

Community: The Key to Jewish Continuity
Yom Kippur Morning 5785/2024

Over the past ten days, our Days of Awe, I have spoken about different aspects of what being in Jewish community involves and can look like. On Erev Rosh HaShanah, I spoke about Cheshbon HaNefesh, spiritual accounting. I invited all of us, the Temple Emanu-El **community**, to engage in this accounting process as we look to both our individual and our communal future. Then on the first day of Rosh HaShanah, I spoke about the polarization in our society and the importance of remaining in conversation and relationship with one another, within our **communities**, even in the face of that polarization. Then last night at Kol Nidrei, I cautiously addressed the elephant in the room of Israel, our homeland and one of many physical manifestations of Jewish **community**.

This morning, I want to speak directly about the idea of Jewish community—our need for it, the benefits we gain from our participation in it, and the effort we need to make and maintain a community.

Communities can be formed around any shared interest or goal, on geographic proximity, or any other common qualities of a group of people. For example, my parents live in what is called a “55+ plus community.” The neighborhood initially was created based on age and location, and it also includes a community center with amenities such as a pool and a gym, a golf

course, playgrounds for visiting grandkids, and all kinds of programs designed to bring people together.

Since moving to the community about 9 years ago, my parents have developed friendships with their neighbors, joined various classes, and participated in the governance of the community, which is all made easier by the fact that their community is based on demographics and shared activities and interests.

What my parents experience in their neighborhood is no longer the norm for many people in this country. According to a 2018 Pew Research Study, A majority of Americans (57%) say they know only **some** of their neighbors; far fewer (26%) say they know **most** of them. And that's just KNOWING neighbors. Getting together with neighbors to play canasta requires going beyond merely **knowing** them. Regular canasta games have led to other get-togethers like Super Bowl parties and to other shared activities such as quilting with my mom or golfing with my dad. All of those social experiences have been opportunities for my parents and their neighbors to develop deep and meaningful relationships, and they have been able to support one another when faced with challenges, whether dealing with a broken freezer or recovering from a medical procedure.

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam explores the decline in social connectedness—the quality and quantity of relationships someone has and the sense of belonging to a group or community. No matter the type of group or

shared activity, the data show that people are less connected to each other. In comparison to the mid-20th century and even into the 1980s, fewer people participate today in the life of the towns and cities in which they live, whether that be through attending local government meetings, running for elected office, participating in a school's PTO, or volunteering to support the town's programs. Fewer people today join clubs or other affinity groups. And of particular significance to us here at Temple Emanu-El and many other faith-based organizations, fewer people today are engaging in religious or spiritual groups than in previous decades. We are not alone in feeling less engaged than we once did; we are part of a greater national trend. But it takes a toll on our relationships and our well being.

The decrease in participation in all forms of community engagement has led to an **increase** in reported feelings of isolation and loneliness. In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General published a report titled, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation."¹ In that report, the Surgeon General makes the case that "loneliness is more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health." The report presents data which describe the many ways in which a lack of social connection is actually detrimental to our physical health. For example, the report asserts that "Lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day."

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

The Surgeon General’s report describes social connection as “a fundamental human need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter.” We need to know and interact with our neighbors; we need to participate in social groups—clubs, town committees, sports and game leagues, and even in religious communities—for our emotional AND physical well-being. The same report states that

“Religious or faith-based groups can be a source for regular social contact, serve as a community of support, provide meaning and purpose, create a sense of belonging around shared values and beliefs, and are associated with reduced risk-taking behaviors.”

Taking a closer look at the Surgeon General’s claim, we can see that taking an active role in a Jewish community such as Temple Emanu-El can offer us most, if not all, of these benefits.

Jewish tradition has long understood the importance of social connection. In the 2nd or 3rd century CE, Hillel said “Do not separate yourself from the community.”² Although Hillel’s advice might feel like common sense, rabbinic commentators on this teaching felt it needed further explanation. According to them, people who do not remain with the community during its difficult times do not have the opportunity to witness when comfort or blessing come to the community.

² Pirkei Avot 2:4

I must confess that this explanation feels like something of a threat, or at least it seems to be using some kind of guilt to compel me to remain in the community. Personally, I find positive reasons to be more persuasive and longer lasting. In the book of Ecclesiastes, which we will hear next week when we celebrate Sukkot, we read, “when two lie together they are warm; but how can he who is alone get warm? Also, if one attacks, two can stand up to him. A threefold cord is not readily broken!”³

We can find strength and support simply by being together. So much of Jewish life is based on communal activity. Today, on Yom Kippur, our liturgy reminds us of the importance of being part of a collective. Ashamnu: **we** are guilty; bagadnu: **we** have cheated. AND Al chet she-chatanu l’fanecha: For the sin that **WE** have committed before You. We offer our confessions in the plural not because we each have committed these sins but because we recognize that we are responsible for each other, that any one person’s missteps contribute to the whole community’s wrongdoing. As we recite these confessionals, we can take comfort in knowing that we are not alone with our individual mistakes but that we share the weight of them with our community.

