

Ari Witkin, Student Rabbi  
Germantown Jewish Centre

## **The Power of Community and the Work of Building It**

### **Discovering Community**

It wasn't until I arrived in my freshman dorm that I realized what the most precious gift I had been given as a child was. Some of you may have quite recent memories of move in day, either of your own or the experience of dropping off a child or loved one, while for others the memory may be less accessible. Regardless of your personal experience, allow me to invite you into a window of my own start to life on campus.

Arriving at my small liberal arts school just outside of Baltimore my parents and I pulled up to find the building in a bustle of action and emotion as new students and family members milled about *schlep*ing bags and boxes from minivans upstairs and through sweaty hallways to our new, and let's just say *haiymish* home. After a few hours of unpacking, a trip to Target, and the ceremonial walk around the campus grounds, I, like my many of my peers was eager to shoo off my folks so that I could dive in to my new independent life on campus. And while the first few days of dorm living were fun and exciting, it didn't take long before the commotion of this shared life began to unfold - and by the time we arrived at our first house meeting just a week later, the opening scenes of teenage drama were already in full affect.

That night, as our resident assistant tried her hardest to facilitate a productive conversation about navigating the needs and wants of each of the individuals with whom we were sharing space, I watched as many of my dormmates struggled with something that I suddenly realized was actually quite familiar. Here in the early days of our collegiate careers we were already deep into what I believe would be our most important subject in college: living in community – theory and practice.

While for many in the room this was the first experience of shared space and a new model of interpersonal interaction and accountability, for me it was a natural progression of the life I had been raised in. From summer camp and shul, tent cities during volunteer disaster relief and early mornings shoveling the neighbor's driveway, community animated the life my parents helped foster for me and our family. But, and this is the key point, it wasn't just mom and dad who initiated me into this way of living, it was the whole world that we participated in – and it became the foundation of what I understood it to mean to live a Jewish life.

In our lives community meant that when someone was sick, or had a baby, or you just hadn't seen them in a while, that you brought them a meal. It meant celebration and *shiva*. It came to life in the never-ending ring of the phone with my mom's friends calling to make sure everyone knew what was going on and played their role in helping out. Community was afternoons in the lobby of the JCC and a Shabbat table that always seemed to have room for one more chair. Even though in many respects we lived what might be considered a rather conventional suburban life, it never felt like we were the only ones in our house, and I always knew that our life as a family was never really separate from the lives of all those we shared them with.

And so there in that dormitory common room as I watched my new community move through the frustration of learning to live together, I recall being overcome with what I would later identify as a counter-cultural sense of excitement. This is the work I thought. This is what we are here to learn how to

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do. Whether we are studying anthropology or chemistry, business or religion, the point in being here is to learn the skills we need to help make the world a better place, and the only way that will be possible is if we do it together. I say counter-cultural because we live in a society that lauds individualism both in accomplishment and in living. In a moment when everything around us says that we should be feeding ourselves with independent experience and accumulation I am hungry for the shared encounter. The truth is though that this work is getting harder. Beyond the rugged individualism of modern America, a powerful illusion of connection that all too often pacifies our drive to connect and leaves us feeling empty or disappointed has emerged throughout our society.

### **Social Isolation and American Individualism**

We live in a time when we are seemingly more connected than ever yet still so distant from one another. I know more about the lives of friends from high school who I haven't spoken to in a decade than I do about the couple that lives next door. I find myself experiencing feelings of jealousy or inadequacy as I scroll through social media and see what appears to be only grand adventures, *smachot*, and promotions in the lives of my friends. Of course, we all want to share the blessings in our lives, but in this new way of connecting to each other too often we are missing out on really knowing one another. Sure, we know where our friends went on vacation and what they ate for dinner last night, but do we know what they really long for, what they struggle with, what keeps them up at night and what it is that gets them out of bed in the morning? The result of this new ultra-connected world appears to be the opposite of what we might have intended. Trapped in front of screens we hold on with great attention making sure not to miss anything while the world around us skates right by. Rather than feeling more held and seen we, I, feel more isolated than ever.

