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Imagining Community

"Lech L'cha." That is the origin story of the Jewish people. When God speaks to Abraham for the first time, it is to say, "Go! Leave the place you know, the place you were born, your ancestors' house, and go to a place that I will show you."[1] One of the big questions of Biblical interpretation is, why does Abraham go? What could induce him to follow this strange and risky command from an unknown god? Many commentators focus on the promises God makes to Abraham that he will be blessed, that his name will be great, that God will bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse him. Today I want to concentrate on the very first reason God gives Abraham: "I will make you a numerous people."[2] At the moment he first hears from God, Abraham is anything but a numerous people. He and his wife constitute his entire family; his father has died and he has left his extended family behind. He is more or less isolated, displaced and without many prospects. His wife is unable to bear children, so the line of his family seems destined to end with him. In this depleted state, God asks Abraham to imagine a different future, to imagine a large family and more, a numerous people, a community of human beings who not only take care of each other in the present but also ensure a future full of hope. And, amazingly, despite the discouraging reality he knows so well, Abraham is willing to imagine. He sees the future, sees a huge community grown up around him, even though they are not there in front of his eyes, existing only in his imagination. And that's all it takes. *Va-yeilech Avram. "*Abraham goes."[3]

As Abraham embarks on the journey, he finds that the fulfillment of the vision that propelled him to begin is delayed again and again. He is understandably discouraged, and his faith in his imagination of a community stemming from him repeatedly flags. He complains to God, "'O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless…?! …Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir.'"[4] God reassures Abraham but realizes that he needs further inspiration. God takes him outside at night and says, "'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them... So shall your offspring be.'"[5] In the face of Abraham's skepticism, God asks him to perform yet another act of creative imagination, to see in the stars in the sky, so far away and unattainable, a sign of his future descendants, even without a hint in his current life that such a future is possible, with both Abraham and Sarah approaching old age. The seemingly infinite postponement of his dream is part of the testing of Abraham mentioned by the ancient rabbis.[6] Can his imagination manage to survive his doubts? Torah gives us the answer: "[Abraham] put his trust in the Lord, and God reckoned it to his merit."[7] Despite his misgivings, Abraham ultimately continues to believe in what he

[1] Genesis 12:1.
[2] Genesis 12:2.
[3] Genesis 12:4.
[4] Genesis 15:2-3.
[5] Genesis 15:5.
[6] See Pirkei Avot 5:3: "With ten trials was Abraham, our father (may he rest in peace), tried, and he withstood them all; to make known how great was the love of Abraham, our father (peace be upon him)."
[7] Exodus 15:6.

can't see. He proves to God and to himself the power of his imagination, his ability to look around him and see himself as part of a community, even when the evidence of his senses and his experience tell him otherwise.

In anthropology graduate school, my friends and I were very excited when Professor Benedict Anderson came to Penn to speak. Anderson, an expert on the political history of Indonesia, had written an influential book on the origins of nationalism, and it had just been republished in an expanded edition. He was famous! — at least to us grad students. In his book, Anderson took on the difficult task of defining just what a "nation" was, this abstract concept that had attained such power that people were willing to fight and die for it. In what became a famous formulation, he argued that a nation was an "imagined community."[8] By "imagined" Anderson did not mean to indicate that the community formed by nationalism was fake or unreal. He simply meant to say that in any group larger than a few people—who would rarely if ever all be found in the same place at the same time—it was necessary that the conception of the community be in some sense "imagined," the product mainly of reflection and discourse rather than an outgrowth of direct experience. He argued that a nation was brought into being through an act of imagination, built through discourse, through words, and through images circulated among people who may never have met but who nonetheless resonated so deeply with the idea of the nation that they imagined it into being. Anderson's book excited my friends and me because we saw that the idea of an "imagined community" could apply not only to nations but to many other different kinds of groups, drawn together by their conception of themselves, their imagination of a community of like-minded folks that could span the globe but still retain a strong connection, something that could give meaning to their lives.

