



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

TZIBBUR: BUILDING COMMUNITY

I want us to think together about what it means to build community, and about how one's personal identity is tied up with being part of that community. The two poles between which human identity swings are that of solitude, of being by one's self, and that of refreshing that sense of self by coming together with other people.

We are now facing a crisis in contemporary culture, a crisis expressed by the numbers in recent studies. For instance, while more Americans now bowl than at any time in the past, less Americans are members of bowling leagues. People used to bowl as a way of being in a community. And, in an age in which spirituality is gushing out of every bookshelf of every bookstore, and in which every one is searching for the meaning of life, congregational affiliation is also down.

Why is that? I think we are a country that has become so obsessed by the notion of rugged individuals pursuing their own agendas, by themselves, that we have forgotten that we also need each other. Perhaps it is because that lesson is so easy to forget that, at the very beginning of the Torah, God tells us that it is not good for a person to be alone. More than that, it is not possible to be a person and to be alone. To be a human being means to be in dialogue and in relationship with other human beings. There is no identity separate from everybody else. From the very moment we are born, we are involved in relationships that help us understand who we are and help us grow into who we can become.

Prior to birth, the baby already knows the mother's heartbeat and her breath. Hopefully, the baby already knows the father's voice. The minute the child is born, the child is immediately initiated into a relationship. Do you know what is the first lesson a child is taught? If someone gives you a *potch*, cry. And from there, the lessons continue: if you cry out in the night, someone will comfort you; if you hunger, you will be fed; if you thirst, you will be brought drink. And if you are cold, someone will wrap you in a blanket.

That's the basis of what Judaism is all about, and babies already know that by the time they can roll over. We teach them theology by our deeds, and we teach community because the baby is in a relationship from the very start. It's the baby learning to negotiate 'who is me,' and 'who is you,' and what we make together that allows the baby to grow into a healthy, productive and contented adult. Perhaps it is for that reason that the Talmud asserts (which I translate, using Patrick Henry), "Give me community or give

me death." A human being that does not have community is not alive. It is only in the presence of each other that who we are can truly emerge.

Last year, in a study, the Medical School of the University of California in San Francisco found that one of the factors leading to longevity is congregational affiliation. We live longer and we live better when we do not have to celebrate our *Simchas* by ourselves, when we do not have to mourn our losses alone. There are people on whose shoulders we can cry, people with whom we can dance and celebrate, sing and exult. In being with each other, we are able to gain information and wisdom, acquire comfort and consolation.

Indeed, our tradition teaches that the primary way God speaks to us is when we are in community. God gave the Torah at the foot of Mount Sinai when all of the Jews were gathered together. The *Midrash* says that from the very first day of Creation, the Holy One of Blessing longed to dwell with God's creatures. God, too, it seems has need for community. When we want to know God, we need to look to each other as guide and fellow travelers. One cannot be a Jew and alone.

What does it take to built *kehillah*? We live in an age that filled with gimmicks. We have singles *Shabbat*, young people's *Shabbat*, environmental *Shabbat*, and Sisterhood *Shabbat*. The only thing we do not have is *Shabbat*. All our gimmicks distract people from the fact that what is important is *Shabbat*, not the *kind of Shabbat*. What we need are not more programs, even though there are great programs out there yet to be tried. What we need are *middot*, character traits. We need to fashion a new way of responding to each other that allows community to develop. Specifically, I want to propose four character traits that I believe are essential in building a vibrant community.

The first is charity, by which I mean the willingness to see people as basically good. The *Mishna* teaches that when you judge people, judge them favorably. Think about the last time you were running a program or coordinating an event, and of the people you might have offended during that process. Most of the time, you probably did not know that you had hurt anyone until they came to you screaming, and yelling. When you are in a leadership position, giving offense is almost always unintentional. You are juggling so many things, you cannot slow down and notice the person who was overlooked, or who wanted the appointment and did not get it, the person who wanted an honor and did not receive it. We do not notice those things because we are so awash in the details. Next time you take offense, remember, it was not intentional when you did it; it was probably not intentional when they did it.