The side effects of this shift in our culture are devastating, and they are taking form across all different sectors of our society. On campus, universities are reporting all-time high rates of students requesting single dorm rooms and in-turn noticing decreased social interaction in common spaces.<sup>1</sup> According to a study from the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University rates of depression and anxiety, especially among young people, have risen drastically in the last ten years.<sup>2</sup> These experiences are not reserved simply for those born into the iPhone generation however. In their study of adult loneliness, AARP reports that in the last twenty years a sense of social isolation has doubled amongst older adults now surpassing 40% of people over 65.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on the growing trends of loneliness amongst Americans author Jessica Olien poignantly states that, "loneliness is not just making us sick it's killing us."<sup>4</sup> And while this might feel like a dramatization, research from both the social and physical sciences overwhelmingly agree. Studies from Cambridge and the University of Chicago even demonstrate that loneliness and social isolation can be directly linked to whole host of physical ailments that leave isolated older adults twice as likely to die prematurely.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, these

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Jose Bowen, address to Goucher College Alumni, May 17, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Weinberger, A., et al. (2018). Trends in depression prevalence in the USA from 2005 to 2015: Widening disparities in vulnerable groups. *Psychological Medicine*, 48(8), 1308-1315

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, C., & Moulton, B. (2010) *Loneliness among Older Adults: A National Survey of Adults 45+*

<sup>4</sup> Olien, J., (2013). *Loneliness is Deadly*, Slate

<sup>5</sup> Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB (2010) Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review. *PLoS Med* 7(7): e1000316.

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facts are staggering. Even as a devoted proponent of the importance of community I was taken aback when I learned about the breadth of effects a lack thereof can cause.

### What's Jewish About Community

People are literally dying for meaningful connection with one another. Across the country and right here in our own neighborhood there is a powerful need for community. Here is the tricky thing though, building community takes work, and sacrifice. It means sometimes putting aside our individual wants for the sake of other's needs, and as I have already mentioned, it is a counter-cultural endeavor that forces us to swim upstream against the current of a society which tells us to put ourselves first at every turn. There is good news however. While I, and I know many of us, are disturbed by the rampant experiences of isolation in our society, just by being here today we are already working to stem the tide, and we have the building blocks of an even more comprehensive antidote at our finger tips. Judaism is predicated on the expectation of community and filled with the tools, models and the direction to construct and maintain meaningful and enriching communal life. When we turn to our tradition with eyes in search of this wealth of information, gleaning its riches is not hard. From mitzvot to biblical narrative, early kibbutzniks to tenement houses, post-war synagogue construction to the more recent renaissance in urban Jewish life, ours is a story of living together.

So, let's step back and ask just what is community? Defining it is tricky actually. Community is in process, and it is different things for different people at different points in their lives. On the most basic level though community is the experience of sharing our lives with others and it is about valuing the presence and contribution of each unique individual. There may be no better model of this than the biblical scene in which Moses leads the Israelites in the construction of the *mishkan*. The plans he receives from God are precise and intricate, and yet in calling for the collection of materials his directions are generous, clear and simple; "everyone whose heart moves them will bring an offering..." he says.<sup>6</sup> Expanding on this scene, the rabbis of midrash *tanchuma* discuss the frustrations of the community's major donors who dismiss the value of what they deem to be the lesser contributions from those of lower economic status. Moses rejects their protest however in a powerful reminder of the importance and significance of each member of the community's heartfelt contribution.<sup>7</sup> In so doing our teacher Moses reminds us of the very definition of the word. Community, broken into its Latin roots literally means a "together gift". And so it was for our ancestors in the wilderness. Not only were each of their gifts necessary for the construction of the *mishkan*, but more than that, together they were a gift to one another and without each contribution the community would have been incomplete.

