

Rosh Hashanah 5781 – Day 1: The Meaning of Community

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Among all of the challenges and difficulties of 5780 and especially these last six months, we sometimes forget that there were some good times also. One night in particular stands out. It was a night that no fan of Washington sports teams will ever forget. October 30, 2019. Game 7 of the World Series. The Nationals down 2-0 against the Astros. Top of the 7th – Adam Eaton grounds out. Anthony Rendon comes to the plate hits a solo homerun. Down 2-1. Juan Soto walks. The Astros substitute Zack Greinke for Will Harris on the mound. Howie Kendrick comes up to bat and knocks it out of the ballpark, scoring 2 runs and putting the Nats on top for good, sealing a World Series Championship. It was a moment of pure euphoria. Perhaps it won't be remembered historically as Bobby Thompson's "shot heard round the world," but for Abbey, Elianna, Micah, Oren and me, that is quite literally what it was. Throughout the World Series, at various times, the five of us watched games from Ann Arbor, MI, Philadelphia and Rockville; Jerusalem, Krakow, Lublin, Warsaw and Hod HaSharon. Most games saw the five of us were in 4 different cities across the globe, spanning seven time zones. And yet, despite the time difference and the distance, none of us ever watched the games alone. In fact, in whatever way we could, we watched and we celebrated each of the games together. And remember - this was during PC Time – Pre-Covid. The word "zoom" still meant the button on a camera you pressed to take close up pictures of an object far away. But through phone calls, FaceTime and WhatsApp chat groups, we managed to watch the games together as one family, constantly chatting, sharing the joys and the sorrows as if we were all together in one room

I've thought about our World Series experience a lot over these past 6 months, as the COVID-19 crisis forced our schools, our shuls and our offices to shut down. We have all learned new terms like "social distancing" and adapted new modes for worship, work and education via Zoom, GoogleChat and Livestream. We now talk about "virtual" seders, funerals and shiva as if those were things that we've always done. Six months ago, it would have been extremely rude to ask someone to mute themselves, let alone for a host of a meeting to forcibly mute everyone. Now, it's the only way we can gather and have conversation. We recognize the abnormality of the situation, the financial and educational costs, and the pain and suffering that we have all been forced to endure to one extent or another. We recognize the loss nearly one million people who have lost their lives, 20% of them, over 200,000 people, here in America. Even as we have learned to adapt, move forward, and create a new reality, we recognize that our definition of community has been completely disrupted.

Prior to Covid-19, when asked about the Tikvat Israel community, I proudly described what happened inside this building – our core activities, how we gather to celebrate and to mourn, to pray and to learn, to eat and to grow. I might mention the Orchestra that practices on Monday evenings, the fencers who joust each Wednesday and the Toastmasters who train every-other Thursday. I describe a place in which the sound of joyful children is never more than a few steps away. I would proudly tell newcomers that Tikvat Israel is a place where you will be warmly

greeted from the moment you walk in the door... Yes, those were the words that I used time and again “the moment you walk in the door.”

So what happens to community when the doors are locked, the building lay desolate, and its empty parking lot sadly announcing the lack of activity to anyone driving down Old Baltimore Road? Can we still be a community if we only see each other in small boxes on a Zoom screen? Or, at best, in our parking lot, with our masks on, standing far apart, as we pick up a meal? Are we still a community when we can't be physically together but watch funerals on zoom, make shiva visits online and celebrate bnai mitzvah with a young man or woman reading the Torah portion from a book in his/her own living room?

According to an etymology website, the word community itself was first defined to mean "a number of people associated together by the fact of residence in the same locality."¹ But are we really still a community? Are we in the “same locality”?

Since March 15, the Sunday morning that marked our last in-person service, we have been challenged to figure out how we create community while living in quarantined conditions. We didn't know what it would look like or how long it would last, but we understood from the outset that we could only get through this if we figured out a way to do it together. We needed each other, now more than ever. So we had to re-define what it meant to be a community and what it continues to mean.

One way to measure the import of a concept in a society is the number of words in the language to describe that concept. The classic example, of course, is the plethora of words Eskimos use to describe snow and ice. By this measure, Judaism and the Hebrew language clearly place great import on forming community. I found at least ten different words used by the Torah, Mishnah and modern Hebrew that are used in different ways to describe a community: There is *goi* – In Torah, a generic term for any nation or country; *am* –also a people/nation, but this one has its roots in the same letters as the Hebrew word “*im*” meaning to be “with,” suggesting a tighter connection between the people than “*goi*”. In Biblical times, people were divided by their *shevet* or *matteh* a group unified by birth or by purpose, what we often call a tribe. Alternatively we have *eidah* – a group convened for a specific purpose. Our High Holiday liturgy describes us as *agudah echat*- an *agudah* is an agricultural term, referring to individual stalks that are bound together or oxen held together by a yoke. In modern Hebrew we speak of a *chevra*, a *kibbutz*, a *kinnus*, or a *tzibbur*.

All these words come from roots that indicate some type of physical link to one another. Some – like *am* or *shevet*, talk about links that are more permanent, but many of them are things that are more limited temporally – a coming together for a specific time or purpose.

