

Rosh Hashanah 2 5782

Taking It For The Team

What is community?

If we look at the origins of this word, we can see that it essentially means “sharing.” Community is what happens when resources are pooled, when people intentionally step beyond their own boundaries to share with others.

And yet, the idea of community itself is under threat today.

In 1995, in his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam wrote:

"The most whimsical yet discomfiting bit of evidence of social disengagement in contemporary America that I have discovered is this: more Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues has plummeted in the last decade or so. Between and 1993 the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10 percent, while league bowling decreased by 40 percent" (P. 5)...

The bond between two members of the Sierra Club is less like the bond between any two members of a gardening club and more like the bond between any two Red Sox fans (or perhaps any two devoted Honda owners): they root for the same team and they share some of the same interests, but they are unaware of each other's existence" (p. 6).

If that was true in 1995, it is even truer now. Our enforced isolation over the past year has put us literally behind barriers. When I got my last COVID test, the nurse told me that she is seeing people being less considerate of her and each other than ever before in her career. The pandemic has ramped up the volume on individualism to the highest it may have been in our lifetimes.

Yet a theme that has emerged for us with greater and greater clarity over the past year is the way that Judaism and contemporary American values diverge when it comes to the idea of community itself.

At the heart of the American system is the idea of the individual. "All men are created equal" - members of society are individuals, with rights. But at the heart of the Jewish system is the vision of Mount Sinai - that a group of people were given wisdom as a community, together. Each member of that collective owes duties to themselves and to each other but also to society.

—> *if I get up in the morning with a perception that I am an individual with rights, then the world owes me; but if I get up in the morning with the perception that I am a member of a community with duties, then I owe the world.*¹

This thread weaves itself through the system of law and ethics that is the exoskeleton of Judaism. Let's look at a few examples.

The Torah teaches that we cannot stand by when someone in our community is hurt or in danger. This principle, in Hebrew *Al ta'amod al dam re-ekha*, means that we are under a duty to rescue that has no parallel in American secular law. It's also the basis for the halakhic obligation to be vaccinated generally, as well as against COVID - we have a duty to save others from getting these communicable diseases (thank you Rabbi ED).

We must also protect others from the harm that we might do. Our first meet and greet of the year - held outside, of course, despite the 90+ degree weather, was called "For Heaven's Cake." Our new director of education and programming, Nomi Kornfeld, made us a cake to share in the shape of a house with a parapet, or fence, around its roof to demonstrate that fencing your roof is a mitzvah. From this principle, the Rabbis extrapolate that if we own anything that might endanger others, we have a duty to protect others from its effects. Rambam - Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, or Maimonides, makes no bones about this: in his 12th century law code *Mishneh Torah* he tells us *lehizaher badavar yafeh yafeh* - I'd translate that as "our very best endeavors."

¹ *Wearing Face Covering, Physical Distancing and Other Measures to control the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Elliot N Dorff and Susan Grossman, passed 1 February 2021 by CJLS <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/new-teshuvah-wearing-face-covering-physical-distancing-and-other-measures-control-covid-19>

And as members of a community, we are not at liberty to put our own lives at risk either. Here's Maimonides again:

הַרְבֵּה דְּבָרִים אָסְרוּ חֲכָמִים מִפְּנֵי שֵׁשׁ בָּהֶם סַכְּנַת נַפְשׁוֹת. וְכָל הָעוֹבֵר עֲלֵיהֶן
וְאוֹמֵר הֲרִינִי מִסַּכְנוּ בְּעַצְמִי וּמָה לְאַחֲרִים עָלַי בְּכֶךְ אוֹ אֵינִי מְקַפֵּיד בְּכֶךְ מִכֵּין אוֹתוֹ
מִכַּת מְרֻדוֹת:

The sages have prohibited many things because they are dangerous to life. If anyone disregards them and says : "What claim have others on me if I risk my own life?" or: "I do not mind this," he should be lashed for disobedience.²

The examples Rambam gives include not drinking brackish water, or wine or milk or even honey that have been left out so that poisonous things could drop into them. None of these would have any effect on anyone except the individual ingesting them, but she is still forbidden to do so because of the effect her consequent sickness will have on those around her.

אָסוּר לְאַדָּם לִתֵּן מְעוֹת אוֹ דִּינָרִים לְתוֹךְ פִּי שְׂמָא יֵשׁ עֲלֵיהֶן רַק יִבֵּשׁ שֶׁל מְכִי שְׁחִין
אוֹ מִצְרָעִין אוֹ זֵעָה. שְׁכָל זֵעַת אָדָם סָם הַמָּוֶת חוּץ מִזֵּעַת הַפָּנִים³:

It's not that liberty doesn't matter in the Jewish system. It does, but as Rabbi Elliot Dorff wryly observes, liberty only works if you're alive. And it's not that individuals aren't important. We have an obligation to take care of our bodies, which are understood to be on loan to us from the Holy One. They need to be returned at the end of the lease in decent condition subject to normal wear and tear. We are taught, *venishmartem me'od* - that we must take particular care for our own safety. We owe duties to ourselves just as we owe them to others.

But when it comes to a choice between ourselves and our community, it's the community that's going to take priority - even more so if lives are at stake. The word *mitzvah* itself is related to the Aramaic word *tzavta* - joining, or fusing. As Rabbi James Taylor sang: we are bound together.

² Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Murder and the Preservation of Life* 11:5

³ *ibid* 12:4

So - to return to the question with which we began - what is community?

A community is not its leader.

A community is not even its members.

A community is its values - specifically the knowledge that we are connected, that we affect each other. We are defined by what we share. Just as we stood together at Sinai. Just as we have moved heaven and earth to be together again this Rosh Hashanah.

So let's walk that heritage and those principles forward with pride this year. Let's model them confidently and teach them to others. Because living out our Jewish values day by day is one way of ensuring that the idea - the ideal - of community is going to survive.

Shanah Tovah.