Many years later, I have come to the view that the act of imagining a community into being did not begin with the stirrings of nationalism in the 18th century. Looking closely, I see the same process happening in ancient times, in the origin stories of the Jewish people. From very early in our history, we have been an "imagined community," a group of people tied together across space and time by a common conception of our origins, identity, and values. Even in the Torah, when Moses takes a group of slaves that reportedly numbers in the hundreds of thousands out of Egypt, it is their common imagination that draws them together and sustains them in the wilderness. When their imagination of themselves as a community fails them—as when some among them splinter and decide to build a golden calf to worship in place of God—their community starts to fall apart. When their imaginations recover, they return to each other with acts of repair and repentance, knitting their imagined community back into being, making themselves a people once again, not just a collection of individuals who happen to be in one place. Individually, their lives can seem inexplicable, random, meaningless. Together, they can imagine a life that has purpose, direction, and great, even cosmic meaning.

[8] Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism Revised Edition (New York: Verso, 1991), page 6.

What is true for the people is also true for their leader through their formative trials, Moses. From his first encounter with God at the burning bush, Moses struggles with his own inability to imagine a future for his enslaved people. His initial attempts to follow God's instructions and to try to instill some sense of self-consciousness and solidarity in the people are met with failure. He cries out to God, "*Lamah zeh sh'lahtani* - Why did you send me??"[9] And God, in what will become a common pattern, rebuilds Moses's sense of mission, re-inspires him with visions of a free people in a Promised Land, and fires his imagination to see beyond Egypt, beyond the wilderness, to the future of a people imbued with the mission to redeem the world. When Moses holds tightly to that vision, to the imagined Jewish community of the future, he can defy Pharaoh, inspire the people to take a chance on freedom, and lead them through incredible hardships. When his imagination flags, his courage falters, he despairs of redemption, and he even asks God to kill him rather than continue to lead this hopeless, merit-less, irredeemable people.[10]

Even God's own story in the Torah is one of imagination continually failing and then continually being strengthened. Just as God comforts and inspires Moses when his vision flags, so too does Moses comfort and inspire God, sometimes even seeming to browbeat the divine into recapturing the imagination that first led God to love and care for Israel, remembering, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah that we will sing this afternoon, "the devotion of your youth."[11] Moses cajoles and needles God, invoking God's pride by drawing a picture of what others will say if God abandons the Israelites before they can fulfill the purpose God imagined for them. When, after one of their many sins, God threatens to wipe the people out and start again, Moses invokes the Egyptians: "Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that God delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.'"[12] God relents, allows the divine anger to dissipate, and once again is able to superimpose an imagined future holy people over the real, live, disobedient children who stand before God. Through that act of holy imagination, the people continue to live.[13]

Near the end of the Torah, Moses gathers the people and declares that they are all standing together before God, all entering a covenant together. But then he says that this covenant is made "not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day."[14] What are we to make of this? Moses seems to be saying that the people both are—and are not—all together. The ancient rabbis teach that the resolution to the paradox is that Moses is referring to those who have yet to be born, to the future Jewish people: to us. At the very moment of covenant-making, the Israelites are asked to perform an extreme act of imagination, seeing not only those who are present with them that day but all who will be present in our day as part of

[9] Exodus 5:22.
[10] Numbers 11:15.
[11] Jeremiah 2:2.
[12] Exodus 32:12.
[13] I want to thank the Reverend Mark Tyler for introducing me to the phrase "holy imagination."
[14] Deuteronomy 29:13-14.

one people. That imagined conglomeration of past, present, and future, spanning centuries and continents—that is the Jewish people that makes a covenant with God. As a people, we only live in that act of imagination that makes the *brit*, the covenant, not just a single moment of commitment on that day, so long ago, but also a continuing struggle to find and do what is right on this day, the day we have in front of us.

Jewish history has mostly been lived through our imagining of what should be, because so often our immediate reality was full of pain, suffering, loss, and violence. The Roman persecutions, the medieval Crusades, the tortures of the Inquisition, and the modern pogroms all drove us to seek a world that lived not in our base experiences of injustice and discrimination but in the high values of truth, justice, freedom, and love that burst out of the Torah, the Tanach, and the works of rabbinic literature, that found expression in poetry and music and drama and prose and art, all works of imagining and creativity. As I taught some years back about the ancient rabbinic martyrs, even those who were murdered left this earth proclaiming their faith in the goodness of God and of humanity, even as human beings tortured them and as God seemed to abandon them. Again and again, through all that we have faced, our imaginations have gotten us through, even as they also sometimes failed us, as we cried out to God with Moses, "Why did you send us??" or with Rebecca as she struggles with twins in her womb, "If there is [such pain], why do I exist??"[15]

