community than just physical sustenance. There is life itself.

The community gives us meaning and makes us fully human. And the community helps us spiritually, by supporting our relationship with God. Jewish law is built around the idea that one will live within a community. A minyan is no accident. Jewish tradition believes that there is spiritual power in numbers. The Mishna tells us that when three people eat together they should discuss words of Torah. Ten gives us the chance to fully pray. And 600,000, the number of Jews who left Egypt together gives us the greatest spiritual power.

In Jewish law members of a community are interlinked. The line Kol Yisrael Arvim Ze Le Ze which literally means that all Jews are mixed together is a textual source for our need to care for one another. But there is a technical implication to this as well. Ritva comments, “In all blessings, (a person) may still fulfill another’s obligation.” I can fulfil another Jew’s obligation to say a blessing by saying it on their behalf, because we are all connected. That helps make us a community. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explained:

Judaism is not only the adherence to particular doctrines and observances, but primarily living in the spiritual order of the Jewish people, the living in the Jews of the past with the Jews of the present. Our share in holiness we acquire by living in the Jewish community. What we do as individuals is a trivial episode; what Israel attains causes us to become a part of eternity.

We are linked spiritually and emotionally as a community. Rav Kook also explained that when one Jew suffers we all cry and when one Jew celebrates so do we. To share in another’s joy and sorrow is one of the strongest elements of community. A Jewish community is not randomly built. It is built with intention and purpose. The rabbis describe in the Talmud what is needed to make a strong Jewish community. It states that it has: a beit din (law court); a tzedakah fund, a synagogue; mikveh, a doctor; a craftsman; (some add a butcher); and a teacher of children. As a community we live our lives collectively and build for others. It is fascinating is that we still

need from a community exactly what the Talmud described 1400 years ago. Lissa and I looked for these and some other communal institutions before we moved here a little over 15 years ago.

Jewish communities today act very differently than we did historically. For nearly a thousand years Jews lived in communities that were forced upon us and that controlled much of our daily life. Communities collected taxes, supported the Jews' basic needs and payed the host government for protection. Leaving the community was not possible. Today is different. We must opt to join the community as a choice. I believe that there is no better choice than that.

The late American author Tom Wolfe declared the 70s the "me generation," which is the opposite of Jewish religious and societal norms. In Judaism it is never about me. It is always about us. That is why over the High Holidays no one asks for forgiveness for their particular sin, but for our sins. We are one people and one community.

I have always felt very privileged to be part of the Vancouver Jewish community and Congregation Beth Israel. But that feeling has only grown over the last 18 months. We have survived Covid- 19 together. Even though we were often kept physically apart we have done well because of all of the work that went into building a strong community in the prior years. All of our preparation has kept us strong even in these difficult times. We have been together despite being physically separate. Our synagogue and our institutions have continued to flourish. We have worked hard to take care of our most vulnerable. We should all be proud of that. We have called and visited people in need. We have not missed a single minyan throughout the entire pandemic. We have increased our programming and the number of our participants has risen over the past 18 months. We have studied more Torah and increased in our level of holiness. We became a stronger and better community because of the challenges of Covid-19. We have been even more successful in our goal of bringing Jews closer to God, Torah, and Israel as a

synagogue community. One of the most significant ideas that we as a synagogue have proven over the last 18 months is that despite the fact that we have an incredible, beautiful and very practical building our congregation is so much more than just a building. Our congregation is defined by the people who make up our synagogue family. Just as a human being is a soul housed by a body, a synagogue is a family and community housed by a building. Even though we were not able to meet for months in our building and some still do not feel comfortable coming back home yet, we have remained extremely strong as a synagogue community. Our soul still shines brightly. I hope that we are nearing the end of this storm. But if we are not, I am sure that foresight and good planning will help see us through what may be another rocky year.

G'mr Chatima Tovah