

Temple Emanu-El, Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Yom Kippur 5784

When I was a kid, I used to watch the show *Cheers*. Maybe you remember this show too; it ran for 11 seasons. In case you missed it, *Cheers* focused on a group of people from different walks of life who all frequent a bar in Boston called “Cheers.” The show followed the lives and relationships of these characters.

Each week the show’s theme song would sing out:

Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name,
and they're always glad you came.
You wanna be where you can see,
our troubles are all the same
You wanna be where everybody knows
Your name.

To drive home the theme song’s message, in every episode the character Norm would enter the bar, and everyone at the bar would greet him together with great enthusiasm – “Norm!”

Welcoming Norm by his name was more than a running gag on the show. Names have power. A 2006 study from the Institute for the Study of Child Development¹ found that our brains respond in a unique pattern when we hear our own name. The brain pattern when hearing one’s own name is similar to brain patterns scientists have found when people make judgments about

¹ Dennis Carmody and Michael Lewis. “Brain Activation When Hearing One’s Own and Others’ Names”
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1647299/>

themselves. In Jewish tradition, names are critically important; they have meaning. Names tell a story about who we are.

Looking back to *Cheers* for a moment, why was this show so popular? Yes, it was witty and the characters were relatable, and I loved watching to find out what would happen next. On *Cheers*, there was a sense of camaraderie and connectedness among the characters despite the fact that they led very different lives outside of the bar. There was something deeply compelling about watching people in a place where everybody knew their names. In fact, I would suggest that watching the group of characters who had little in common besides their shared watering hole touched on a very basic and essential human need – the need and desire for community.

We crave social connection and community. **We** want to be where everybody knows our name. Not only do we know instinctively that we need to feel a sense of belonging, but our Jewish tradition explicitly tells us that we need to have other people in our lives.

Back in Genesis 2:18, God observes that “it is not good for the human to be alone.” In the context of the narrative, the verse is about a single person needing a partner. However, the wisdom of this verse goes beyond two person partnerships. In Pirkei Avot, the Teachings of our Fathers, Hillel said, “do not separate from the community.”² The Talmud teaches that one who separates

² Mishnah Avot 2:4, in some editions 2:5
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from a troubled community will not see the consolation for it.³ People gather together both to celebrate joyous occasions and to find comfort and support when times are difficult. Navigating the peaks and valleys of life with the company of others is far easier than going it alone. Dr. Joshua Kulp of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem offered a metaphor illustrating this point. He wrote, “A reed on its own is easily broken but a bundle of reeds standing together cannot be broken even by the strongest winds.”⁴ Even for an introvert like myself, being part of a community is a gift and blessing.

This instruction not to separate from the community, to remain in it, led me to ask another question. What if you are new to the community? What if you already separated from the community and now are considering coming back? To bring it closer to home, maybe you are new to Temple Emanu-El. Or maybe, like me, it's been a while since you've been here and you're trying to find your place in the community. Maybe you are a long-time member and you remember what it was like to be new here and trying to find your way in. No matter how friendly people have been to you so far, maybe you don't feel like you're a part of this Temple Emanu-El community **YET**. The fact that you have come here today, whether in the sanctuary or online, tells me that you're at least curious about

³ Ta'anit 11a

⁴ Kulp Commentary on Mishnah Avot 2:4.

https://www.sefaria.org/English_Explanation_of_Pirkei_Avot.2.4.1?lang=bi

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being connected to the community. The question then becomes “how does Temple Emanu-El become the place where everybody knows your name?”

One answer begins, as many answers do, with a story.

Here we are on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. We spend much of this day acknowledging our missteps and our wrongdoing from the past year. In addition to that important work, our tradition teaches that something else significant happened on this day with our Israelite ancestors. When Moses first came down Mount Sinai with the 10 Commandments, he saw that the people, in his absence, had created a Golden Calf to worship. In his anger and frustration, Moses took the tablets with the 10 Commandments inscribed on them, and he hurled the tablets, shattering them at the base of the mountain. Later God tells Moses to ascend Mount Sinai again to create a second set of tablets. According to tradition, our ancestors received that second set of tablets ON Yom Kippur.

So what happened to the fragments from the first set of tablets? A modern midrash suggests that each person picked up a different fragment and placed that fragment in the ark. It was necessary for each person to collect a different piece, because according to the ancient rabbis, when God spoke at Sinai, each person received according to their unique ability.

When I imagine the people gathering up the fragments, I see them looking at the pieces to see what was on it. As they noticed what was on each piece, they must have shared with their neighbors what they saw and what they thought

about their piece. It was only when the people shared their own unique understanding of Torah that they were able to preserve the treasure of the first set of tablets in their entirety. Each person had something to share, and each had something to learn or come to understand from someone else. As the people placed the fragments of the first tablets in the ark, they learned something about each other, came closer to Torah, and came into deeper relationship with each other.

The idea that a community is where everyone knows your name means that everyone in the community knows who you are. We can only know who you are when you share yourself with the community. Temple Emanu-El wants to know you. We need you. – We only know you when you share your name

The founder of Hasidim, the Baal Shem Tov, taught that every person is like a letter in a Torah scroll. In a Torah scroll, if a single letter is missing, the scroll is considered invalid. That is, we cannot read from a Torah scroll which is missing even a single letter. Lest you worry that an invalid Torah scroll can never be used again, let me reassure you that it is possible to restore Torah scrolls so that we can read from them publicly again. And just as we can repair our Torah scrolls to make them complete and whole, we also can rebuild our communities when we each participate in its life.

For all that each letter of a scroll is essential, a single letter by itself does not tell a full story of Torah. The Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of blessed memory

wrote, “we can see our life as though it were a letter of the alphabet. A letter on its own has no meaning, yet when letters are joined to others they make a word, words combine with others to make a sentence, sentences connect to make a paragraph, and paragraphs join to make a story.”⁵

Just as each letter of a Torah scroll is important and necessary, so too each of us is critical to the wholeness of the Temple Emanu-El community. When we each share our unique letter – our voices, our questions, our opinions, our presence – we create and continue the story of Temple Emanu-El.

Throughout this next year, come to Temple Emanu-El – do not separate from the community. If you’re not sure how to start, check out our website to see what is happening in the next few weeks. Choose one program or event to try and make sure you say hello to someone when you attend. If you have questions about the congregation or how you can be more involved, reach out to me or to our board members. Let us get to know you; share your unique gifts with us.

Rabbi Sacks also wrote, “Community is the human expression of Divine love. It is where I am valued simply for who I am, how I live and what I give to others. It is the place where they know my name.”⁶ In this new year of 5784, let us bring our unique letter – our gifts, skills, openness, and presence – to share with each other to continue to write our congregation’s story. Let’s get to know

⁵ Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now*

⁶ <https://www.rabbisacks.org/quotes/i-am-valued/>, *Celebrating Life*. p. 149.

one another and connect authentically and more deeply so that Temple Emanu-El becomes the place where everybody knows your name.