But there is one term that our tradition raises up above all others when talking about community – that is the word *kahal*. It also means to gather, so it does have that sense of bringing the people together physically, but it is almost always used for a purpose that goes beyond the physical nature of the connection. It is used to gather the people for the census

with the half *shekel*, it is used to bring people together to dedicate the *mishkan*, the wandering sanctuary in the desert; but it can also be used negatively, as it was with the Golden Calf and in Korach's rebellion. It is also what we call the people when describing the Yom Kippur ritual of communal atonement and the way we are referenced when Moshe struck the rock. It is not just about a group of people who happen to be standing together, but it is a group who purposefully gather together and stand as one for something that matters. As we read in the book of Judges - וַיֵּצְאוּ כָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתְקַהֲלוּ הָעָרְיָה כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד – All the Israelites gathered out together and the entire people stood together as one. ⁱⁱ

Rabbi Yosef Gavriel Bechhoffer explains that “We strive for the high level of achievement that the term *kahal* connotes. To attain that level requires unity. That unity was first achieved through the bond of the half-*shekel* and the other massive out-pouring of materials used to make the *Mishkan*. The worship in the *Mishkan* and the *Beit HaMikdash* united all the individuals in the Jewish nation, recalling *Kabbalat HaTorah* “*ke'ish echad be'lev echad.*” – the receiving of Torah at Mt Sinai as one person with one heart.ⁱⁱⁱ

Kahal has a physicality but it is more about a unity of purpose. This is why European and early American synagogues began their name with the words *Kehillah Kedoshah*. You will still see that sometimes on documents with the initials *kuf, kuf*. The specific name followed, as in Kehillah K'doshah Tikvat Israel or whatever the name was. These two words – *kehillah kedoshah*, a holy community – was not just about where the group met, but it was about why the group gathered, indicating something about what united them as a community.

To be a *kahal* means that we come together because we share common aims and aspirations. In this sense, no physical separation can take away what it means for us to be a community. And we have seen this throughout these past 6 months, as members of our community have reached out to one another and taken care of one another, just as we would if we were physically together, at least to the extent that we possibly can. Members call one another to check-in or to assure everyone had a Passover seder to attend. Our “drive-through” meal pickups on Thursday evenings, our *minyan*, now meeting twice daily via Zoom, the support we have shown one another at times of loss and the turnout that we have seen at times of celebrations. In all these ways, our Tikvat Israel community remains just as strong during these difficult days as it had been previously.

But what about beyond our immediate community? Sadly, and this pre-existed Covid, American society seems to be in a struggle right now to define any set of values and sense of purpose that unite as a *kahal*. Police brutality, protests that turn into riots, a rise in hate speech and hate crimes, voter suppression efforts, even issues of public health have all given way to bitter partisan divides. Its not a question of whether or not we can have disagreements – like any healthy democracy, there are a wide range of opinions on almost any topic and we view that positively. No, it's not about disagreements, but about a growing intolerance to even listen to any opinions that may differ from one's own.

And this has impacted our Jewish community too. Let me name three issues that have always united us but today have turned divisive:

- 1) Israel signing peace agreements with its neighbors has always been strongly supported by the American Jewish community, even if we might quibble about some of the details. Yet, as Israel normalized relations with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in this past week and month, there was a muted response from much of the Jewish community who were leary of giving the current administration any type of victory. When I posted a note celebrating this on Facebook, many people responded that we were making a big deal out of a relatively small change in relations. They couldn't see past the way they feel about the administration to see the import of this moment for Israel and for the Jewish people.
- 2) Anti-Semitism. This may be most surprising. We have still united amidst some of the worst attacks on our community, such as Pittsburgh and Poway. But now there is a bitter partisan fight about the anti-Semitism of the Left versus the anti-Semitism of the right and which is more dangerous and which needs to be stamped out. Worst of all, each side claims that the other grants comfort and coverage to anti-Semites. So this issue, which has always brought our community together, today is used in ways that further divide us.
- 3) Encouraging Voter turnout. For many years, the Jewish community ran a united Get Out The Vote drive that was endorsed by each of the denominational movements, JCPA, the Federations, even both the National Jewish Democratic Council and the Republican Jewish Coalition. Everyone understood that voting and getting more people to vote is healthy for our democracy. In today's polarized climate, even encouraging people to vote has become a partisan issue.

There was no doubt in my mind that our Tikvat Israel community would be strong enough to overcome the physical separations that the COVID-19 crisis has forced upon us. We may come out with a few bruises, but they will heal and we will survive. Like my family during the World Series, physical separation today does not prevent us from being together for a unified purpose.

What worries me more is the breakdown of a sense of common purpose and mission in our nation. This breakdown was not caused by the Coronavirus, but as we have necessarily retreated to our own quarters, the divide seems to be growing, not narrowing.

In the Torah, the *kahal*, the community, had a clear purpose that united them:

הַקָּהָל אֶת־הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנָּשִׁים וְהַטּוֹף וְגֵרָךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעֲרֵיךָ לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלִמְעַן יִלְמְדוּ וְיִרְאוּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְיַעֲשׂוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת:

Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your midst—in order that they may hear and so learn to revere the LORD your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Torah.^{iv}

We in our American society must figure out what is that Torah for our society today. We must figure out what common purpose and values hold us together as a nation. We don't need to all think alike – but we do need to have some sense of core shared beliefs that make us more than neighbors, but a *kahal* with a united sense of purpose.

As a synagogue we have that, and I know we can maintain our community even when we must stay apart physically. But as a nation, we are living together physically but lacking, perhaps, a shared sense of purpose, which is a much more scary proposition. I say perhaps because I actually believe that there is a shared sense of mission – I just think we have lost sight of it. I don't have any easy answers, but I do have a prayer for the new year: I ask all of us work towards helping our nation to find its Torah that unites us. It is not enough for us to be an *am* or a *goi* or an *eidah* or a *shevet*. We must work to create an American *kahal* so that we can make real the vision that we are indeed one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

ⁱ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/community>, accessed 9/10/2020

ⁱⁱ Judges 20:1

ⁱⁱⁱ www.aishdas.org/mesukim/5764/vayakhel.pdf accessed 9/10/2020

^{iv} Deuteronomy 31:12