In the year that has now passed, we have faced a trial different than any that have gone before us, yet strangely familiar: a challenge to our ability to imagine ourselves as a community. In the face of a pandemic that has spread across the world, two great principles of Jewish tradition have come to the fore: *pikuah nefesh,* the obligation to preserve life at all costs, and *sakanat n'fashot,* the equally important obligation to avoid even the chance of that our actions could endanger another. And so, to preserve and protect each other's lives and our own, we have taken steps that we would have previously said were unthinkable, unimaginable. We have isolated ourselves in our homes, shrinking our social world to those in our household, going for weeks or months sometimes without seeing another person face to face. We have closed the doors of our synagogue, our communal home, not gathering to celebrate the high moments in our lives or to mourn our losses together, not able to grasp each other's hands, to hug each other, to feel each other's physical presence, the laughter in our hearts or the tears in our eyes. We have kept ourselves away from those who may be at elevated risk, with children and parents, grandchildren and grandparents who had close relationships cut off from each other. We have lost the ability to run into each other in the street, in the coop, in the playground, in the halls and nooks and crannies of this building, this place that has been a second home for so many of us. We have been torn from each other, webs of interactions disrupted, patterns of years shattered, cherished expectations and traditions cultivated over decades smashed. Our sense of community has been shaken to its core.

[15] Genesis 25:22.

Pundits in the Jewish press have asked if this is the end of Jewish community, an organism so local, so built on the face-to-face, that it surely couldn't survive long without the interactive nexus that makes it live. Dire predictions have been made that scores of synagogues and other Jewish institutions will close their doors for good, their shaky pre-pandemic condition proving no match for the earthquake of change spreading through the Jewish world. Articles have been written arguing that perhaps the whole idea of synagogues and local Jewish communities is outmoded, inevitably to be replaced by online, curated content accessible by any individual at any time to fulfill their individual need much more efficiently than a legacy institution like the synagogue. The pandemic, so the argument goes, has merely accelerated a process that was already in motion, as the growing individualism and the decline of "joiners" in American society catches up with Jewish communal structures designed for the America of 50 years ago, which anyway were always too myopically obsessed with "the way we've always done it" to survive in a fast-changing world.

The way these arguments are couched reveals a great deal about them. They sound the death knell of the idea of Jewish community, which then inevitably presages the decline and fall of the institutions built around that idea. But they somehow assume that the contours of that idea are fixed and unchangeable. If the external circumstances no longer conform to the idea, then the idea is dead and cannot be revived. Instead, we know from Jewish history that the content of the idea of community has morphed and changed as Jews ourselves have developed in ways that our nomadic ancestors could scarcely have dreamed. The idea of Jewish community survived the transition from nomadism to agriculture to urban life, and from a small, close-knit group of kin to a large kingdom to a trans-national people spanning the globe. Jews did not stay stuck to an outmoded vision of community; instead we did the creative work necessary to re-vision and re-imagine what community meant to us in the circumstances in which we found ourselves. Our history shows us that the idea of Jewish community is not fragile, frozen, and brittle but robust, flexible, and accepting of change. Community exists whenever we devote our energy to imagine it into being; it fails, not when reality does not conform to the idea, but when our imaginations fail.

It is no surprise, though, that in these days we are hearing pessimism among Jews about the very idea of community. In our city and in our country, we are seeing a failure of communal imagination that rocks our conception of ourselves and divides us from each other. Even as our GJC community has affirmed that Black Lives Matter, words now written in large letters on the sign that identifies us to the world, we see evidence every day that too many people in our country dispute that simple statement, as violence and discrimination continue to be visited on Black and brown bodies and racism eats away at our souls. Every day we see people putting forward a narrow vision of what it means to be a member of American society, a vision that erases those of us who are People of Color, who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, who are Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, who are immigrants, who are poor, who are sick—the list of the erased and the unvalued goes on and on. Every day we see people challenging the key teaching of Torah that we are all—all of humanity—created in the image of God. This is a failure of imagination of gigantic proportions that holds frightening portents for

our collective future. If we cannot imagine ourselves as a nation, a nation of incredible diversity united by a respect for that diversity, then what are we? Divided and weakened, we find ourselves asking: Where is the hope? Where is the meaning? Where is the path forward?

