

**Of Zoos, Jury Duty & Barbra Streisand:  
Creating Covenantal Community**

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In today's Torah portion, we read about the long-awaited birth of Avraham and Sarah's son Isaac—the son who represents the fulfillment of a promise made to Avraham long ago of “countless seed,” the promise that he would become the father of a great nation. Through the rest of the book of Genesis we follow the passing on of this promise, from Isaac to Jacob and then to Jacob's 12 sons as they journey down to Egypt. It is in Egypt that this extended family becomes a nation, their identity formed in the Exodus and cemented at Sinai. In their encounter with God at that mountain, the Israelites receive instructions for how to become an *am kadosh*, a holy people—a community in which the living presence of their God can become manifest.

Of course the Torah, being a fairly realistic book in many ways, doesn't stop there for a happy ending. Almost as soon as they've received their assignment, the Israelites blow it—agitated at Moshe's prolonged absence on top of Mt. Sinai, they create a golden calf, and worship it. This is the first catastrophic crisis in the people's relationship with God. And God is ready to entirely destroy the people, and begin again. In chapter 32 of the book of Exodus, YHVH says to Moshe: “Let my anger flare against them, so that I may destroy them—and I will make you into a great nation!” But Moshe refuses. Why? I think it's because he understands that this whole project is about creating sacred community. Wiping out the people when they mess up isn't the answer, because in some way God needs this community, just as they need the Holy One. After all, this is how the awesome Power of Creation, this vast Being with a name you can't even pronounce, has chosen to become manifest in this world: in the context of a holy community. Moshe doesn't say as much, but perhaps, in his refusal to except the divine offer, he is challenging God: Where would You be without this people struggling to come into right-relation with one another, and with You?

So this is what I'd like to explore a bit with you today—what does it mean to be a holy community? And what are the challenges in creating such a community? And what does it mean for Dorshei Tzedek as a congregation?

“Community” seems to be one of those “in” topics these days. In the Reconstructionist movement in general, and at Dorshei Tzedek in particular, we use the language of “community” a great deal, emphasizing its importance. “Community” is something that many people have been decrying the lack of. Suburban sprawl and strip-malls have destroyed vibrant towns and urban neighborhoods; the closing and moving of companies that employ hundreds of people has devastated many towns and cities. New communications technology has led to more and more people working in isolation from home or having their primary social interaction on the Internet, not in person. There seems to be a widespread acknowledgment that communal ties in this country are fast dissolving.

I read an interesting op-ed a few weeks ago that explored the links between people going on murderous rampages and this decline of community. The authors, social scientists who study

multiple murders, argue that even more than the availability of guns, the fact that almost every one of these murderers was socially isolated was a prime factor in their violence. They had no social network to turn to when they experienced what they perceived as a devastating loss; they had no one to dissuade them from the insane course of action they were about to take. The article is a powerful argument for the fundamental importance of communal ties for the health of our society.

Yet with all the talk and concern about “community,” this remains a somewhat amorphous term. What exactly are we talking about when we say the word “community”? Are we all thinking of the same thing? This is important, because if we don’t have a clear idea of what we mean by “community,” we’ll have a hard time creating it.

It’s been helpful to me to begin to distinguish between various sorts of communities, which share some features and at the same time are quite different from one another. At the risk of vastly over-simplifying, here is a typology of three different types of community:

The first I’ll call “intimate community.” Intimate community is made up of those people we choose to be close to, with whom we choose to share our lives with in a variety of ways. These may be friends or family, but what characterizes this type of community is the level of intimacy and emotional connection between its members, and the extent to which they can count on one another for support. The main characters on *Seinfeld*, in a dysfunctional sort of way, could be a model of “intimate” community.

The second type I’ll call “situational community.” This is the community you find yourself in because of location, or other life choices—a neighborhood or a workplace, an academic program or the school where you send your children. In situational community we don’t choose who the other people are; they more or less come with the territory. But because the members of the community share some fundamental life experiences together, real relationships are built, although they might look different than those in intimate community. While there are varying degrees of intimacy in this sort of community, close emotional ties are not the main point. The types of connections among the people involved will depend on the context, and on the extent to which they work to build relationships among themselves.

But I’d actually like to focus today on another sort of community--the kind of community that has us gathered together here for these services. And this I will call “covenantal community” (a term that is not original with me).

