

Finding Community in the ‘Me Generation’

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Once again, last Shabbat afternoon, we had a Z’havah lunch. Once a month, Z’havah, the young women’s group of Sisterhood, embarks on bringing the community together by spending some of Shabbat afternoon together. Once Kiddush and learning are over, we go to someone’s home in the area, to eat a little more and to just hang out. It’s a way of extending Shabbat morning into the afternoon. People of all ages come. It’s not an exclusive group, its just people getting together. The children usually go to the child’s room or the basement and the adults usually hang around the dining room table. The conversations are easygoing and often thoughtful. Sometimes a discussion will break out about the weekly torah reading, politics or even sports. Nothing is ever planned but I always have something up my sleeve, just in case. Sometimes it turns into an “ask the rabbi” and sometimes they don’t even know I am there. Sometimes there is a board game, sometimes cards – but it is always a terrific relaxing couple of hours. However, this past week was a little different and I’ll tell you why.

It just so happened that one of the people who attended the Z’havah lunch, had just finished reciting kaddish that morning for his father, after a year of mourning. He came almost every morning and now that period had come to an end. The craziness of juggling schedules and rushing from minyan to work had now come to a close, but there was a sense of uneasiness about it being over. As we were getting our food from the buffet, we began to talk about this and as we made our way to the table, we continued the conversation. The next thing you know, our private conversation had become a communal one. Every one at the table, and by now there were probably 15 people, began to participate. Telling stories of the losses they had and the difficult transitions from one stage to another - and then back to the deaths again. One spoke of the death of her brother, one spoke of the death of a father when he was young, and one spoke of the death of a mother when he was older - and then back to this person’s loss of his father. As many spoke, a theme emerged. Those who had a community with similar sensitivities when the loss occurred viewed the loss very differently. One who was deeply embedded in his community remarked that although it was terrible, even tragic to lose their loved one, there was something beautiful about it. Though it was only his family there at that moment, I believe it was his grounding in community that gave him the internal fortitude to stand in that precious fragile place and feel it would be all right. He would be O.K.

Although there were many tears shed at that Shabbat table, it was a place of safety and comfort. The difficult times in our lives, the moments when we feel most vulnerable, are the moments of transition. The student going off to college, the person going through divorce, the loss of a loved one presents us with the greatest challenges. In those moments, it is easy to focus only on self. At those times, we think we are all by ourselves in the world and this only serves to amplify our feelings of defenselessness. The time we spent together at the Shabbat table helped move this one sad person to another place. The conversation we had around a Shabbat meal could only take place in the context of friendship, shared vocabulary and trust. All three are the result of community.

When we trust each other and share the same values and the same language to describe those values, we have found community. This is what our entire religious system is about. We survived as individuals because we have survived as a people. Judaism, our sacred library, and our holy sages, have placed community pre-eminent in our value system. The rabbis teach us *al tifrosh min ha tzibur*, don't separate yourself from the community. The rabbis teach us that the needs of the community must override the needs of the individual. It is hard to swallow this concept today because the needs of the single person often appear to be much more important than the needs of everyone else. However, Judaism says, "no." Our personal relationship with God is very important and in many ways it's what brings us here today. It is compelling, but sitting in the presence of God can be done anywhere. What brings us here today, right now, is knowing we will find warm open hearts to greet us. We can connect to God by ourselves but connecting to each other happens by sitting next to one another.

You know the age-old joke about Berkowitz and Goldberg. Both older gentlemen come to the synagogue. Goldberg comes to talk to God while Berkowitz comes to talk to Goldberg. Each week we gather here, hundreds of us, to experience the spiritual uplift needed in our lives to make it through the week, but we also come to feel the warmth of those people sitting next to us. We cannot make it on our own. If our community is going to survive, each of us have to make a commitment and offer some sacrifice.

This week we begin the book of *Vayikra, Leviticus*, which deals, almost entirely, with the sacrifices that were to be offered in the Tabernacle and the Temple. Week after week, we will read of the many sacrifices offered - animal sacrifice, incense, and meal offerings. There are daily sacrifices, sacrifices for sins committed intentionally, and sacrifices for sins of an accidental nature. There are holiday and regular weekday offerings. By the time we have read the entire book, we'll be wondering what this has to do with our lives today and why is so much of the central, foundational text of our canon, focused on this archaic and seemingly out-of-date practice. There must be more immediate meaning and application, more than just preparation for when the temple is rebuilt. Therefore, the rabbis read every word and every grammatical innuendo very carefully, beginning at the very start.

Chapter 1: Verse 2, makes the following statement. *Adam Ki Yakriv mikem karban l'adonai... takrivu et karbanchem*. Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: "When any of you presents an offering of cattle to the Lord, they shall choose their offering from the herd or from the flock." (Leviticus 1:2)

Although our English translation works hard to illustrate the expressions of grammar, it is the Hebrew language that is best. Strangely, this sentence moves from the singular "any of you" to the plural of "they" and "their." Our Etz Hayim Humash teaches, "The opening words of the Hebrew text are singular, but the torah soon shifts to plural." This reflects the essence of the religious experience. A Hasidic master taught that we enter the sanctuary as individuals but the experience of worship leads us to transcend our separateness and become part of the community." (Etz Hayim p. 587) You reap what you sow – and you must be planting all of the time. Never knowing what will grow – we must plant seeds for community.

It is hard to look beyond ourselves and it is difficult to plan ahead, never knowing what life will bring. However, if we do two things, we will be planting the seeds for a crop that will yield an unimaginably bountiful harvest. First, we must plant kindness, like our liturgy speaks of God as *Zoreah Tzadakot*, so too we must plant acts of kindness. Plant it in the field called “Community” and it will produce a harvest far greater than we ever imagined.

Second, we must plant seeds of prayer. When we come together to pray, we see the people next to us. We see them weep at kaddish and we know they are feeling a loss. When we see someone stand to offer a prayer on behalf of an ill person, we see fragility. Worship in our community brings not only self-awareness, it forces us to see the struggles of our neighbor that we might otherwise miss. This takes work. It’s hard to think of others and to be kind, and it’s hard to get to services, but our community depends on you. When you learn the value of community, you also understand the sacrifice.

In almost every context, Judaism reminds us that it cannot and it should not, be just about me. The best example is shiva. This very sad and most difficult time in a grieving person’s life, is suspended on Shabbat. The reason for this is that the survivor’s sadness ought not impact the joy of the community - but couldn’t the Rabbis see the person was suffering? Of course, but they chose community over individual. They made the statement loud and clear. If we are going to survive as a people, then we are going to have to set aside our personal wants, maybe even our personal needs, for the greater good.

I realize that our conversation held at the Shabbat table was probably not *b’ruach Shabbat*, in the spirit of the joyful celebration of Shabbat, but it was certainly a communal conversation. It certainly strengthened our community and sustained those sitting around the table. The seeds we have planted in the past four years have grown into a community – a community that cares about each other, a community in which people feel supported, a community that holds us up when we have fallen down. So, I invite you in. If you are standing on the side waiting for a personal invitation, consider this your personal invitation. If you are watching from a distance, I ask you to come closer, it is incredibly warm. Please know it takes work. Join a committee, attend minyan, come to a class and I promise, we’ll make you feel right at home.

I never like to conclude without giving you an opportunity to make these words your own. Please join me in the reading you can find in the Shabbat brochure.

Let us go forth in confidence from this sacred place. And may the blessing of God go with us. Let us take with us the words we have just heard, and may God give us resolve to fill our desires. May God’s spirit be with us and with those we love, and may we be granted health and contentment.

And may God give us strength, hope and vision – in a world at peace and let us say Amen.