

YOM KIPPUR 5777
COMMUNITY – OUR LIFEBLOOD
OCTOBER 2016
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Sebastian Junger in his book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* writes there are positive effects of war on mental health. This was first noticed by the great sociologist Emile Durkheim who found that when European countries went to war, suicide rates dropped. “Psychiatric wards in Paris,” Junger writes, “were strangely empty during both world wars, and that remained true as the German army rolled into the city in 1940. Researchers documented a similar phenomenon during civil wars in Spain, Algeria, Lebanon, and Northern Ireland.” He writes that suicide rates in Belfast dropped 50% during the riots of 1969 and 1970, and homicide and other violent crimes also went down.

An Irish psychologist, H.A. Lyons, writes: “When people are actively engaged in a cause their lives have more purpose... with resulting improvement in mental health. It would be irresponsible to suggest violence is a means of improving mental health, but the Belfast findings suggest that people will feel better psychologically if they have more involvement with their community.”

After examining the aftereffects of an earthquake in Chile and the war in Sarajevo, Junger writes: “What catastrophes seem to do – sometimes in a span of a few minutes – is turn back the clock on 10,000 years of social evolution. Self-interest gets subsumed into group interest because there is no survival outside group survival.”

While this may seem to be an odd finding, it is very true of human life. The next time you purchase a ticket which has a perforation in it, look at the small print. Usually you will find the words: “not good if detached.” When something is cut off from its source, it often becomes quite worthless. Something detached from that which gives it life and spirit is apt to shrivel up and die. People need people. Community is essential for meaning. And indeed, we are “not good if detached.”

In a very famous Talmudic story, Honi Ha-Me’agel returns home after seventy years of sleep. This is the same Honi who planted a carob tree knowing that it would take those seventy years for it to give forth fruit. To his chagrin, the new generation of rabbis in the study house do not know him. Seventy years after he first went to sleep, he is not recognizable to anyone. Despondent, he prays for his own death. Rava comments on the situation: “This is why people say: ‘either companionship or death.’” While this may be an exaggeration, it accentuates a very important principle. We need others and others need us. It is essential to be part of a greater whole, a community, a caring group of people. On Rosh Hashana I spoke of the importance of

the individual, the uniqueness of each and every human soul, the need to recognize the humanity in the other. Yet, if we stop there that is not enough. We are not only singular individuals, we crave community. We want to be part of a larger whole. It is essential for our very being, our existence, for a life filled with meaning. We need to be attached to a community, to be concerned about others, and for others to be concerned about us.

Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, in examining the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis, suggests that the stories answer the important question which has continually challenged our societies: “Is the individual an independent free entity, who gives up basic aspects of his sovereignty in order to live within a communal framework; or is the reverse true: the individual is born into the community which, in turn, invests him with certain rights?” Soloveitchik suggests that Judaism rejects both alternatives, if they are seen as diametrically opposed. Both experiences are necessary, individuality and collectivity; uniqueness and community. The chapters in Genesis remind us that though man is created alone he immediately needs a helpmate, a person with whom to share his life. Thus, for us, though we raise up the life of each and every human being, we must see ourselves as belonging to a community and being a contributing member of it. If we find ourselves isolated, concerned for our own self-interest, then we tend to lose the very meaning of our social existence.

All of us were enthralled with the exploits of the athletes at the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. It was compelling television and personal drama. Some of the athletes were involved in individual sports and, therefore, their personal exploits were on display. Others were members of teams and their team, though made up of individuals, won or lost on the field or in the pool together. Totally dependent on their teammates they could only be successful if they joined together in a winning combination.

But, sometimes even in individual exploits the need for another and a sense of community becomes very important. One of the lasting images of the Rio Olympics occurred in the woman’s 5000 meter qualifying heat. American runner, Abbey D’Agostino, clipped New Zealand’s Nikki Hamblin from behind, sending both tumbling to the ground well short of the finish. The *Associated Press* reported: “D’Agostino got up, but Hamblin was just lying there. She appeared to be crying. Instead of running in pursuit of the others, D’Agostino crouched down and put her hand on the New Zealander’s shoulder, and then under her arms to help her up, and softly urged her not to quit.” They both made it to the finish line at the same time and embraced.