This kind of community is what it sounds like—a group of people who come together through a covenant, through a mutual agreement about what the purposes of the community are, and what its members owe one another. Covenantal community certainly has things in common with the other two types, but it also differs in some important ways. In contrast to “intimate community,” it’s not just made up of close friends. Not that the people within a covenantal community are never intimate—if it is a healthy community, it will be a place that nurtures those kind of deep and lasting ties. But there will also be people with whom we don’t agree, who we might not even always like that much—but who we still recognize as part of the community. So while covenantal community is truly about relationship, about building real relationships, at the

same time its primary goal is not that everyone like or be in a primary emotional relationship with everyone else.

And in contrast to “situational” community, covenantal community is not about where we happen to be, but about where we are trying to go. A meaningful purpose is always at the heart of covenantal community. It is about building something new, or trying to transform what is into something better. It is about the Israelites journeying from *Mitzrayim*, the place of constriction and oppression, to a promised land. Or, in another biblical metaphor, it is about creating the *mishkan*, the sanctuary—a humanly built structure in which Godliness can dwell among the people.

Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher of relationship, spoke in similar terms when he argued that the fundamental purpose of Judaism is the establishment of what he called the “true community.” In his book *Paths in Utopia* (p. 135), Buber wrote: “The real beginning of community is when its members have a common relation to the center overriding all other relations: the circle is described by the radii, not by the points along its circumference.” He explained this in a somewhat different way in his classic *I and Thou* (p. 45): “The true community does not arise through people having feelings for one another (though indeed not without it), but through, first, their taking their stand in living mutual relation with a living Center, and, second, their being in living mutual relation with one another . . . Living mutual relation includes feelings, but does not originate with them. The community is built up out of living mutual relation, but the builder is the living effective Center.”

So, what is Buber is trying to describe here? Buber’s insight is that this type of community, although it depends on deep, true, mutual relations among its members, is actually held together by something at its core, and by the relationship of each of its members to that core “something.” Although he calls it different things in different books, this “something” that Buber contends is at the center of true community is what some call God, or Godliness. That is to say, it is through dynamic relationship to something beyond ourselves, to some greater source of meaning, that we are able to build effective relationships of mutuality, of love and justice, among ourselves.

And yet at the same time, Buber also argues that it is only through coming into real connection with other people that we achieve a full relationship to that something that is beyond us. Where there is true human connection, Buber says, “where the eternal rises in the Between, in the seemingly empty space: that true place of realization is community, and the true community is that relationship in which the Divine comes to its realization between [human being and human being]” (*On Judaism*, p. 110). Like Moses arguing with God not to destroy the Israelites, Buber is essentially saying that without human community, God cannot become manifest in this world.

While Buber was not exactly a Reconstructionist, I think his insight into community fits well into a Reconstructionist understanding of both God and Jewish community. Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, argued that God is not a supernatural Being, not a personalized force “out there,” but a spiritual power operative in both humanity and nature, a Power through which human beings are able to achieve their fullest humanity. For Kaplan, it is

in community that individuals both make sense of the world and are enabled to bring Godly qualities of love and justice to fulfillment in this world. On a more pragmatic level, both Buber and Kaplan understood that a fundamental component of “true” or “covenantal” community is mutual help and support among its members. Kaplan wrote that “A community might be defined as that form of social organization in which the welfare of each is the concern of all, and the life of the whole is the concern of each” (*Future of the American Jew*, p. 325).

Kaplan also realized that, as Jews, there are certain things that we can only accomplish in community. One is the creation of a meaningful spiritual practice based in Jewish tradition, whether it’s davvening on Shabbat or celebrating holidays or observing *mitzvot* in daily life. Another is keeping alive a 2,000 year-old conversation that centers around the study of and interaction with sacred Jewish texts. And the communal function of mutual support also takes on special meaning and force in a Jewish context, as ancient traditions and rituals—and some new ones--help guide us through significant life changes.

So here is the \$64,000 question: if the creation of this sort of community is so meaningful, so important, so beneficial, so spiritually and socially necessary—why is it so hard? Why are covenantal communities so difficult to create? Why do so many of us hesitate to join once they are created?

