

Gathering the Community in a Time of Coronavirus

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There is a certain (painful) irony that this week, of all weeks – a week in which we learned the term “social distancing,” a week where we have been separated from friends and family, where spouses can’t visit each other in the hospital or in the nursing home. A week in which universities sent student homes, sporting events were cancelled, malls were shuttered. It was this week of all weeks that we read parashat Vayakheil P’kudei, which opens with the words “Vayakheil Moshe et Kol Adat B’nei Yisrael – Moshe gathered together every unit of the Israelites. And just in case we didn’t understand it, just three verses later it repeats “Vayomeir Moshe el kol adat b’nei Yisrael.” Again, emphasizing that everyone was together. Who said God doesn’t have a sense of humor?

And what’s the first thing that Moshe does when he gathers them together? He reminds them of the need to observe Shabbat. They are all together. Observe shabbat.

And so it was in the time of Moshe, and so it has been in every generation, that Jewish communities throughout the world gather together on Shabbat. It doesn’t matter if you are Reform or Orthodox, Conservative, Renewal, Reconstructionist or Humanist. You can live in Israel or anywhere throughout the diaspora. In Israel, it doesn’t even matter if you are religious or secular. Shabbat is the time when the community comes together. It can be around dining tables or in shul, on Friday night or Saturday morning – shabbat is our gathering time. It is when we are “Vayakheil” – together with our friends or family, or friends who are like family. It is when family units stop running around and sit together for dinner without the distractions of our electronic devices. This is what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, z’l, meant when he said “More than Jews have kept Shabbat, shabbat has kept the Jews.” Shabbat is our time to be in community.

Until now.

This week, again, we will have no Shabbat services at shul, no big gatherings around Shabbat tables, no large groups singing zemirot. Rather than gathering together, we will each stay in our own home, with only our immediate family members. True, we will no longer each be sitting in front of our own computer with our ear phones on, each participating in his or her own zoom meeting or class or Google Hangout. But can we really be a Shabbat community if we can’t gather together physically?

In the past, I would have likely said no. Being in physical proximity to one another is important. We are social creatures who need hugs to comfort us, shoulders to lean on when we tire, and slaps on the back or high-fives to give us encouragement. But during this past week, we have learned something. We can still connect to one another, even when we can’t be together

physically. Our need to be gathered in community is so strong that when it is taken away from us, we immediately find the next best ways to gather.

So, for example, this week, two of our members, Roberta Helzner and Nancy Solomon, each lost a brother at a time that was unexpected and far too young. Our community knows what to do when someone dies. We help prepare the home and deliver siddurim, we attend funerals and shiva homes. We give hugs and sometimes just sit silently with the bereaved, knowing that it is our presence that matters most. We couldn't do any of that for Roberta or Nancy. So what happened? On two successive nights, as we gathered for our virtual ma'ariv, over 40 people signed on to zoom and listened carefully as Roberta and Nancy shared their memories of their brothers. Not only that, but we were also able to provide a platform for their family members to all be together. We found a way to gather our community.

For our youngest members too, their routines were disrupted of routine and were separated from their friends and sometimes even grandparents. We could have simply said, this is the government ordered, there's nothing we can do about it. But instead, our ECC director immediately put into action a plan where the students now spend part of each day together as a class – reading a book or doing an activity, each one in their own living room. It gives new meaning to “parallel play”! We had 54 families who signed on for Music with Ms. Ellie, dancing, making hand motions and happily singing along. And on Friday, they gathered together again as a school for Shabbat sing.

Beyond our synagogue, I hear stories of old friends getting back in touch with one another, family “reunions,” Camp Ramah sing-a-longs with over 1000 people participating and so much more. People are checking in with their neighbors, calling friends who live alone or who are not on computers, volunteering to help. As I call member after member of the synagogue to check-in, I hear amazing stories of the way people within our community and beyond are helping each other out. Our human need to gather together – *vayakheil* – is so strong that coronavirus can only put up obstacles – but it cannot block us.

Our parasha also recognizes that a true community must include all of its members. The Kol – all – is not a generic kol – in fact the parasha differentiates, Kol n'div lev, kol chachem leiv, kol eish, kol ishah chatat lev, kol hanshim, kol ish v'ishah. Volunteers, skilled craftspeople, every man, every skilled woman, all woman, all couples. The commentator Or HaChayim notes that the “kol” is meant to indicate the inclusiveness – that everyone had a portion in the mishkan, not just the men, but that it is specifically including the women, children and orphans, groups who are often left out or at the margins of the society. Everyone has something to contribute to the community – and we must take care of all members of our community.

But what about Shabbat? If we have all these means to be together virtually during the week, shouldn't we “suspend” the prohibitions of Shabbat in order to gather together online? Normally, Shabbat is the time to be together, yet in this situation it is the one time we are not gathering together as a community. But hereto, our parasha is instructive. The rabbis teach that

the mention of Shabbat prior to the details of building the mishkan is to teach that even the construction of the mishkan does not trump the command to rest on Shabbat. Perhaps the Israelites would have thought otherwise - because it was God's holy place being built at God's command, its construction should over-ride the prohibition of working on Shabbat. But here we are to learn the lesson from God's *dugma ishit* – God's personal example - just as God rested from the work of creation to celebrate the first Shabbat, so too, even the creation of the mishkan, God's holy sanctuary, does not override the need to rest on Shabbat.

And so, on this Shabbat, we will join together in welcoming Shabbat together prior to candle-lighting. We will join together immediately following Shabbat for Havdalah. And in between, we will give our Zoom and our Facetime, Skype, Google Hangouts and Facebook live events a rest. But we do so with the knowledge that when the sun goes down, the community that we work so hard to build will be waiting for us. Nothing can take it away from us. We might be socially distant, but we will still be social. We will still call out for help from one another and we will still answer those calls. We cannot touch, but we can give the warmth of a smile, the nod of a head, the comforting eyes.

Perhaps reading this parasha this week then, is not ironic at all, but instructive. We are commanded to gather our community together with all of its members. In many ways, this week more than many others, we have done that and I know that we will continue to do so throughout this period. And, I have a feeling, when we emerge from our homes to come back together again, perhaps we may find that our ties to our community and our ties to one another, have become even stronger.