

Rabbi Fine
Kol Nidre 5772

True Community

It is not unusual for a rabbi to get the question, rabbi, why can't I say kaddish alone, or with just a few people?

In the Talmud we read, "The *Shechinah*, the Divine presence, rests upon every assembly of ten."

What is it that is special about a gathering of at least a minyan people that brings the Shechinah to join us in prayer?

We find a similar statement in Maimonides Code of Jewish law related to Yom Kippur. He notes that while the 10 days from Rosh Hashanan to Yom Kippur are a special time when God will immediately accept our prayers, that only applies to an individual.

However, when a community cries out and does *teshuva* together, God is always ready to accept the prayers immediately regardless of the time of year.

Why would this be the case? Why is there added power to our prayers when we are together?

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the underlying unity of all of life, and asserted that our spiritual task is to respond to that truth by working to make what is broken in our lives whole.

The core vision of Judaism is of a world redeemed, a world in which the unity of life is fully manifest. While this vision can seem like a far out messianic fantasy, our tradition has always focused on the practical ways of working towards such a goal within the nitty gritty details of our lives.

The unity we seek is not one that obliterates the differences found among people, but rather one that honors our diversity and builds healthy connections *between* us.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah I spoke about how we can begin that work at the micro level in our personal relationships.

Unity comes between two people not when they both come to *think* the same and do the same, but when they can understand and respect one another and build a sense of connectedness *between* them as a result.

We create a world that is whole by starting at the micro level of one-on-one relationships and we can then build outward to the macro level.

Tonight I want to speak about the next step outwards in the co-centric circles of building human connection, the level of community.

As the teachings I began with make clear, our tradition recognizes a unique power that emerges when human beings are able to forge connections within a larger group.

There is some spiritual tipping point that takes place when we come together as community, something that can't be achieved alone.

In 1959, China took over the ancient homeland of the Tibetan people, and the young spiritual leader the Dalai Lama was forced to flee by horseback over snowy Himalayan mountain passes to safety across the border in India. In 1990 a group of rabbis and Jewish leaders went to visit the Dalai Lama in Dharmasala, which is the home of the Tibetan leadership in exile.

It was a unique opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue between two ancient religions. One of the things that the Dalai Lama asked his visitors was what the secret was of the Jew's survival in exile.

The Dalai Lama recognized that survival of the Tibetan people in exile was in danger, and hoped to learn from our the Jewish experience of survival and retention of identity despite exile from our ancestral homeland and a history of persecution.

In his book, "The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion", the anthropologist Mircea Eliade demonstrated that one of the common characteristics of ancient religions was that they had what he called an "axis mundi" – a central pillar that supported the entire worldview of the religion and culture.

This axis mundi was usually a place invested with such symbolic significance by the culture, that were it to be destroyed the group often could not sustain itself afterwards.

For our ancestors 2000 years ago, the Temple in Jerusalem was our *axis mundi*. The place the Temple stood is in our tradition literally considered to be the center of the universe.

The Temple was the place that Jews came to worship and connect with God and see the rest of the Jewish people 3 times a year.

When the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE and Jews were scattered to the four ends of the earth, as we put it in our prayers, it was quite possible that it could have meant the end of the Jewish people.

How could we even conceive of Jewish life outside of the Land of Israel and without the Temple?

The fact that we were able to adapt and maintain our identity is indeed remarkable. The fact that we not only survived through centuries of horrific persecution, but have been remarkably creative and productive contributors to the world is amazing.

This being the case, the question the Dalai Lama asked his Jewish visitors is not only a question that the Tibetan people could learn from, but one that we as modern Jews can learn from as well.

The answer I would offer the Dalai Lama, is that our secret over the centuries has been *community*. Across the continents across the globe across the centuries, the Jewish people have been nurtured and sustained by Jewish community.

After the destruction of the Temple, we made a radical adaptation that allowed us to survive. The central pillar had fallen, but in its place we learned to raise pillars of community wherever we have been.

These communities remained tied together as we shared common traditions and history, with the Temple in Jerusalem remaining the symbolic center of our universe in our prayers.

This momentous shift was possible because our ancestors recognized that places aren't inherently holy. A place is holy to the extent that it helps forge connection between human beings and also between humans and God.

This insight goes back to our Torah.

In the book of Exodus, as the Israelites are camped at Mt. Sinai after leaving Egypt, God says to Moses, "*asu li mikdash, v'shachanti b'tocham* – Let them make me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them."

