

“Community as the crux of positive change in the world”

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Every day we take for granted that we have electricity. Right now, in the morning, it is not so readily apparent just how much our lives revolve around light. The most widely used estimate is that 500,000 years ago Homo Erectus learned to control fire. By controlling fire, these hominids could control what they ate¹ and when they socialized. Since then, light has profoundly influenced our society, and we take it as much for granted as we do breathing.

With the invention of candles and subsequent light bulbs, we have been able to be social at all hours of the day and night.

With that little bit of background, I want to tell you a story of a nobleman living in a mountain village in Europe a few centuries ago. He wanted to leave a legacy for his townspeople and pondered what it could be. Eventually he settled on building a synagogue. None of the local folk saw the plans for the building until it was finished.

When the people entered for the first time they marveled at its beauty and all the exquisite details. The pews were covered in lush vibrant fabrics. The ark, holding the only Torah scroll the townspeople owned, was carved with biblical stories. The candlesticks, used to bring in the Sabbath and every festival, were so polished that everyone could see their reflection. Everywhere the townspeople looked, there were touches of love.

But then someone asked, “where are the lamps? How will this incredible space be lighted?” The nobleman pointed to brackets which were all around them, on every wall of the synagogue. Then he gave each family a lamp to bring with them every time they came to the synagogue. The nobleman nodded with understanding and wisdom.

He replied: “Bring this lamp with you every time you enter our space, and light will follow. Also know, however, that each time you are not here, your place within the synagogue will be unlit. This will be a reminder that, whenever you fail to attend, especially when the community needs you, some part of God’s house will be dark”².

We may not bring lamps in to our place of worship to literally bring light to our space. But without us here as a community, the space is just a dark building. With community, with each of us intentionally showing up, each of us bring our lights, then we are able to bring light into our world. Together, we *can* affect change in the world.

Community gives us the ability to be our best selves by holding up a mirror. Community gives us the ability to give voice to diversities which might otherwise fall on deaf ears in society. And community gives us an outlet for our cherished values. Each of these elements allow our light to shine forth and make our world a better place. What prosperous lives we will lead when we engage in these way, and others, with our community.

¹ <http://discovermagazine.com/2013/may/09-archaeologists-find-earliest-evidence-of-humans-cooking-with-fire>

² *The Essential Jewish Stories* by Seymour Rossel; pg. 134 “the dark synagogue” —embellished

Community gives us the mirror that we need.

Think about a time when you went into a clothing store and found an article that you really liked³ So you go back to the dressing room and try it on. The lighting in your stall is flattering and the mirror highlights your best side.

With a bit of confidence you pull back the curtain and go to the large communal three-way mirror. We do not see our entire selves at once, and there are parts to us that we never see. Standing in front of a three-way mirror can be rather intimidating. It forces us to see our entire selves—the good and the bad.

Engaging in community is looking in a three-way mirror. Sometimes it is really gratifying while other times it makes us want to run and hide. But unlike putting the pants back on the rack and walking away, we cannot simply hang-up our personal traits.

Here on Yom Kippur however, we have the chance to really take a look at ourselves and find ways to make the mark. We use our vidui prayers, such as the *ashamnu*—an alphabet of woes—or the *al chet* prayers to guide us in ways we might improve. All of these prayers are said in the plural because even if we ourselves did not transgress in one particular way, we are all responsible for one another.

If we find that we are grudging in giving of our time and we would rather not be that way, our community can help us. If we find that we are quick to judge, and to judge poorly, our community can help us. If we gossip, slander, complain, and we want to move away from these harmful ways of speech, our community can help us.

And when we look at our community, sometimes what we see looking back at us is love, all the love we ourselves have put out into the world. And sometimes it is indifference, for all the times we have closed ourselves away from others.

No matter what we see when we look in our congregational mirrors, we are there for each other to help one another be the best we can be.