My colleague Richard Hirsh recently shared with me a text from an earlier period in Jewish history that might help us answer that question. I think this text—with Richard’s commentary--can help us understand both some of the reality of what covenantal community entails, and what the obstacles are. But first, some background. This text comes from a wonderful type of Jewish literature called “*responsa*,” or “answers.” A combination of case law and Ann Landers, the *responsa* are collections of questions sent by Jewish communities or individuals to authoritative rabbis, and those rabbis’ answers. Here is a question received by Rabbi Moshe di Trani, the head of the rabbinical court in the town of S’fat in the land of Israel, in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century:

“SHAYLA/QUESTION: A group of people formed a mutual society for the purpose of praying together and assisting each other, to share in each other’s joys and sorrows, and to help one another in case of distress. The members took an irrevocable oath not to rescind this mutual pledge, and not to withdraw from the society unless all other members gave their consent. Now one of the members wants to leave the society. He claims that in his moment of trouble the other members did not come to his aid. Therefore, he contends, the agreement was broken and is now null and void, and he wishes to join another synagogue. Please, Rabbi, let us know, if he leaves, what should be his punishment. Also, may another synagogue accept him as a member?”

And Rabbi di Trani responded:

“TESHUYA/ANSWER: The society was formed primarily for the purpose of praying together. It is too much to expect that a group of people should be associated with each other for any length of time without an occasional disagreement. Therefore, although he may have a grievance about not receiving help in a time of need, this does not release him

from the obligation to pray in that synagogue. The clause regarding assisting each other is not linked to the agreement of praying together. They are two independent clauses; the abrogation of one does not cancel the other.

A Bet Din/rabbinic court must decide whether the members violated the agreement by not coming to his aid. If they are found guilty, they must be punished and warned henceforth to live up to their pact. And if they fail to do so, the members must permit him to leave the community. But before the matter has been clarified by the Bet Din, he has no right to resign. If he does, he is subject to the fines that are spelled out in the agreement, and he is not permitted to pray in any synagogue.”

I love this text, because it shows us a society so different than our own! While we have all had experiences with various sorts of organizations that have entailed a variety of obligations and responsibilities, I doubt most, if any of us, have taken an “irrevocable oath” to live up to communal responsibilities, and promised not to leave the organization unless everyone else agrees! We can understand how serious this kind of community was in an earlier era, when there really were no other mechanisms—no governmental social welfare programs, no nonprofit organizations—to turn to for help. But the people who sent in this question were not only concerned with material aid, but also with spiritual support—the obligation to show up for the *minyan*, the quorum for prayer—and with social relationship, sharing in “each other’s joys and sorrows.” These things were all important enough to them that they were willing to enter into this kind of binding agreement.

Yet, as Rabbi di Trani points out in his answer, in some ways the 16<sup>th</sup> century wasn’t so different from our own: “It is too much to expect that a group of people should be associated with each other for any length of time without an occasional disagreement.” That is, perhaps, a polite understatement. Because this is one of the main difficulties of communities: there are other people in them. And these other people tend to have their own opinions, their own sense of what is right and what is wrong, their own assumptions, needs and wants. And often what these people think and do and want and assume fails to live up to my expectations. But as the rabbi wisely explains—a disagreement cannot be the basis upon which communal obligations evaporate. Rabbi di Trani does allow for the possibility of a community failing one of its members, at which point the mutual oath becomes null and void—but until it is clear that the community, or some of its members, have failed to live up to their obligations, an individual cannot simply decide to leave, for that would weaken the fundamental agreement upon which the community is founded.

Rabbi Hirsh points out in his commentary on this text: “One cannot be conditionally committed to a community, offering support and fulfilling expectations when one is content, and withholding support and defaulting on obligations when one is disappointed or in disagreement. No relationship is sustained in this way.”

I often think that each positive aspect of a person or a situation is simply the flip side of a corresponding negative aspect, and so it is here with community. The positive quality of constancy, of knowing that people are there for you when you need them, has as its flip side the reality of obligation: you can’t just leave. Of course, you can—this is not the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we live in a free society, and most of us here don’t accept rabbis’ opinions as law. But the reality is

that if I fail to live up to my obligations, then the community may fail with me, because the requisite foundation of trust and commitment has been broken.