That is an image that we must uphold. Abbey could have easily left Nikki behind in attempting to secure a place in the finals. Instead, she showed her graciousness to another human being and together they crossed the finish line. They may not have gained an Olympic medal, but each gained a friend and conveyed an important message to all the live onlookers and millions around the world.

Community is based on relationships. Today modern technology both enhances and detracts from that sense of community that we so need and crave.

In a commentary on of the book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* by Sherry Turkel, Chris Woods writes: “In the past, dining with your sister or calling a best friend entailed talking to them, engaging in real conversation. However, this past decade has seen a dramatic change. Rather than converse with a dining partner about a meal, we post a picture of it on a social media site; rather than calling our siblings, we shoot them a quick e-mail; and, when at parties and similar gatherings, our focus is on Internet cat videos and sending messages online telling others what we are up to. Basically, speaking face-to-face is rarely done.”

Turkel herself writes that we have sacrificed conversation for mere connection. We turn away from each other and toward our phones. We are forever elsewhere. To empathize, to grow, to love and be loved, to take the measure of ourselves or of another, to fully understand and engage the world around us, we must be in conversation, we must be part of a community.

Living in isolation or hiding behind the facade of modern technology is not adequate to create community. We need others and others need us. David Hazony in his book *The Ten Commandments: How Our Most Ancient Moral Texts Can Renew Modern Life* writes that: “We often think of ‘community’ as something we participate in, are members of, benefit from. But the point of the ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness,” is that community begins not with involvement but with taking responsibility. Community is alive when the redemptive self turns toward his loved ones and best friends, caring and nurturing and protecting the people and institutions that community is made of.” “Either companionship or death,” realized Honi, and the truth of this statement continues. We must be part of a community that cares about others. We cannot live life solely on our own. We have learned that no man is an island and no one can live in isolation. Instead, even as we retain our own individuality, we need to extend ourselves to embrace others.

An author points out that when a friend is struggling, you can’t e-mail a meal, nor can you cover for a carpool partner via a text, or FaceTime a plate of cookies. When a tragedy strikes, typing “no words” on your Facebook feed doesn’t begin to compare with silently sitting next to a mourner in a shiva home. At its core, if it is physically possible, community means being there and showing up offline, in person.

The importance of community is axiomatic to Jewish life. For a mourner to say Kaddish and be comforted, there must be people who are present and can respond. In order to fulfill the obligation to hear the shofar blown or the megillah read, one must be there to hear it live and in person. For a couple to be blessed with the recitation of sheva berachot at the meals that occur during the week following their wedding, there must be panim chadashot, new faces, guests who physically come to share in their joy.

In this age of the selfie and lack of real conversations, Judaism and the Jewish people are being challenged. We are a people based upon community. A complete prayer service can only be performed with a minyan present. One of the first things that Jewish communities have the responsibility for is establishing Jewish schools and cemeteries, taking care of the living and the dead. Even today in our liturgy of the Yom Kippur Mahzor, we offer our prayers in the plural, recognizing our responsibility one to another and our concern for each other. We're not concerned merely for our own welfare, we are concerned for another's as well.

The Jewish people is ultimately one Mishpacha, one family. As a family we may sometimes have internal struggles and disagreements. But when the chips are on the line, when our fate is being decided, when difficulties and challenges emerge, we have learned to stand together. For if we do not, we fall individually, and collectively.

The Talmud tells us "When the community is in trouble, a person should not say, I will go into my house and eat and drink and be at peace with myself." Thus, it is our task to be concerned about our fellow Jew anywhere in the world. It is not good enough to say, "All is fine with me," and be done with it. Until we establish that there is safety, security, and freedom of our entire Jewish family, we cannot be safe and secure either. Thus, we remain concerned about the fate of the Jews the world over. We are ever vigilant about the future of our brothers and sisters in Israel. We reach out to our family members all over Europe who have gone through a terrible year. Last June Bryna and I were in Paris with members of the Jewish Agency Board of Governors' delegation expressing our support for the French Jewish community. As we stood at the Hyper Cacher supermarket remembering those who were killed in the terrorist action, we exhibited our solidarity with our brothers and sisters. We recognized that they need us as much as we need them.

