

Yom Kippur Day, 5780

In recent years, there has been a large question mark hanging over Jewish institutions in the United States. In 2013, when the results of the most recent Pew survey of Jewish Americans were made public, leaders of Jewish organizations as well as those committed to existing institutions got very scared.

One of the findings of the survey is the significant rise in those who identify as Jewish by ancestry and ethnicity but not by religion at all. That fact, in and of itself, would not necessarily have been an issue for leaders. What scared them, is that the same group is far less likely to affiliate with *any* kind of Jewish organization or to say that they are raising their children Jewish, not even culturally Jewish, not even *partially* Jewish or Jewish together with another identity. And even those who identify as Jewish by religion are less and less likely to be involved with Jewish institutions.

There are a many different reasons for these changes. One, is that many people, for whatever reason, have felt unwelcome or unaccepted in existing institutions. Others had negative experiences growing up that are still hard for them to shake off as adults. I've had people, even in their 40s, describe how difficult it can be to receive an honor during services after how they were shamed as children.

Some have also felt that they're not really wanted for their own sake, that synagogues and other organizations are only interested in their volunteer hours, or their membership dues and donations or their ability to fill roles in a prayer service, but that we don't have an interest in them for their own sake, as people, as part of our community.

And still others simply don't enjoy the way they're used to Judaism being done in communal spaces in the US but aren't ready or able to create new ones.

And then, there are broader forces, beyond our control, that challenge Jewish life in the US. The past 20 years have seen a decline in the faith of Americans in all sorts of institutions, including organized religion. Most Americans still feel that they can count on the police and the army, but fewer and fewer implicitly trust other institutions, including government, banks, religion, the news media, and international corporations, at times with good reason.

And then, maybe more than anything else, Jewish communities in the US are challenged because we live in a culture that, naturally, differs from traditional Jewish cultures. Jewish tradition puts a very heavy emphasis on the group, the collective, whether that's the local community or the wider Jewish people. That stands in stark contrast to mainstream American culture. American political thought emphasizes the individual and his or her rights. American consumerism is certainly focused on the individual customer, and attuning each of us to our every possible whim and desire. And even other religions in this country tend to draw the balance between the individual and the collective differently than our tradition does.

So those of us who are both Jewish and American are caught between different frameworks and different notions of what it means to live a good and inspired and self-expressed life. We experience tension. And, at least lately, the balance has swung toward us as sovereign individuals rather than us as a community.

Given all of those trends and all of that tension, I think it's worth it for us to ask a very basic question: Why be part of a community? Not why have, for example, a synagogue or JCC or other *membership*, but why *be in community*? Yom Kippur is a time of rededication and return to a sense of purpose. What is our purpose as a Jewish community?

I'll offer three answers today, each emerging from a different Jewish text.

The first answer to why be in community is because the community needs you. You matter. From the perspective of Jewish tradition, your actions and your well-being are inextricably linked with the well-being of all of us.

While discussing how the sins of one Jew impact another, a *midrash* offers the following story:

"A parable of people sitting on a boat. One of them took a drill and began to drill [a hole] under his [own seat]. His fellow [passengers] said to him, 'What are you doing there?!' He said, 'What do you care? I'm only drilling under my [seat]!' They said [to him, the obvious], 'The water that rises up [through the hole under your seat] will sink the whole boat!'" (Leviticus Rabbah 4:6)

Just like the people in the boat, our community is impacted by our actions, our words, and our intentions, maybe even by those we think of as totally personal, as decisions that are our prerogative, like choosing to destroy our own seat. This story describes our negative and destructive capacity, but how we live can also have a positive influence, can change reality for those around us in wonderful ways, beyond what we're likely to imagine. The examples are limitless: visiting a neighbor in the hospital, helping make *minyán*, supporting a *tzedakah* project, inviting a guest to a Shabbat meal, taking time to speak to someone new at *kiddush* - those small actions impact others in obvious ways, but there are also subtle ways that they create an atmosphere of respect and caring and connectedness that has the power to envelop all of us.

Your presence makes a difference, probably more than you realize.

The second reason to be in community is because, frankly, we need it. Without community, it's hard to mourn. It's impossible to celebrate. Community strengthens us to persevere through life's challenges, and, most importantly, it enables us to take on the positive challenges that come of acting on our commitments.