This basic human challenge, the challenge of creating and maintaining covenantal community, becomes even more pronounced in modern America, where personal autonomy has been elevated to the level of sacred right and mutual obligation has little if any cultural currency. In a country in which just paying taxes is considered “socialism” by many, the notion that I could be obligated by a communal oath—even if that obligation was freely entered into—may seem rather strange. We are swimming against the current tide when we assert that there is value and meaning in establishing communities in which members take on responsibilities towards one other, and in which we recognize that sometimes individual preference has to bow to the collective good.

There are also other challenges, more internal challenges, to creating true community. As Buber writes, true community calls for “living mutual relationship”—a real connection of one person to another. Achieving this kind of connection with a group of people can be threatening in any number of ways. Some of us have a real fear of being “different” than everyone else; some of us have a profound fear of seeming to be the “same.” Sometimes the idea itself of “community” can be an obstacle to engaging in it. If I have an idea of what “community” is and what it looks like, I may look around and assume that all these other people are somehow sharing in that, and I’m not—they’re more “in,” more connected, more something than me. This could be disheartening enough to keep me out.

As we know from our own members’ experiences, we often have most need of community at times of loss and pain, and the community itself is often strengthened in responding to one of its members in this way. And yet, at the same time, the prospect of being that vulnerable to a group of people who I may or may not know all that well can be terrifying. I might wonder, how much can I trust these people? I might fear their judgment, I might assume that none of them can really understand what I’m going through. All of these kinds of feelings keep us separate, keep us tentative.

I am not suggesting that covenantal community requires that we strip ourselves bare—this is the important distinction between “intimate community” and “covenantal community.” We should not force ourselves to be intimate with people we feel we don’t know well. Yet this type of community does call for a certain willingness and openness: a willingness to trust, and an openness to receiving the care and love of others. This balance is difficult in a society that seems to swing between two extremes—from the hyper-privacy of the therapist’s office to the emotional exhibitionism of daytime talk shows. In covenantal community we are striving for something else: we are trying to act on the words of Leviticus: *v’ahavta l’reyecha camocha*, “you shall love your fellow human being as yourself” —without exhibitionism and without shame. This is the love of mutual respect and mutual aid, the attempt to do for the other as we would want done for ourselves. And there is profound responsibility in this kind of loving. If there is a willingness to trust, then I need to be trustworthy; if there is an openness to lovingkindness, then I need to meet that openness with loving care.

So, to come back to my original question: how do we define “community,” the kind of community that could be called “holy”? By way of summing up, here are three things that teach us something important about community: a zoo, jury duty, and a Barbra Streisand concert.

Covenantal community is like a zoo—there is a wonderful diversity of animals in it, but when they get hungry, some of the animals might have a desire to eat some of the other animals. Therefore we need to keep everyone well fed, and to create structures for everyone’s mutual safety and benefit.

Covenantal community is like jury duty—sometimes you just have to show up, even if you don’t really feel like it.

And covenantal community is like a Barbra Streisand concert—people come together for some focusing purpose, for an elevated reason: there needs to be something that hints of the divine at its center.

And why is creating such community difficult? For lots of reasons. Because of the nature of the obligations, and because of disappointment in others; because of disagreements and because it’s hard to trust. Because of fears of being too close or not close enough. Because it’s hard to give and it’s hard to receive. And yet—

This is really why we are sitting here today. This is why the Israelites shlepped out of Egypt and through the wilderness for 40 years. This is what has kept Jews alive and Judaism vibrant through 2,000 years of exile and oppression. We have been called to create sacred community, covenantal community—for our own good, and for the good of the world. Because all of the other stuff—spiritual awakening, intellectual wisdom, a sense of identity and of knowing right from wrong, working to repair the world—all of those wonderful aspects of Judaism can only happen if we can make this thing called “community” work. If I had to come up with a bumper sticker to describe Judaism, this is what it would say: “Sacred community. Just do it.”

Like the Israelites making their way through the desert, we will probably experience moments of complaining; there will be hard decisions and compromises. But there will also be those moments when we experience what it means, in Buber’s words, for the Divine to attain its “earthly fullness.” There will be times when we know what it means to experience love and care and support. There will be occasions when we realize that we can achieve a great deal more as a community than any one of us can as an individual. And all of these moments will sustain us and nurture us and move us along on this sacred journey.

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