

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PART OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Congregational Rabbis Speak

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REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PART OF COMMUNITY

Bringing our Communities Back To Life

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I vividly remember standing in our sanctuary on Friday afternoon, March 13, 2020, in shock and disbelief, less than an hour after sending an email canceling services. For 130 years, my predecessors and generations of congregants worked tirelessly to build and maintain Jewish

life in Oakland, California, and here we were, closing the doors to the building. I slowly walked to the light switches, turned off the chandeliers that hung from the A-frame structure, and looked back one last time before exiting the building. Feeling the weight of the words from Eicha (Lamentations 5:21) for the first time in my life, I davened:

הַשִּׁבְנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁוֹבָה חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקִדְמָה
Bring us back to you, God, and we will come back; renew our days as of old!
More than a year later, that return has slowly begun. First with weekday minyanim, then Shabbat morning

services. The most challenging High Holy Days of my career were a chaotic success. We have celebrated *britot*, baby-namings, and bar mitzvahs and marked shivas — all outdoors, distanced, and masked. And finally, on March 14, 2021, a small group of us returned to the sanctuary for the first time to mark Rosh Chodesh Nissan davening, a month of renewal.

There have been many times in the last year when I found myself looking to Jewish leaders from two-thousand years ago to see how they navigated the crushing catastrophe of the

Churban Bayit Sheni (destruction of the Second Temple).

Dr. Bryna Yocheved Levi, in her article “Zecher LeMikdash — Zecher LeChurban,” points out that the rabbinic response to destruction took place in different stages. The initial experience was one of shock and sadness:

היה רבן יוחנן יושב ומצפה כנגד חומת ירושלים לדעת מה יעשה בה [כדרך שנאמר בעל, 'ועלי יושב על הכסא יד דרך מצפה']. כיון שראה רבן יוחנן בן זכאי שחרב ביהמ"ק ונשרף ההיכל עמד וקרא את בגדיו וחלץ את תפלו ויהי יושב ובוכה ותלמידיו עמו.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was sitting and watching opposite the walls of Jerusalem, to know what would happen to it ... When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai saw that the Temple was destroyed and burned, he stood and tore his clothes and took off his Tefillin and sat and cried together with his students.

Avot D'Rabbi Natan, Nusach 2

Chapter 7

But after taking time to grieve, the first generation of Tannaim who survived destruction, led by Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, busied themselves with creating new practices to ensure that Jewish life would continue to survive. These are the *gezeirot* (edicts) we call

zecher LeMikdash in memory of the Temple.

Most famous among these edicts is Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's decision that we should carry the lulav and etrog all seven days of Sukkot, even though the Torah only commands it to be held on the first day outside of the Temple (Mishnah, *Rosh Hashanah* 4:3). Unprecedented times required unbelievable religious creativity to ensure that our memories of the Beit Hamikdash, the center of Judaism, would not fade.

With fits and starts, our communities have followed in the ways of the first post-Churban generation. This past year has required unbelievable creativity and experimentation.

Within the bounds of halacha, we created virtual classes, tefilot, and social opportunities. We found ways to do chesed that were unimaginable before last Purim.

The second generation of Tannaim who led the community after the Churban faced a different set of challenges. Klal Yisrael's emotional scars did not disappear with the passage of time. We can understand this stage and its emotional drama in a story with Rabbi Yehoshua, the

leader of this second generation in the Talmud:

תנו רבנן כשחרב הבית בשניה רבו פרושין בישראל שלא לאכול בשר ושלא לשתות יין נטפל להן ר' יהושע אמר להן בני מפני מה אי אתם אוכלין בשר ואין אתם שותין יין אמרו לו נאכל בשר שממנו מקריבין על גבי מזבח ועכשיו בטל נשתה יין שמנסכין על גבי המזבח ועכשיו בטל אמר להם א"כ לחם לא נאכל שכבר בטלו מנחות אפשר בפירות לא נאכל שכבר בטלו בכורים אפשר בפירות אחרים מים לא נשתה שכבר בטל ניסוך המים שתקו אמר להן בני בואו ואומר לכם שלא להתאבל כל עיקר אי אפשר שכבר נגזרה גזרה ולהתאבל יותר מדאי אי אפשר שאין גזרין גזירה על הצבור אא"כ רוב צבור יכולין לעמוד בה דכתיב (מלאכי ג, ט) במארה אתם נארים ואותי אתם קובעים הגוי כולו אלא כך אמרו חכמים סד אדם את ביתו בסיד ומשייר בו דבר מועט.

The Sages taught in a baraita (Tosefta, Sota 15:11): When the Temple was destroyed a second time, there was an increase in the number of ascetics among the Jews, whose practice was to not eat meat and to not drink wine. Rabbi Yehoshua joined them to discuss their practice. He said to them: My children, for what reason do you not eat meat and do you not drink wine? They said to him: Shall we eat meat, from which offerings are sacrificed upon the altar, and now the altar has ceased to exist? Shall we drink



wine, which is poured as a libation upon the altar, and now the altar has ceased to exist?

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: If so, we will not eat bread either, since the meal-offerings that were offered upon the altar have ceased. They replied: You are correct. It is possible to subsist with produce. He said to them: We will not eat produce either, since the bringing of the first fruits have ceased. They replied: You are correct. We will no longer eat the produce of the seven species from which the first fruits were brought, as it is possible to subsist with other produce. He said to them: If so, we will not drink water, since the water libation has ceased. They were silent, as they realized that they could not survive without water.

Now is our moment to embody the faithful optimism of Rabbi Akiva, who declared, while looking at the ruins of the Bayit Sheni, that he had full *emunah* in the great rebuilding that was yet to come.

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: My children, come, and I will tell you how we should act. To not mourn at all is impossible, as the decree was already issued and the Temple has been

destroyed. But to mourn excessively as you are doing is also impossible, as the Sages do not issue a decree upon the public unless a majority of the public is able to abide by it, as it is written: “You are cursed with the curse, yet you rob Me, even this whole nation” (Malachi 3:9), indicating that the prophet rebukes the people for neglecting observances only if they were accepted by the whole nation. Rabbi Yehoshua continues: Rather, this is what the Sages said: A person may plaster his house with plaster, but he must leave over a small amount in it without plaster to remember the destruction of the Temple.

Bava Batra 60b (translation from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud)

Rabbi Yehoshua’s response to the ascetics of his day is often seen as a great display of Talmudic logic and *reductio ad absurdum*. But his response is also filled with deep validation and empathy for the pain of the community. He acknowledges their sadness, and their inability to move forward and live. This is the generation that codifies laws *zecher LeChurban*, acknowledging the losses and painful memories that deserve a place within our ritual lives.

During the first year of the pandemic, community leaders have worked unbelievably hard to recreate Jewish life in new ways. But some of our Zoom events are underattended. Our cautious minyanim have not always reached capacity. And while more and more members have been vaccinated, after a year of “doing Shabbos” differently and at home, not everyone is rushing back to abbreviated services that don’t (yet) include childcare or kiddush.

While religious leaders (myself included) might be frustrated with a sometimes lackluster response from our communities, we need to embody the empathy of Rabbi Yehoshua. And then we must slowly, kindly, pull our people back to life.

Now is our moment to embody the faithful optimism of the great Tanna Rabbi Akiva, who declared, while looking at the ruins of the Bayit Sheni, that he had full *emunah* in the great rebuilding that was yet to come. While as leaders, our emotional batteries are running close to empty, we need to find ways to replenish ourselves, and then bring this sense of optimism to our communities. We will rebuild and use the creative muscles we developed in the last year to build back with renewed vision and deeper empathy.