In his discussion of this biblical scene Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that there are three Hebrew words for community, each of which characterizes something different.<sup>8</sup> At the most foundational level there is the *tzibbur*. From the Mishnaic Hebrew root *tz-b-r*, the word literally means "to heap" or "to pile up". A *tzibbur* is a community that forms more by chance than intention. Finding themselves in common space and with utilitarian purpose the *tzibbur* Sacks says, "is community in the minimalist sense". To better understand what this may look like, we might imagine a spontaneous *minyan* at the *kotel* in Jerusalem. Putting aside the fact that the members are united in their shared Judaism, they are a community only briefly and for no more than the purpose of forming a quorum so

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<sup>6</sup> Ex. 35:20-29

<sup>7</sup> Midrash Tanchuma P'kudei 11:3

<sup>8</sup> Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *Three Types of Community*

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that they may fulfill their prayer obligation. We have all been members of *tizburim*. Whether in a similar experience making a *minyán* or in more benign locations like waiting for an airport shuttle that

departs only when all the seats are full. Likely these experiences were less than memorable. They serve a purpose, they result from a shared endeavor on some level, but at their core they exist only by chance and in service of individual needs rather than the collective.

The second formation of community comes from the word *edah* whose root, *eid*, means “to witness”. Members of an *edah* have a powerful sense of connection and communal identity. Many in this room I am sure have an instant association with word *edah*, recalling bonds made amongst cohorts during formative summers spent at camp. In their journey through the desert the Israelites, joined together through their shared experience of bondage and redemption are consistently referred to as an *edah*. In Psalms we read, “*Elohim nitzav b’edat el*” that God stands in a divine assembly when judging the people.<sup>9</sup> In each of these cases the formation of a community known as *edah* is established upon relationships of shared identity and experience. Similarly, we are each members of various *edot*. Whether it be our membership in a political affinity group, fraternal organization, or alumni community, we join and are joined in relationships of *eidut* with those with whom we have a specific connection and mutual sense of self. More intentional and interactive than a *tizbur*, an *edah* is formed based on who its members are, not just what they are doing. *Edot* are powerful because in them we feel a sense of belonging, connected to those who are like us, but they are also limited by just that, only capable of bringing together individuals of shared likeness and experience.

The *parsha* that hosts the scene from which this conversation began is quite fittingly known as *v’yakel*. Meaning “to gather” the word is derived from the root *k-ha-l*, the same root that we use to construct the word *Kehilah*, our third term for community. Different than our two previous models, a *kehillah* is made up of members who are different from each other and yet their being together is not simply in service of a goal but is valued for its own sake. *Kehilah* is the community that forms when each individual’s gifts are treasured. *Kehilah* does not simply make space for the unique features of each of its members, it cherishes them and seeks to honor all who are present. As Rabbi Sacks says, “The beauty of *Kehilah* is that when it is driven by constructive purpose, it gathers together the distinct and separate contributions of many individuals, so that each can say, ‘I helped make this’”. In doing so, a *kehillah* functions as a sort of cooperative home in which each member has stake regardless of their station within the organizational body. It moves past existence as a collection of individual experiences and becomes an entity onto itself.

A *kehillah* comes to life because of but beyond its individual members. It is in *kehillah* that we are able to fulfill the mitzvot of living in community. Commandments such as *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick), *hakhnasat orchim* (welcoming guests), *mesameach chatan v’kallah* (bringing joy to a bride and groom), and *kavod ha’met* (honoring the deceased), mitzvot truly fulfilled not just for our friends but for all those in need. It is in *kehillah* that the weighty burden of simply being a person in this crazy world is shared with others. Membership in the *kehillah* does not require specific modes of participation, it doesn’t mandate large financial commitment, that we join a board or lead services, but it does ask that we give of ourselves for the sake of the community. It requires that we think not only about what we need from the community but the ways in which we can help make sure that others’ needs are met as well. This will be different for each of us, but honoring these differences is what makes it beautiful.

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<sup>9</sup> Psalms 82:1

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When we talk about *kehilah* what we are moving towards is more than just a shared space or experience, we are doing the work of elevating the banality of our need for connection into the realm of holy relationship. There are many places where we can encounter the divine, but I truly believe none are more powerful than the space God occupies when we meet each other in community. This is why the names of synagogues often begin *kehilah kedosha* because for us as Jews, being a community is about that ever illusive commandment *ki am kadosh t'hiu* (for you will be a holy people),<sup>10</sup> and it is in the formation and stewardship of our *kihilot* that we are able to become *kadosh*, holy.