This includes reminding each other that we are all created in the likeness of God as is said in Genesis. The early Rabbinic teachers took that likeness to be a sign of unity and of partnership between humans and God—that in addition to the various covenants which were subsequently made.

For example, in the mid first century BCE, Rabbi Hillel the Elder is recorded as having said “do God’s will as though it were your will, so that God will do your will as though it were God’s....do not separate yourself from the community, Do not trust in yourself until the day of your death, Do not judge not your fellow until you have reached his place.”⁴

Community, with abstaining from judgment, was one way that humans could focus on and do God’s will. When we act this prescribed way, we ourselves become better versions of ourselves and the world in turn grows towards peace.

³ Gen 1:27

⁴ M. Avot 2:4

In 15th century, Rabbi Bartenura added that not separating oneself meant that the individual would share in the community's troubles. As anyone who separates from the congregation will not see the congregation consoled⁵.

The 20th century Rabbi Abraham Kook went even further. He said, "One who considers severing themselves from the people must sever their soul from the source of its vitality.

Therefore each individual Jew is greatly in need of the community. One will always offer their life so that they should not be torn from the people, because their soul and self-perfection require that of themselves."⁶

We are called "Am Yisrael"—the people of Israel—and not "Dat Yisrael"—the religion of Israel. Our life-cycle, our liturgy, our celebrations and our sorrows are all based around having community. We need community for a Passover Seder. We need community for a funeral. We need community for shabbat and holidays. We need community for learning and for leadership.

According to the Talmud⁷, in order to have a community, it must include: a beit din that metes out punishments; a tzedakah fund that is collected by two people and distributed by three; a synagogue; a mikveh; a bathroom; a doctor; a craftsperson; a blood-letter; a butcher; and a teacher of children.

Modern Rabbi Jill Jacobs sees this list as defining "a suitable place to live, [needing] a community must provide for all of its members' spiritual and physical needs. The presence of a beit din helps to protect residents from falling victim to crime. A tzedakah fund under appropriate supervision aids community members who have fallen into poverty.

A synagogue offers a place for prayer, as well as for communal gatherings. The bathhouse, bathroom, doctor, craftsperson, blood-letter and butcher provide for the physical needs of residents. The teacher ensures that the next generation is versed in Jewish tradition and prepared eventually to assume leadership of the community⁸."

According to Rabbi Kook, we need community in order to be our best selves. And if we choose to cut ourselves out of community, we are not only losing that relationship but also the relationship with the Divine. The self, the community, the Divine are all intertwined and in relationship so that each may become actualizations of the best they are.

"Though the precise structure of Jewish communities has changed according to place, time and current interests, membership in a Jewish community has always demanded a sense of shared destiny, manifested in the obligation to care for other members of the community, as well as in the joy of partaking in others' celebrations."⁹

How can this community help you be your best self? Perhaps through its work tikkun olam, through our mitzvah day, our community involvement team, and our individual desires

⁵ Bartenura, Redeeming Relevance, as cited from sefaria:

<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/47323.8?lang=bi&with=Redeeming%20Relevance;%20Exodus&lang2=en>

⁶ Rav Kook, *Orot*, pg. 144 as cited from sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/47323.47?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

⁷ BT Sanhedrin 17b: <https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.17b?lang=bi>

⁸ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/community-focused/>

⁹ Ibid.

of volunteering. Perhaps by encouraging everyone to be present and take on roles which need filling inside the church. Perhaps just by showing up.

When we show up, we are not necessarily sure of who else will show up too. Because in 21st century America, we are able to choose our groups. We are not necessarily bound by the affiliation of our parents. Nor are we bound externally, where society tells us we must be.

We are free to choose with whom we associate and with where we devote our energies. Because of this freedom, we prioritize different facets of our lives and the groups each bring to us.

For example, I have a kindergartener and I can choose to associate with the parents of his class. Or being a rabbi, I can choose to associate with other clergy. Maybe I find great connection with others who love Star Trek. Maybe I also stick with my Jewish peoplehood. We are no longer limited in our choice of community by the place where we live.