But I turn to our community members with a plea: Be our partners in bringing our communities back to life. We are waiting for you, and need your strength, your resolve, and your physical presence — we are waiting for you with open arms and can’t do this alone. With Hashem’s help, in the coming months we will turn again to the words of Eicha again as we bring back our sifrei Torah and ourselves to our sanctuaries, with the unique joy that comes from having walked through the valley of the shadow of death, and made it through to the other side:

הַשִּׁיבֵנו ה' אֱלֹהֵי וְנִשׁוּבָה חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקִדְמָם
Bring us back to you, God, and we will come back; renew our days as of old!

May the communities we rebuild, congregants and leaders together, have the best of the old, but the openness for the creative good that is yet to come.

Connecting to Community Locally and Globally

Rabbi Binyamin Blau

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As we are poised to celebrate Shavuot, it is poignant to note how different this yom tov will be from our experience of a year ago. Last year our shul, the Green Road Synagogue in Beachwood, Ohio, did not meet in person and our learning was in the privacy of our own homes with our families. There were numerous divrei Torah and shiurim sent out in advance, often culled from previous issues of *Torah To Go*, which helped unify the kehilla; but ultimately, the learning was experienced individually.

This year, we are davening in multiple minyanim over the chag, and there will be live shiurim both on the first night of yom tov and during the days. In short, we will be able to feel, more fully, what it means to truly be a community as we collectively engage in those activities that define not only our shul, but all of Am Yisrael.

It has been quite a journey to get to this point, and I am proud of both how far we have come and of our connection to the larger Yeshiva University world that has supported us in this process. From the outset, the painful decision to curtail all live activities in shul was guided by the psakim of our Roshei Yeshiva, Rav Schachter and Rav Willig, and it was on their broad shoulders that I relied when directing my congregation on how to prepare for that initial Pesach and beyond. At the same time, the

fact that so many of my chaverim — colleagues in the field — were going through the same experiences was empowering. The discussions we had via WhatsApp were both a source of chizuk and an excellent vehicle for disseminating the latest piskei halacha of Rabbis Schachter and Willig. I was never prouder to be part of a unified Modern Orthodoxy passionately committed to Torah and mitzvot and to the safety and health of the klal (in truth a mitzva in its own right).

Our shul quickly adapted that position as our guiding light, continuing as a source of tefilla, limud Torah, and chesed, never at the expense of the community's well-being. Each step we took was inspiring and inspirational. When we initially had just "outside" minyanim for Mincha/Maariv (meaning they met on the side of the shul), one at Plag and the second at the regular zman, seeing people's thirst to join minyanim was incredible. We had more attendees than our normal crowd, despite the requirement to sign up in advance, wear masks, use hand sanitizer, answer the health gabbai's questions and be physically distant.

Gradually, we were able to combine minyanim back in the sanctuary with some outside, and I was amazed by how many people attended the four minyanim that we had over Yomim Noraim — two in the building and two under tents in various locations. While our hakafot were radically different, they were powerful; just having everyone together, even if only person held a sefer Torah and the singing was muted, was deeply meaningful. When we brought all the children to a large parking lot on Simchat Torah afternoon to sing and receive candy it was rejuvenating, reminding us how vibrant our kehilla really is.

Once again, while I took responsibility for the decisions made for my kehilla, the knowledge that so many of my chaverim were making similar choices based on the halachic rulings of our shared rebbeim was a tremendous source of comfort. This was a different form of Klal Yisroel uniting, but it was no less emboldening.