But the essence of God's command is not actually to build a *place*. What is fascinating and incredibly important is that God didn't say *Asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocho* - let them make me a sanctuary and I will dwell in it.

God wasn't asking for the Israelites to create a building where God could live.

Does God need a house?

If so, why would God ask the Israelites to build it?

Couldn't He have plopped down a little house for himself when he was creating the world, perhaps even a summer home on the beach in Marblehead?

Perhaps God was having a hard time getting a mortgage during the 7 days of creation?

No, God wasn't asking them to build a house for Him to live in. God said "*asu li mikdash, v'shachanti b'tocham*" – Let them make me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among *them*." God didn't need to build a spiritual home, we did.

When I first arrived at Temple Sinai, I was struck by the language the community used to describe itself. One of the most common words used is family. We call ourselves the Temple Sinai family.

This is a very appropriate term for Jewish community, after all, the Jewish people began as a family. Avraham and Sarah had Isaac, Isaac and Rebecca had Jacob and Esau, Jacob had 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel who became the people of Israel.

Thousands of years later we are still here, and our shared spiritual roots give us a unique connection to one another today.

It is for this reason that the main metaphor for sacred space in Judaism is *bayit*, the home. The Temple in Jerusalem was called the *bet hamikdash* – the holy house.

The two central institutions of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple were also *batim* – homes. One was the *bet midrash* – the house of study, and the second was the *bet haknesset* – the house of gathering, otherwise known as the synagogue.

The synagogue is a home that we share with our extended family and with guests. Like a home, it is a place that we share our joys and our sorrows. A place we can find support and also be challenged to grow in new ways.

It is because we have built shared homes of community wherever we are, that we Jews have been able to maintain our interconnection even when we have been far from our ancestral homeland.

Humans are fundamentally and instinctually relational beings. Freud once asked, “What is mental health?” - “the ability to work and to love.” Community is a place to share the love and caring and basic human connection that life is all about.

When it comes down to it, if you think about what really make life meaningful is to share it with family and friends. We can have all the riches in the world, but none of them will bring us happiness like basic human connection will.

When we think of our hardest times in life, how many of have come when we didn’t have enough of that human connection?

Community is a place we share the full range of human experience, where our life journey becomes part of a larger story. To use Myranne’s metaphor from Rosh Hashanah, community is the place we weave ourselves into a greater tapestry of people that sustains us and gives our life meaning.

When we grow up with Jewish community, we sometimes forget how precious it is, and I was touched a few weeks ago to hear the perspective of our communications maestro Josh, who began his Sinai experience as a newcomer to Jewish life, which he’s given me permission to reflect on here.

Josh often writes little personal notes in the emails you receive about upcoming events. A few weeks ago, in our weekly Sinai email following our end of the summer bonfire on the beach, his note was more like, in his own words, “a small novel.”

What had gotten Josh so excited, was that at the bonfire something had clicked. He realized more fully than before what Jewish community is all about. In his words, “we celebrate life together.”

At a recent family wedding, Emily’s uncle used a beautiful metaphor for how he felt about the occasion. He is 80 years old, and spoke about as he looks back on his life, he sees it as a bunch of points that are interconnected by a line.

Those points are the momentous occasions such as the wedding.

Those points in our lives most often take place in community. Whether they are sad or joyful, together we share their significance and sacredness.

To say that community has been the secret that has sustained us over the centuries though is not a full answer to the Dalai Lama’s question. He is a very smart man, and I’m sure at this point in my sermon he would ask a follow up question.

What is it that has allowed Jews to create community where we can celebrate life together? How do we do it?

The first part of my answer is that we have an incredible tool kit for building community that our ancestors passed down to us.

In our toolkit is our Torah, our value of open dialogue and debate, our rituals that help us celebrate joyous occasions and care for one another in sad times, and our Jewish calendar with Shabbat and the holidays.

As the great Zionist thinker Ahad Ha’Am once said, “More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews.”

At weddings and shiva houses, I often am awed by the simple but deep wisdom that has been passed down to us about how to celebrate and how to mourn. We are blessed with a very rich and full toolkit as Jews.

But there is another factor, which has been equally important to our success in creating community over the centuries.

This factor is one that we sometimes forget as modern Jews. I have forgotten it myself in the past.

