**Community (Valuing the Particular)**
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The story is told about a hasid in the old world who travels to spend Yom Kippur with the Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth century founder of the Hasidic movement. Our hssid had been travelling for several days to reach the Baal Shem Tov, and he stopped over for Shabbat in a small town where he was the tenth for the minyan. That small Jewish community was so happy to have him there since it was the first Shabbat they had had a minyan in a long time. Because of the traveler who was the tenth they were able to open the Ark and take out the Torah, read from it and say the blessings over it, the highpoint of the Shabbat liturgy that can only be done with a quorum, the minyan of ten. When Shabbat was over and after they made Havdalah, the members of the community begged the traveler to stay with them for just a few more days so that they might have a minyan for Yom Kippur. But our travelling hasid insisted that he had been traveling already for hundreds of miles for the sole reason of spending Yom Kippur with the holy Baal Shem Tov, the great Hasidic master, and that he had to continue with his journey. So he journeyed on and arrived in the community of the Baal Shem Tov just in time for the Kol Nidrei service on Yom Kippur. But every time he tried to approach the Baal Shem Tov to seek a blessing, to ask him a question, or just to say "Gut Yuntiff," the holy master ignored him. Deeply hurt, the hasid finally geared up enough chutzpah to confront the Baal Shem Tov and ask him why he was ignoring him. The master responded that the entire purpose of his journey was so that he would be the tenth and make the minyan for that small town on Yom Kippur.

Ours is a religion of community. It is not our way to go on long quests in search of enlightenment. We know that our purpose can be found right here. Wherever Jews are, they come together to form communities. While one can pray alone, our prayers are only complete when said in the presence of a minyan. The Torah can only be read in a minyan. The Kaddish can only be said in a minyan. The Talmud teaches us that God hears the prayers of a community better than the prayers of an individual. That does not mean that individual prayers are not heard, or that God is hard of hearing. It means that when we pray in community, when we come together, our prayers are that much more sincere.

The importance of praying in a minyan can be better understood if we consider the nature of Jewish worship. In some religions a worship service requires a priest or other clergy. Not so in Judaism. You don't need a rabbi to have a minyan, or any kind of service. So long as there is someone who knows how to daven, how to lead the service, the service is "kosher." Far more essential than a rabbi is the community quorum, the minyan. In Jewish worship we count, we all become officiants and enablers of each other, never mere spectators. We help each other celebrate. We help each other reach God.

This aspect of Judaism is not always so easy to realize. It is often easier to relate to God in private. Praying in front of other people entails a sacrifice of privacy and loss of the sense of security that we create for ourselves when we keep ourselves apart from others. "I don't know if I can say Kaddish in front of others," I am sometimes told by people who have just experienced a loss. "Can't I just say it by myself?" No. You can't say Kaddish alone. While I know that sometimes people do that, it doesn't work that way. It doesn't have the same power, the same ability to heal. As I explained on Rosh Hashanah, the mourners stands and declares the Kaddish

before the congregation, publicly affirming that despite the tragedy that has befallen me, I am still here, and I still declare the holiness of God. The mourner looks around and sees other mourners saying the same words, and discovers that she is not alone in bearing sadness. The mourner then looks and hears the whole congregation say "Amen." The mourner realizes that that whole community is there to support her, to help her carry the sadness that she faces. We heal by coming together.

We do that for each other. I am very proud of how our community knows how to be there for each other, to visit each other in shiva, to hold each other's hands, to cry with us. Sometimes someone will say to me: "Rabbi, I don't really feel comfortable going to a minyan at a shiva house when I don't know the family." But you do know them, I say. "Rabbi, I don't' know them and I don't know what to say." "Say, we are members at Temple Israel, and are so sorry for your loss." Then we become part of their family.

Communities don't develop on their own, like mold. They take commitment and responsibility. When we treat fellow congregants like family, we then become a family. So we visit each other in shiva and send shiva meals. So we support our services here, creating a community where our mourners can say Kaddish and feel at home. But of course we understand that the synagogue is not only here for when we are in pain. The custom of not holding funerals in a synagogue is specifically so that when we think of this building we remember joyous times. Last Friday a *bris* was celebrated in this room. Maybe not so joyous for the baby, but definitely for his family. On Saturday, a thirteen-year-old will celebrate his bar mitzvah here. The very word "synagogue" means place where we come together, *bet kenesset* in Hebrew. One might translate "synagogue" actually as "Jewish community center"! The synagogue is the community.