As Hillel taught us in Pirkei Avot: "Do not separate yourself from the community." If you wish to be a full member of the Jewish people, you must be fully involved in its historic memory and its historic destiny. The Talmud teaches: "At a time when the people of Israel are immersed in distress and one of them goes off on his own way refusing to share their suffering, the two angels who accompany this man come and place their hands on his head and say, 'Since this man has separated himself from the community, let him not see its consolation.'" As the Talmud concludes,

“Whoever suffers in sympathy with the community will merit to see its consolation, the redemption of the community.”

The Talmud in the Tractate of Shabbat tells a story that in the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to Abraham: “Your children have sinned against me.” Abraham will answer G-d: “Sovereign of the Universe, let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your name.” Then G-d will go to Jacob, who G-d hoped would supplicate and ask for mercy for his people. G-d will say to Jacob: “Your children have sinned.” Jacob too will answer Him: “Sovereign of the Universe, ‘Let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your name.’”

It is only at that point that G-d will go to the third of the Patriarchs, to Isaac, and tell him the same thing, that the Children of Israel have sinned. Isaac, at that point, will confront G-d: “Are they my children and not Your children? Moreover, how much have they sinned?” Isaac then begins bargaining with G-d: “How many are the years of man? Seventy. Subtract 20, for which you do not punish,” for in Rabbinic times it was assumed that G-d did not punish individuals under 20 years of age. “Subtract 25, which comprise the nights, and there remain 25, subtract 12 ½ of prayer, eating, and using the facilities, and there remain 12 ½.” Isaac then states to G-d: “If You will bear all, it is well; if not, half of them shall be upon me and half upon You. And if You say they must be upon me, I offered myself before You as a sacrifice.” At that point, according to the text, G-d is satisfied. One of the Patriarchs does not abandon his people and asks for mercy from G-d.

It is rather interesting that it is Isaac who will save the Jewish people and not the great Patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob. Perhaps the Rabbis are trying to teach us the lesson that each of us, whether we consider ourselves important or of less significance, can stand up for our community and make a difference. Each of us needs the other and has the obligation to protect the other. Each of us can stand up and make a difference in this world for our people.

When our students on campus have to endure anti-Zionist propaganda and threats of BDS, then their parents, the alumni of the school and its faculty must respond “Hineni”, “Here I am.” We must be there to help our students in whatever way possible. When the State of Israel is delegitimized at the United Nations, in the International Court of Justice, or at UNESCO, we must respond “Hineni”. We must protest to our politicians, to our government, and in whatever way possible make it clear that this is unacceptable. When our brothers and sisters in Israel are subject to terrorism on the streets, we must respond “Hineni”. We must be there for them in person and extend our continual support. When Jews in Europe and in South America are subject not merely to anti-Zionism, but anti-Semitism, we must respond “Hineni”. We must stand with them financially and politically.

These are very challenging times, and if we are only concerned for ourselves, shame on us. It is critical that we reach out beyond our own personal bonds to our family, wherever they may be. We need our family and our family needs us. Soloveitchik teaches us that: “there are times when we are a community of common pain, of common suffering. The Halakha has taught the individual to include his fellow human being in his prayer. The individual must not limit himself to his own needs, no matter how pressing those needs are and how distinguished he is. Halakha has formulated prayer in the plural.”

In our prayers over these High Holy Days we aren't merely concerned for ourselves, we are concerned for our community far and wide. The Jewish people need us and whether we comprehend it or not, we need them. We are ultimately “no good if detached.” We do need friendship and companionship. We do need personal interaction with another human being. We do need to be part of a larger whole, giving meaning to our personal existence and to our lives.

On this Yom Kippur day, as we pray for well-being for ourselves, our families, our community, our people, and the entire world, may we learn the lesson well. We are only as strong as the community in which we are a member. May we be privileged to be part of communities which add to our lives as we add to theirs.