This is our challenge, different and yet the same as the one our ancestors faced. As a Jewish community, our very conception of community is under huge stress, as the pandemic rapidly changes the circumstances in which we find ourselves. As a city and as a country, our idea of ourselves is under attack from those who would divide us and pit us against each other, hemmed in by a narrow vision of our nation in which there is not enough room for the fullness of who we are. Do we have the creativity and courage to re-vision what community means to us? Do we have the strength and determination to knit together a new idea of an American nation? Are our imaginations up to the challenge??

I think they are, and here is why. At Germantown Jewish Centre I have seen how so many of you have so quickly and with such great energy and love taken up the task of transforming our idea of community to fit the new, strange circumstances in which we find ourselves. You have adapted prayer services to Zoom and learned a host of technological skills along the way. You have reached out to each other through phone calls and emails and Facebook and WhatsApp. You have made sure we were all somehow connected, that we all felt the support of the community around us even when we couldn't see it. You have created and led and participated in support groups and classes and lectures. You have attended online funerals and shiva minyanim and offered your love to those enveloped in grief. Before we knew it, our multiple prayer groups were once again meeting, seeking different paths to wisdom, to connection, and to God. In an instant we established a daily morning prayer service that has had a minyan every single day since March, something that we never had pre-pandemic. And these High Holiday services were co-created by all of the people who devoted their time to record videos and write talks and give of themselves to this community, including our incredibly devoted staff, working in the building and working from home, tirelessly re-inventing how we operate and how we embrace each other. And this is just the more visible evidence. I've also been privileged to see many private acts of kindness. I've seen GJC members give countless hours of their time to help a single person find the resources they need, or to connect them to the internet so they can participate in our programs and services, or simply to visit with someone who is alone. I've seen individuals and groups donate incredibly generously and anonymously to the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund on the correct assumption that there would be many our community in need of support, and that fund has in fact been tapped like never before to help those who are struggling with unemployment and illness. I've seen anonymous donors selflessly open their resources to the synagogue, expressing so deeply their faith in the existence of this community, this place that is so important to us, even in a time when "place" is an embattled concept. You all have shown that our holy imagination is strong enough to stretch the idea of community until it fits us, knowing how much we need each other now. In the face of crisis, you have all helped imagine us back into being.

As for our city and country, here, too, I see reasons for hope. In the streets of Philadelphia and across the nation I have seen thousands and thousands of strangers coming together to demonstrate the strength of their belief in a larger vision of who we are, one that acknowledges that when you hurt, I feel the pain, that we are all part of each other and responsible for each other, and that injustice against one of us is injustice against all of us. I have been so impressed by the loving atmosphere of the rallies and protests I have been part of, seeing people caring so carefully for each other even as they express strong opinions about the brutality that we see in our streets. Above all it is inspiring to see people willing to stand up for causes that do not affect them personally, that are a matter of conviction and right, a vision of who we can be and an unshakeable belief that we can be better, that we can enter into a reckoning with the structural racism and injustice of our country for all of our sakes. When we can imagine a nation full of the beautiful rainbow of humanity that God put on this earth, gorgeous in our diversity and yes, even in our disagreements, full of respect for each other, then there is hope for this deeply scarred and fractured nation to be healed. It's up to us.

So I want to ask you to join me in imagining community together in this new year. We don't know what we face. We can't imagine the challenges ahead. But we can imagine us facing them together. I want you to try holding out your hands. Yes, I know we are not all together, and even those in the sanctuary are deliberately placed not close enough to touch. Reach out your hands anyway. I want you to close your eyes. Yes, I know then you won't be able to see me, or the people on your screen, or the people around you. Close them anyway. Imagine us together. Imagine feeling hands grasping yours. We are together no matter what. Like the ancient Israelites, alone our lives can seem inexplicable, random, meaningless. But together, together we find the meaning, the direction, the purpose, and the hope. With your eyes closed, see it. With your hands empty, feel it. With your heart open, imagine it. We are all imagining our community into being at every second. It will hold us. It will carry us through. And it is real.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu – may we all be inscribed together for a good new year.