This means that we are able to meet people with whom we have one thread of similarity but whose tapestry is completely different. This exposure to diversity enhances our appreciation of others and serves to broaden our own mental horizons.

Being in a religious community allows us to have that thread of connection and yet come with our varied demographics and life experiences. Often when we discuss diversity, we do so in terms of ethnicity or nationality.

But I believe that age and stage have a place in the conversation. As does regional differences, such as “the South or the North” or in my case “Coloradan”. Similarly, gender and sexual identity have a place in the diversity conversation. A cis-heteronormative identity is just one perspective. Transgender or homosexual are other identities which face different challenges in our society. By making those experiences personal, we boost our own development as individuals and as a society.

We mustn't forget economic diversity either. When we hear a story from someone in our close community who is able to go to a different city because the doctors there are more prepared to fight their particular illness and simultaneously we hear a story of a person who has to choose between oxygen and insulin because they can only afford one, we are more able to personalize the healthcare debate. We not only bring our own experience to the table, but that of our community.

Diversity, in all its forms, provides a richer and more meaningful life for all who choose to engage in the vastness that is the human experience. And we cannot get diversity in isolation. We must be *within* community for it to affect us. We must be *of* a community for diversity to affect us. We must *engross* ourselves in community.

And when it does affect us, we in turn can affect the larger world around us. We are equipped to stand together and be allies for one another. We are able to stand up when we see someone else, an “other” being marginalized, and lend our voices and our hands. And in this way, with diversity, we bring about positive change in our darkened world. We bring our light, and the

light of our whole community to the dark world.

Community has the ability to amplify the voice and the light of the individual, especially when it comes to living ones values. And when our small individual congregations can elucidate and enumerate our values, we can often find other congregations who are similar.

Then next thing we know, our one individual voice has been magnified a thousand fold. This is one thing we get when we align ourselves with the “Union for Reform Judaism”, as Agudas Israel has been since the nineties. When that happens, the change we can affect in the world similarly increases.

Community is the place to live our values. We come together to pray as individuals, sitting near other worshippers. We come on the Sabbath and other holidays to do our ritual and liturgical dances. They are meaningful and spiritually uplifting. The rest of the week or month or year is for us to come together to live what we say during prayers.

We pray for peace and health.

We pray for an end of discrimination.

We pray for an end to lack of basic needs.

We pray for the eradication of evil.

And then we go out as a community and we do. Famously, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said when marching with Dr King on Selma, “Even without words, our march was worship. I felt like my legs were praying.”

Because it is what we do when not sitting here in the pews. It is what we do the other 166 hours of the week, the other 360 days of the year.

We need community and it needs us. Every single one of us in some way. We are needed for individual thriving. The community we choose can hold up a mirror to us, and us to each other. And when we do so, we need to do so with kindness and honesty. We need to be vulnerable and accepting.

May we all learn to look inside ourselves and find where we can grow.

May 5780 bring us the ability to be our best selves by holding up a mirror. May we find the ability to give voice to the voiceless. And let our community give us an outlet for our cherished values. Each of these elements allow our light to shine forth and make our world a better place. And if that sounds a little Pollyannaish, great! We could use a bit more of that and a little bit less of cynicism. We could use a little more of saying “this sounds a little bit silly but I’m going to go out and try and do it, and I’m going to go in with my light and go out, go within, and say I’m bringing light to this piece of darkness that exists; and I can make a difference.

Because if each one of us actually firmly believes that we can make a difference, it turns out, we will. If we are cynical about it, thinking, I’m just one...and everyone of us thinks that we are “just one” nothing is going to happen. So it is up to each one of us. Each of these elements will give us an opportunity to share our light. And then let us be sealed in the book of life, of living of thriving, and we will have a good year. Gmar chatimah tovah.