And it is only through community that we can truly worship, that we can truly learn, and that we can truly find a greater family.

Who is the authentically spiritual Jew? Someone who shuckles back and forth while davening? No. Someone who spends all day studying the words of such and such a rebbe? No. Someone who only eats glatt kosher? No. The true spiritual Jew is the one who lives in community with others. The one who comes to synagogue, who helps to make a minyan. The one who contributes to the work of the synagogue through meetings, volunteer work and monetary gifts. The one who care about the broader community through support of Federation and other philanthropic organizations. The one who supports the State of Israel from deep in the heart. The one who cares about public issues and votes in elections. The true spiritual Jew is the one who learns to worship with and learn with and cry with others.

There is a teaching from Pirkei Avot, the chapter from the Mishnah called "The Ethics of the Fathers," a great teaching of Hillel: *Al tafros min hatzibur,* do not separate yourself from the community. At the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan, where I went to rabbinical school, there is a wall that has framed original works of art that were the gifts of each graduating class, and in this work of art, for my class, each of our names are written in Hebrew calligraphy along with our favorite line from the Bible or the rabbinic literature. This teaching of Hillel was what I chose. The reason why I went to rabbinical school and chose to be a rabbi was because I believed, and believe, in a Judaism that is focused on community. There is no virtue in going off and praying and meditating all day as a hermit. Not in our tradition. There is too much to do. In another famous passage from the Talmud, the Rabbis debate which is better, study or deeds. The proposed solution is study, but only because it leads to more deeds.

Do not separate yourself from the community, Hillel teaches us. The Talmud explains that when the community is in trouble and one individual separates from everyone else, then the two angels who are tasked with watching over him place their hands on his head and say: "So-and-so separated himself from the community. He shall not enjoy the consolation of the community." Another version of the teaching says: if the community is in trouble let not one say: "I will go home and eat and drink and everything will be fine with me." Only the one who shares in the distress of the community will also merit to enjoy its blessings. In his evocative commentary on Pirkei Avot, the modern Orthodox commentator Irving Bunim cites a saying of the Zionist Revisionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky: "When you cut off a man's foot and he does not scream, it means he was already paralyzed." That is, he was not fully alive. So if there are people suffering and we do not feel their pain, if we do not scream out in pain, then it means that we have started to die. If a limb is so dead that I do not feel its pain, then neither will I be able to feel pleasure from it. And so Bunim explains: "Moreover, culture and civilization as we know it would be impossible if we lived as hermits, in total isolation and total self-reliance. Through the organization of society, specialization and division of labor, each of us can enjoy the fruits of cooperative work of myriads of our fellows. If for a brief episode during one's prime, one has illusions of self-sufficiency, one would do well to remember that in the very near future one will need the community, the organization, the synagogue that perhaps one now ignores. And always, whether one knows it or not, one benefits indispensably from the activities and contributions of countless others."

There are times, there have been times and there will be times, when we need others. When it is impossible to be alone. Therefore, we are told to come together even when we don't

need to, so that we have each other when we need each other. And only then can we truly find joy, because one can only truly celebrate with others.

Do not separate from the community. Let us rather come together and continue the work of building a community where we can all feel at home. There is a part of the wall in the lobby, just before the steps upstairs, that has three signs. One sign is for the NNJJA office, our community Hebrew school. One sign is from the BCHSJS office, the community Hebrew high school. And one sign is for RCBI services, our Reconstructionist congregation. Yes, there are a lot of acronyms there. NNJJA stands for Northern New Jersey Jewish Academy. BCHSJS stands for Bergen County High School of Jewish Studies. And RCBI stands for Reconstructionist Congregation Beth Israel. But you don't have to remember what each separate letter stands for. Just remember: community. Once someone pointed out that the three signs look a little sloppy, and yes, we can make it look nicer on a real more permanent sign. It is still a work in progress. Nevertheless, I love to look at that wall. It fills me with joy, because that represents for me my vision for this building, for this institution.