Two years ago on the high holidays I shared a piece of wisdom that my rabbi, Shimon Brand, gave me in college.

I had been speaking with him about feeling like the community that was a perfect fit for me wasn't out there - this was not as a rabbi at that point, but just as a Jew looking for community.

Shimon's reply was "Aaron, you don't find community, you build community."

What Shimon did was shift the way I was thinking about community. Our fundamental orientation towards community as Jews has been essential in enabling us to effectively build it over the centuries. Had our ancestors thought of community as something you find as opposed to something you build, we wouldn't be here today.

What Shimon articulated is the essential secret of community. It isn't something static. It's something that has to be continually built because true community is a living organism.

Like a human body it lives and breathes as we as individuals invest ourselves in it.

We have been given the spiritual toolkit from our ancestors, but it will help us if we use it.

I am grateful as we gather together this Yom Kippur to be able to say that this orientation towards community has been deepening over the past two years and particularly the past year. I believe we stand at the tipping point of a time of deep renewal and growth for our Temple Sinai family.

Over the past 2 plus years I have been inspired by so many of you who put your hearts into the work of building community here at Temple Sinai, in ways both small and large.

The love and dedication of our lay leadership and membership is what has inspired me to put my heart into our shared enterprise as well.

Change and renewal takes real time. The work of transforming community is an investment in the future. As a result of the tremendous energy that has been devoted to enriching our community over the past two years, a huge amount of positive momentum has been building.

I feel like a surfer waiting for a wave. *There's a big wave coming, and if we put the effort in to paddle into position, we're going ride it.*

The momentum of renewal at Sinai spreads across the spectrum of our communal life:

From our plans to create an Art Gallery in Founders Hall to our upcoming launch of the Sinai Arts and Performance Space, to our new Strategic Planning Group led by past-president Michael Silverman with a grant from the Federation, to our by-laws committee led by Peter Short intended to help us fulfill our communal vision more effectively, to our continual updates to our Shabbas services, to our expanding adult learning opportunities, to the remarkable renewal of our daily

minyan under the leadership of Rebecca, Haviv, and Eddie, to the modernization of our Sinai communications and our new Executive Director Susan Weiner, to the exciting programming that is overflowing off of the bookmarks we handed out.

The list goes on. The wave of momentum is not off shore at this point.

Perhaps more than in any other realm, we see the renewal of community in the energy a significant number of Sinai members have been investing to develop comprehensive youth programming that can help us fulfill Rabbi Avraham Joshua Heschel's call to teach our children a Judaism that can remake the world.

This effort is not a small undertaking, but it is beginning to bear fruit.

Our new Noar educator Roni Kripper is leading his first program tomorrow, and Roni is also going to be leading our new inter-generational Sinai band.

This winter, we will be launching a service-learning program for our teens, a modernized version of a confirmation program that will engage our many recent bnei-mitzvah as well as older teens in a program of social action based in Jewish values.

And the Temple Sinai Educational Think Tank that I formed this summer is providing big picture thinking for our educational vision, including considering innovative models for reinvigorating our Hebrew School.

One of the things I have been most inspired by in this process, has been watching connections grow in unexpected ways. I've watched this happen among the individuals that have been working to raise the funds to support all of our new youth programming.

Fundraisers often prefer the term development to fundraising. I now understand why.

About a year and a half ago I invited a member who hadn't been particularly active in the synagogue to join our new youth committee.

She became committed to the project, and invited others to get involved. It grew organically and before long we had subgroups that included is new members with young kids, two teens, a twenty something who grew up in our community, as well as several more long time members who found a new meaningful way to be involved.

What they have been doing is not fundraising. It is developing community. Yes, the events we are planning will hopefully raise money to support our exciting new programs.

But the events themselves are going to be wonderful celebrations of life. And the process of planning the events itself has created new and meaningful connections among individuals.

I was touched by one small example of this. As part of our fundraising effort we will be creating planters on our Sinai patio near the fence that can be dedicated by an individual or family and that will make our outside area more beautiful.

One of the members involved with our youth programming development lost her mother this year. Soon afterwards, she came to the synagogue to meet me and another committee member to help think about the planters. As we stood on the patio, with tears in her eyes she shared with us how much her mother loved gardening, and said she'd like to be the first to sponsor a planter in her mother's honor.

Small but powerful moments like this take place all the time in our shared Sinai home.