It is better to attribute an error to stupidity than to malice. People are doing the best they can. If we do not learn to judge each other in a positive light, we cannot ask them to do that for us, as well, and we discourage people from taking leadership roles.

I was disgusted with the last presidential campaign. Whatever you might think of President Clinton or of Senator Dole, they have devoted their lives to the service of their country. Criticize their ideas, disagree with their policies, but to subject these men and their families to gossip, malice and degradation is an insult to the democratic

process. What does that say of our daughters, who might be thinking, "Maybe some day I'll be a Senator"? Any sane child would say, "forget it." Then we wind up with the leadership we deserve. Our inability to judge with charity gives us degraded leadership. That is true in the synagogue as well as in politics.

The second trait we need to cultivate is restraint. The prayer says: "Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile." Judaism teaches that it is essential that we speak *to* each other and not *about* each other. If you want to say something about someone who is not present, say something in his or her praise. If you are going to criticize, do that to their face.

Another kind of restraint we need is something that I derive from Jewish mysticism. The first act involved in Creation is God's pulling away and making a space in which Creation could take place. Rabbis need to trust their leadership enough to pull away and let them lead. The leadership needs to have enough confidence in its rabbis to allow them to provide spiritual leadership.

That is not to say that the two need to be distant or uninvolved with each other, but there needs to be a mutual partnership based on respect and affection, each making room for the other to be strong. You cannot have a vibrant community without a strong rabbi; you cannot be a strong rabbi without a strong board. In the strength of one, the other is strengthened.

The third point is that we need to learn to love each other. Our tradition tells us, "You shall not bear a grudge against your kin, love your fellow as yourself, I am *Adonai*, your God." One of my favorite stories in the *Midrash* is about our patriarch, Abraham, who is famous in rabbinic literature for welcoming people into his home. One day, an old man shows up and wants lunch. Abraham welcomes him into his tent, serves him a meal, and after the meal is over, asks the man to lead *Birkat HaMazon*. The man says, "Well, I can't. I'm a pagan, I worship fire, and I don't serve God."

Abraham is enraged. How dare this idolater come to his tent – he, the father of monotheism – and presume to take of his hospitality! In righteous indignation, Abraham throws out the idolater. At that point, God's voice booms out and says, "Abraham, I have been putting up with that man for 70 years, and you couldn't put up with him for two hours?"

Think for a minute about the worst *nudnik* on your board. (My board doesn't have any *nudniks*, but I'm sure that yours does.) Now think about what the parent of that *nudnik* sees in that person. What is it that those parents love about their child? If we could see the aggravating member of our boards, Sisterhoods, and synagogues, as somebody's child, then we could see what is lovable about that person, and then we would treat him or her differently. You hope that people will treat your child with love, so you had better do that for the *nudnik's* parents, now.

Finally, we need involvement. The great sage Hillel says, "Don't separate yourself from the community." That is essential. My congregants already know when they come to me with a new ideas, I am going to put them in charge.

Do not wait for somebody else. In fact, I have a policy suggestion. Our synagogues should be open to membership for every Jew except one, "someone else," because, I can tell you, "someone else" was supposed to set up the *kiddush* and did not, was supposed to visit the sick, and did not. "Someone else" was to organize the *shul* picnic and did not. "Someone else" is the most unreliable Jew alive, and so we need to banish "someone else." And since someone else won't be there, you had better take on those tasks yourself.

As a rabbi, the worst phone call I get is from congregants who say, "Rabbi, I am so angry. I was sick in the hospital for a month and you never paid a visit." And I say, "Did you call to tell me?"

"No, I assumed one of my friends should do it." Each friend was waiting for someone else, and nobody called. You need to be involved, yourself.

Let this transformation of our community begin with each of us. Let us embody the virtues of charity, restraint, love, and involvement. Beginning with each of us, we will set off ripples that will transform our synagogues, transform our Movement, and change the world. If we can do this, then community is not only possible, but it is once again a place where we can encounter each other and God.

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