I stay up at night thinking about what we can do to transform our synagogue into the Jewish Community Center of the future. Can Judaism survive, people ask, when synagogue membership rolls continue to decline, when fewer Jews are moving into the area, and when more and more Jews are opting to live their lives with no connection to the Jewish community? Our challenges are not unique to Ridgewood, or Bergen County. Although they are very present here. We live in what may be the fastest aging community in the country. And we live on a landscape of synagogue after synagogue one mile after another, reflecting a time when the Jewish communities were more populous and, to be frank, more loyal to communal needs. We need a

strong local Jewish community and we will need to come together and form new coalitions in new models in order to do so. I am very proud of our growth into a community that offers Conservative and Reconstructionist worship options. I am very proud of NNJJA, our consortium religious school, where we have taken the leading role in Northern New Jersey in modeling what a multi-synagogue supported religious school can look like. I am very proud of our consortium youth program, where we have formed a combined chapter with pooled staffing positions for five area congregations. I am very excited about the Rabbi Selig Salkowitz Distinguished Speaker series that we are inaugurating this November in partnership with Temple Avodat Shalom in River Edge, a Reform congregation. I am exceedingly proud that this is the only synagogue building in Northern New Jersey where a Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform rabbi work together for the same organization. We were blessed to hear from my Reconstructionist colleague Rabbi Lieberman on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, for the second year in a row now. And many of you have gotten to know my Reform colleague, Rabbi Mills, who is the director of NNJJA, our religious school. What other synagogue, our size or larger, has a Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform rabbi listed on the masthead?

Have you noticed the couches in the lobby? I am getting that question a lot lately: "Where did the couches come from?" They belong to BCHSJS, the community Hebrew high school. We offered them space in our basement so that they could cut costs on office rent. BCHSJS started in Temple Israel many years ago, and now we are thrilled to share our space with them. The high school's long-time director, Fred Nagler, while not a rabbi, is a proudly identified Orthodox Jew. So you see, we actually have a Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform and Orthodox professional all working under this single roof! Okay, so Fred Nagler's office is in the basement,

mine is here on the main level, Rabbi Mills' is on the mezzanine and Rabbi Lieberman's is on the upper level. All on different floors. But it's a start! A good start! Thinking about the way that partisan divisions can devolve to such hatreds, the way that we and the rest of the country witnessed watching the presidential debate last Sunday night, I am so proud of what we are building here, of the vision that we can share with our children, of how different parties can come together in community.

I am blessed to have the opportunity to work with colleagues across the proverbial aisle in his sacred house, and to build something with your help, something so special. I have come a long way to get here. I was always "Mr. Conservative Jew." For me, the Movement always used to come first. I once lost a good job opportunity because of that. I had been working for the United Synagogue's college outreach department, regularly teaching on campuses in the New York metropolitan area and also visiting colleges across the country as "the visiting Conservative rabbi." A position of assistant director at the Jewish student center of a very prestigious university. The outgoing rabbi from that post, a recent graduate of the Reform seminary, had worked closely with me while I was teaching a Torah trope class for Jewish students there, and he recommended me to the new director as his successor. So I went in for the interview and it was one of those situations where it was my job to lose. And I managed to lose it. The director was interested in building an institution to serve the entirety of the Jewish community, and asked me about my loyalties to the Conservative movement, and oh boy did I dig my own hole there that I could not climb out of. I went on about how much I loved Conservative Judaism, and how hard I would work to build a strong Conservative Jewish student community on campus. He responded by asking me what I felt about postdenominationalism. Oh well, that interview was a

bomb. I had figured that since he was a Reform rabbi he would cover the Reform students and I would cover the Conservative ones. Well, we learn from our mistakes.

But I still don't believe in postdenominationalism. I don't really go for postmodernism either but that's a horse of a whole different color. I do believe that we can embrace our differences, and flourish together, and that is what we are trying to do here in this sacred house. We can build and are building an extraordinary community here. The type of community, I believe, that can be a model throughout the American Jewish world of how we can take what we have, even while our numbers and resources may have thinned, and turn it into something stronger, better, and more inspiring.