When our early rabbis said that the *teshuva* of a community is accepted immediately, and that the Shechina is present when 10 Jews come together, they were pointing to a real and profound power found in community.

What these teachings point to is that in community, we are greater than the sum of our parts. That intangible *extra*, that added sustenance and strength that is with us in community, is what we mean when we say God is with us when we gather together.

That power was with us when we left Egypt together. It was with us as we stood at Sinai together. And it will be with us today as we build true community together.

True community is as important today as ever. It isn't enough to share a common past, we must share a common present.

And so, this Yom Kippur I want to ask all of us to consider how we want to be involved in our communal process of *teshuva*, of renewal of our shared enterprise, this year.

When God instructed the Israelites about who should bring the physical materials to be used for building the tabernacle, God says, "kol ndiv libo yivieha et trumat Ado-nay" – every person whose heart moves them shall bring God's offering."

The type of contribution that creates sacred community is not one given out of obligation but out of generosity of heart.

There are a million different ways to support the development of our community, small and large. For each person it will be different. Our community is sustained by the actions of each of us.

I'll give one small example. Before Rosh Hashanah, a congregant approached me and thanked me for supporting him through some challenging times this year.

He is a regular at our Tuesday night meditation minyan that I lead, and after Rosh Hashanah I told him that I also wanted him to know that he had supported me this year.

The contemplative minyan has been a very peaceful and rejuvenating space that has been sustaining to me personally. I shared with him that the way he invests himself in the meditation minyan each week has really helped support my own spiritual practice this year.

Our job is to ask ourselves what moves us, and what do we have to offer? For some it may be getting involved in the political leadership of our synagogue. For others it may be supporting the spiritual life of Temple Sinai.

As we read on Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson once taught, “If you see what needs to be repaired and how to repair it, then you have found a piece of the world that God has left for you to complete. But if you only see what is wrong and what is ugly in the world, then it is you yourself that needs repair.”

This is true with building community as well. If you see a gap between Temple Sinai as it is now and Temple Sinai as you would like it to be, ask yourself if you have the skills or passion to help bridge that gap.

Whether you are someone who usually just comes to synagogue two or three days a year, or you are someone who is deeply involved already, I ask you to consider how you can take hold of the toolkit our ancestors have given us and help bring to life our shared enterprise of human community this year.

This is a very exciting time to do so at Temple Sinai. The more each of us gets involved, the more we will all gain. The more we each give the more we will all receive.

I want to end with two specific requests.

Another word often used in our communal self-description here at Sinai is *haimish*. This Yiddish word literally means “like home.” More broadly it means welcoming, down-to-earth, friendly, comfortable.

This says a lot about who we are and who we want to be. A value is only as good as the actions we take that fulfill that value.

It’s the small things that will make Temple Sinai truly feel like a home to all of us, and I want to ask you to do two small things in that light.

First, I want to ask for your participation in one of our “Open Door Shabbas Dinners” this year. We are asking everyone in the synagogue to sign up on those dates to either host other Sinai members for Shabbas dinner at your home, or to sign up to go to another member’s home.

As I’ve said tonight, true community is about more than a physical place, it is the connections between us, and that begins with knowing one another. Since time immemorial, Shabbas dinner has been one of the places Jews get to know each other and build true community.

For anyone who doesn't usually make Shabbas dinner and would like to learn the basics of the blessings, Cantor Aronson and I will offer opportunities to learn.

In the donation booklet that will be handed out tomorrow and that Myranne will talk about, on the last page there will be a fold down a tab to offer to host a dinner, or to attend one.

The second request I have is even easier. I've been beginning each board meeting this year with a get to know each other exercise in place of a dvar Torah, because it's our job to put our value of being *haimish* into action in every realm of our communal life.

A haimish board meeting is one that starts not with business but with people asking how the person next to them is doing.

I want to extend this mission to all of us tonight. Whether it is on Shabbas, at a committee meeting, at a minyan, at an event - if there is someone in the community you don't know very well, say hello.

When there is someone new, welcome them. Be active in making the small extra effort to extend your hand when you know someone is in a time of need, and to be there to share in the joy of each other's events and celebrations. The small things go a long way.

You can make your acceptance of this mission real by going out of your way to say hello to someone you don't know well tonight after services.

May the Temple Sinai community be sealed for a year of deep renewal and blessing, a year of sharing life together with caring and with joy.

Gmar chatima tova.