Our Yom Kippur prayers are not the only rituals we observe as a community. Many of our regular prayers – such as kaddish, the priestly blessing, and even the seven wedding blessings – require a *minyan*, a quorum of 10

³ Kohelet/Eccles. 4:11–12

people. Even when a minyan is not required, our traditions are more meaningful when observed with other people. You could certainly have a Passover seder by yourself or with only your immediate household, but a seder is more enjoyable and meaningful when shared with other friends and family.

At Temple Emanu-El, we support each other through the ups and downs of life. When there is a loss in the community, we comfort the mourners and honor the person who has passed. Upon learning of a death in our community, the Chesed committee delivers challah, grape juice, candles, and other resources to support the mourners. When there is a celebration in the community, such as at the Dodge family's baby naming last weekend, we offer blessings and congratulations to the family. And when the events in the world around us threaten to overwhelm us and send us into despair, we share our anxiety and worry with one another to lessen the burden of carrying those painful feelings alone.

Attending services, enjoying a potluck gathering, helping with Chesed baking projects, supporting the religious school—all these activities and others help us cultivate a sense of belonging around shared values. Even with the multiplicity of opinions within our congregation, we still share many core values. We still see each other as part of the same “tribe,” or to use my mamaw's term – we are, in a sense, kin to each other. Given the reality of increased antisemitism, our Jewish community provides a safe place for us to be with people who are

more likely to be feeling similar anxieties or at least more readily understand our experience of the world. You can, of course, find a sense of belonging outside of Jewish community. However, Jewish community offers a unique sense of belonging specific to our people's lived experience.

Just because community is beneficial for us does not mean it is easy to create and maintain one. Theodore Roosevelt wrote, "Nothing in this world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort."⁴ Communities do not form or sustain themselves. Individual people need to invest their time and energy into the project of making and maintaining a community. We cannot expect to reap the benefits of being part of a community unless we participate actively in it.

The good news about Jewish community is that there are **MANY** ways to build and nurture one. Just a moment ago, I mentioned a few possibilities for how you can support our Temple Emanu-El community. Whether you choose to attend any of our services, participate in educational programs, support our community members who need a little extra care, or connect with the congregation in another way, all of these activities have something in common — they all require us to show up and to be present for each other.

The community of Temple Emanu-El is NOT our building even though many of the activities of our community happen here. The Temple Emanu-El community is created and sustained when each of us chooses NOT to separate

⁴ Roosevelt, Theodore. The Works of Theodore Roosevelt. Vol. 16, United States: C. Scribner's Sons, 1926. pg. 340

from each other, when we choose to participate in the activities and life of our sacred congregation.

Perhaps you are wondering why I am stressing the importance of the Temple Emanu-El community given the current financial situation and ongoing conversations about the congregation's future.

Communities are dynamic. They change over time. They expand, contract, reorganize. To remain a part of the community requires your continued presence, participation, and support. **You** can play a role in Temple Emanu-El's future only by choosing to be a part of the conversations. Choosing to remain active in the community, in whatever future form Temple Emanu-El takes, still offers the same social, emotional, and spiritual benefits being in a sacred community has always provided.

When we are a part of a community, we journey through life with caring companionship. When we have cause to celebrate, our community has the pleasure of celebrating together, and the celebration is more meaningful and affirming in the context of community. When we face difficult times or losses, our community holds and comforts each other, offering reassurance that we are not alone in our grief and that others have lived through similar grief and healed. These benefits will remain true for Temple Emanu-El regardless of its future location and regardless of its organizational structure, because Jewish

community is grounded in the value of areyvut – the idea that we are all responsible for one another.

Though community is not easy, it is what has sustained our ancestors and what will sustain us going forward. Communal prayer and other shared practices enabled our ancestors to keep Judaism alive after the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. Continuing to come together as a community for Shabbat, holidays, important milestones, and simply the pleasure of each other's company strengthens our bonds and adds meaning to our lives. This next year will present challenges for all of us as we engage in the work of determining our congregation's future. However, many hands make for light, or at least lighter, work. Although the work of determining our congregation's future may feel difficult, let's remember Hillel's words as we journey into our community's future and not separate from our community. Instead, may we be like the threefold cord, intertwined and woven together in strength.