But we must do it together. Do not separate from the community. The one thing I hear that saddens me most of all is when people say, "We are considering not *rejoining* this year." What does that mean not to rejoin? Obviously, when our friends say that, what they mean is that they are considering not paying their dues. Now, we heard our Good Will speech tonight from Manny Haber, and President Obeiter will speak tomorrow morning on the state of the synagogue. I can assure you that our board works really hard to keep the dues down, with the help of so many wonderful generous people. My point this evening is the meaning behind the dues, what it means to be a part of the Jewish community, the mitzvah of being in community. We join the community. And once we join, we are in. We don't rejoin on an annual basis. We have annual commitments, but we don't rejoin. And no one, no one, is ever denied membership because of financial hardship. Paying dues, at whatever level we can, marks the privilege of membership. It's like being an American and paying taxes. I actually wrote a chapter on the mitzvah of paying taxes in the volume *The Observant Life,* published by the Rabbinical Assembly

a few years ago. We don't chose if we are going to rejoin the country and pay taxes. We pay taxes. Well, at least most of us I should say. And while no one likes shelling out money to the government, I tell myself that I am privileged and proud to be an American citizen. I may not agree with how every dollar is spent, but I thank God I have the right to be a full citizen, to be a tax payer. When people tell me that they are considering leaving the Jewish community, I wonder if they understand that that is like leaving one's country. People should leave a synagogue if they are moving away, or going to another synagogue. That's fair. But to just say "I am not rejoining" is like saying, "I am not going to be an American." Okay, I will identify as an American, but I am not going to pay taxes anymore. I will still speak English and eat hamburgers and pizza (though not at the same time of course!) and listen to pop music and watch Hollywood movies, but I am going to renounce my citizenship because I don't want to be a part of the organized American community.

We should not consider doing that, just as we should not separate ourselves from the Jewish community. Let's not think of community dues as a fee for service. People say, well, I come a few times a year, I don't know if it really pays, if I'm getting my money's worth. Well, if we were to apply that standard to taxes we would all be in big trouble. I pay social security taxes, but I hope not to ever be entirely dependent on a social security check. I pay Medicare taxes though I hope to stay healthy. I pay a lot towards national defense, building weapons that I never want to be used. On a local level we pay for police and fire departments even though we hope to never require their services. And we pay for education even if our children are not in school. And so with the synagogue. Don't we want there to be Jewish community here? Do not separate from the community. Serve in synagogue leadership to make sure that we only make appropriate

use of communal funds. Serve in synagogue leadership to make sure that we get our priorities straight. Help us keep our community together, whether it be generously pledging to the Circle of Honor or shmearing bagels on Sunday mornings. But do not separate from the community.

I feel blessed to serve in this community, to have the opportunity to build a vision of what we hold sacred, to study together, to worship together, to celebrate together, and to cry together. What a treasure we have here, that we all bring right here to Grove Street. It reminds me of the story of the pious and impoverished rabbi from the small village in Poland who had a dream that there was a beautiful bridge in a place he had never seen and that under this bridge was a fabulous treasure. The first time and the next time he had this dream he ignored it. But night after night he would have the same exact dream until he could hardly close his eyes without seeing the image of this bridge which he had never actually laid eyes on. And then, by chance he saw hanging on the wall a picture of this exact bridge. The picture was of the famous Charles Bridge in Prague. (I was in Prague for Shabbat twenty-one years ago but remember it so clearly.) The poor rabbi (not me, although I was a graduate student twenty-one years ago so, by definition, also poor!) decided, crazy as it was, that he had to go and see for himself. He got together the provisions and travelled to Prague and there, over the Vltava river, stretched the bridge he knew so well. And there on the bridge stood a guard. That he had never seen. That little detail had been left out of his dreams. How was he to get below the bridge to dig up the treasure? He waited until it was dark and then went down to dig. But the guard was there. He sees him and says "What are you doing here?" Having nothing else but the truth to say, he told him his story. The guard laughed so hard he almost dropped his weapon. A dream? You came out here in the middle of the night for a dream. I have dreams too but do you think I

chase after them? If I did I would have to go to Poland to the little house of some poor Jew. Get this! Every night I dream that there is a tremendous treasure buried under his floorboards! Of course the rabbi went home dug up under his floor and found the great treasure that he had dreamed of all those nights.

That's where the treasure is. Not in some faraway place. Not even over the river across the bridge. But right here, here in our own homes, in our own selves, here in our own community.