### Community at GJC

Here at GJC we talk a lot about community. A community of communities we call ourselves. This tag line inspired me when I first arrived in Philadelphia and was part of the reason I moved to Mt. Airy when I started rabbinical school. I tote it often when I talk about the great virtues of our congregation and it is something I think we should be really proud of. Sitting in this very room on Shavuot I was inspired by the stories of the leadership and hard work it took from so many to get us to this place. From those early years and in each that has passed since, we have found ways to highlight the multiplicity within our single congregation. A sum far greater than our parts we are constituted of concentric circles of shared space; for prayer, social justice and advocacy, school, social events and affinity groups all of which weave together our unique tapestry of a community. And we take it seriously. Time and again I have been moved by the way this community shows up. In moments of hardship and need, in celebration, and in all the days in between, our GJC community comes out to support one another.

But I also know that our web of relationships has holes that are sometimes bigger than we would like to admit. Too often I meet someone who considers Germantown home and I realize I don't yet know who they are. Many members, active in different aspects of the shul never meet one another, and I worry that there are also those in our community who feel like the college freshmen or senior citizens I discussed earlier – isolated, home alone watching from afar what is going on right outside their door. In some ways we are fighting a classic up-hill battle, aware that we are really good at something and then needing to still work harder to be great at it. This is the work though, the starting point from which we accomplish all we are capable of. Making our community stronger is a beautiful challenge when we are all in it together.

The reason I am moved to speak about my love and dedication for this work with you is because I know that it is a passion shared throughout this room. In that vein, I am eager to share about a few of the initiatives here at the Centre that have me really excited about our community in 5779. One of the things we know to be true about building and strengthening *kehilah* is that it doesn't just mean making space for those who are able to bring themselves here and ask for what they need and want. It also means reaching out to those who can't and making sure no one is left behind. This fall, thanks to the leadership of our new *chesed* committee chairs Peninah Berdugo and Gena Epstein as well as the never-ending dedication of the members of the Women of GJC, we are rolling out a congregant led effort to reach community members who aren't able to get to the building regularly. Whether it is Shabbat shalom phone calls and visits, or the delivery of *chesed* meals in times of celebration and mourning, or

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<sup>10</sup> Lev. 19:2

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when life's circumstance simply calls for a little extra soup and kugel, we are going to make an even greater effort to stay connected to everyone who calls the Centre home. I am immensely grateful for the leadership many have already put in to making this happen, and I also want to invite all of you to join us.

Whether it's coming to a meal cooking event, making calls with Women of GJC, or even just inviting someone for dinner you haven't had over before, continuing to strengthen our community is all of our shared endeavor.

One of the hallmarks of our congregation is the existence of the different minyanim which provide diverse prayer experiences for GJC members. Building on this success, in the coming weeks we will be launching a new model of Friday evening services in order to make a communal celebration of Shabbat more accessible and meaningful for all. We will still offer the popular Kol Zimrah and traditional Kabbalat Shabbat services, but will also have a host of other rotating Friday night experiences including; "Shabbat together" geared especially for young families, "Speed Shabbat" for those who prefer a faster service, and "Shabbat in the Neighborhood", a song-filled home hosted Shabbat service and dinner that will bring us together in more intimate spiritual and social space. As I look to the year ahead I am inspired by what it means to be a member of this community and truly hope each of you will join us in these new and exciting community building initiatives.

In the years that have passed since that first week of dorm life I have had the opportunity to live in a number of different models of community. From a big shared house of Jewish farmers, to burgeoning neighborhood in Baltimore to my lovely life right here in Mt. Airy, in each place I have lived it has been the community I am a part of more than anything else that has lifted me up and made my life feel full. In the strange and tumultuous times we live in community is more important than ever. For even though we face new and different challenges today, for generations community has held us together and helped us overcome hardships in all their forms. Community is what makes the unbearable bearable, it relieves the burden of the immensity of being, reminding us that we aren't in it alone. It gives us the strength to take on forces greater than ourselves, it holds us when the world feels dark and celebrates us when we are beaming with light. As we enter this new year together it is my prayer that each of us feels cherished for our unique contribution to this remarkable community, that we push ourselves even a bit further to continue to fortify this *kehillah kedosha*, and that we look back a year from now each of us feel as though we can say "I helped build that".

Shanah Tova