There is a well-known line from Pirke Avot: “It is not your responsibility to finish the work, neither are you free to desist from it.” (Avot 2:16) Those are the words of Rabbi Tarfon. And they get a lot more play than his comment that comes right beforehand:

“Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, and the work is vast, and the workers are lazy, and the reward is great, and the Master is urging [us onward].” (ibid. 2:15) Rabbi Tarfon is describing our life: we’re called and inspired to do great things, to live lives of meaning and holiness, to make the world a more just and beautiful place, during what is a very short lifetime. We can’t count on other people to do it for us (“the workers are lazy”), and “the Master is urging [us onward]” - all the time we hear an imperative calling us to action.

How are we to persevere through such an intolerable situation? Rabbi Tarfon’s famous line is his answer: “It is not your responsibility to finish the work, neither are you free to desist from it.” The answer is to engage in the work *together*. We join with those who are here with us now, our community, as well as those from the past and future, members of our people and tradition. Collectively, we can overcome life’s challenges, including the greatest and most pressing of all: to answer the summons to do that great work whose reward is profound, living a life of meaning.

The last and, perhaps, most important answer to why be in community is because of who it gives us the opportunity to become.

Last night, I shared a provocative *midrash*, which described Moshe annulling God’s vow. It illustrated the awesome power of the individual. Moshe played an almost super-human role and, in the process, saved the entire people of Israel. But here is a very different take on Moshe’s leadership. We begin at the point when God tells him to go down from Mount Sinai because the people have made a Golden Calf.

The Talmud records the following:

It is stated [in Torah], “And Hashem (God) said to Moshe: Go and descend, [for your people whom you have lifted out of the land of Egypt have been corrupted].” (Exodus 32:7) What is the meaning of “Go and descend”? Rabbi El’azar said, “The Holy Blessed One said to Moshe, ‘Moshe, descend from your greatness. It is only for the sake of Israel that I gave you greatness. [I only made you great in your capacity as my messenger to Israel.] Now that Israel has sinned, why do I need you?’ Immediately, Moshe’s strength waned and he lost the power to speak.

[At the burning bush, Moshe identified himself as a stutterer, but through his long and demanding tenure of leadership, he gained the gift of speech. Now, as God removes his role and purpose, he goes back to being “heavy of tongue”. Rabbi El’azar’s telling of the story continues:]

But as soon as [God] said [to Moshe], “Leave Me be, that I may destroy them,” (Deut. 9:19) Moshe said [to himself], “[If God is telling me to let Him be, it must be because] this matter depends on me!” He immediately stood and was strengthened in prayer, and

asked that God have compassion [for the people of Israel and forgive their sin.]
(Berakhot 32a)

Moshe, perhaps the greatest figure in our history, and the paragon of prophecy and teaching in the rabbinic imagination, is understood by Rabbi El'azar to derive all of his power and greatness from his service, from the role that he plays for the community. As soon as he loses that role, he goes back to being the stammerer that God found tending sheep in the wilderness. And again, as soon as Moshe realizes that he can still make a difference, that he still has a part to play, he gets his power back.

That is the most transformative power of community. Only in a web of relationships can we discover the ways that we are able to make a unique difference. And by filling those roles, we unleash potential within ourselves that we didn't know was there and that would never be expressed otherwise. Inside of a call to service, a frightened stammerer becomes the great orator of Torah. A fugitive shepherd transforms into the leader of a nation and a prophet.

In this moment, I invite all of us to explore the ways that we're called to build this community and deepen the work in which it's engaged. Not just because the community needs us (which it does), not just because we need the community (which we do), but because our greatest potential as individuals flows from the opportunity to serve. Our nobility and power find expression only to the extent that we devote ourselves to something beyond ourselves.

Now, everything that I have said so far could be applied to many communities, not just religious ones, and not just Jewish ones. So, since this is Yom Kippur, a time of returning to our core, I'll share the intentions that are at the center of what I believe Judaism to be.

Judaism is our people's approach to pursuing justice in the world, to cultivating a life of devotion to God and, through religious practice, to sanctifying each area of our lives. Pursuing justice, cultivating a life of devotion, and sanctifying every area of human life.

Judaism isn't the only way to approach these missions, but it offers accumulated wisdom, experience, inspiration, and vision, that extend back to those who stood at Sinai across a hundred generations to us, and, God willing, to at least as many generations of our descendants. When we are of service in the context of Jewish community, we do so as part of a magnificent tradition and a great web that strengthens and uplifts us beyond anything we would be capable of on our own. We have the potential to do justice, fashion lives of devotion, and sanctify the way we move through the world, in rich and expansive and fulfilling ways.

Looking forward, I wish us all a year of deep and meaningful service, and a heightened appreciation of how much we matter and how much we are capable of together.