Over time, always with the astute guidance of our medical team, our shul resumed more of our normal activities. The health guidelines remain in place, and there is now a balance between virtual and live classes — by way of example, for several months my "Shabbat afternoon" Gemara class met each Saturday night over Zoom — but the vitality of our kehilla is once again felt daily within our walls. Our new Beit Midrash is filled with the sound of Torah and perhaps my favorite time of the week occurs after Mincha each Shabbat. We no longer serve food for Seudat Shlishit (that does not align with our Kiddush-To-Go format), but there are two opportunities to learn each week. People can either join me for our spirited analysis of the parsha or they can go to the Beit Midrash to learn on their own. While I enjoy my group, I am excited that the combined number of parents learning with children and students learning with their rabbeim far exceeds my attendees. Despite the pandemic, our shul, and Am Yisrael as a whole, remain firmly committed to transmitting the mesorah to the next generation.

As we are about to embrace *zman Matan Torateinu*, I want to share a beautiful thought of my late grandfather, Rav Pinchas Teitz zt'l, which highlights the importance of our shuls and day schools/yeshivot. When it came time for Yaakov and his

family to go down to Egypt, the Torah tells us that he sent Yehuda to the land of Goshen before the rest of the family would join him. Rashi explains that the reason for this trip was so that Yehuda would establish a yeshiva before they arrived.

While this is a beautiful sentiment, it is quite puzzling. Yosef had just proven to his father that despite his extended time in Egypt he remained the same Yosef, committed to the family's ways. Moreover, Yosef had done such a wonderful job educating his two sons that Yaakov himself compares them to Reuven and Shimon and elevates them to the status of shvatim. Why then was it critical that a yeshiva be started before their arrival in Egypt?

My grandfather explained that Yosef was a unique personality, and indeed, in each generation there are special individuals who can raise children who are Yarei Shamyim without the benefit of a yeshiva education. However, as a community, we cannot survive spiritually without providing a source of chinuch for all, without providing shuls that will compliment that education and nurture the neshamot of the young and old alike.

Our experience during the COVID-19 crisis has reinforced my belief in the wisdom of my grandfather's poignant words. Our shuls and schools have been the lifeblood of our communities and they have been strengthened by their connection to the larger world of Yeshiva University's leaders and graduates. May we all continue this noble work.

Joining a Sacred Community

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Ask almost anyone who celebrates Shavuos what he or she is celebrating, and you'll probably get the right answer: Shavuos marks and celebrates the decisive moment of *kabala HaTorah*. But then follow up by asking what exactly we are seeking to recreate, and you'll probably get an inaccurate answer. Most would answer, Shavuos represents the time we received the Torah and became obligated in mitzvos. The problem is that most of the Torah and the overwhelming amount of mitzvos were given at different periods in the desert — in Arvos Moav, Marah, and each time Moshe came to the Ohel Mo'eid. In fact, at Sinai, at least according to Rebbe Yishmael, only ten commandments were given. Six hundred and three were given elsewhere and at other times. Why, then, is Shavuos special, what makes it exceptional and worth celebrating?

Almost forty years ago, a book was written that would turn out to be prophetic. In *A Nation of Strangers*, Vance Packard documented how, already then, America was rapidly becoming splintered, fragmented, and divided. Packard argued that increasing mobility was destined to have negative effects on society. His prediction came true and his work

did not even include any anticipation of the proliferation and impact of technology.

Long before this pandemic, we were already experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. Despite social networking that was designed to connect people and create bonds, in a 2018 survey conducted by Cigna, nearly half of Americans reported sometimes or always feeling alone. People clearly crave community, and no matter how many belong to various online communities or cultures, they are struggling to find authentic connection in ways that will take away the feeling of loneliness.

In his *Sifsei Chaim*, Rav Chaim Freidlander explains that when we were liberated from Egypt, we were a group of individuals, a conglomerate of people, but we were not yet a community. Only after gathering around Har Sinai with a shared purpose and a collective mission did we achieve peoplehood and did we become a sacred community.

When we stood at the base of that modest mountain as one entity, one person with one heart, we formed an eternal entity — *Knesses Yisroel*, the people of Israel. Yet before mitzvos defined us, independent of our obligation to perform hundreds of positive and negative commandments, we created a bond and a link that would transcend barriers and boundaries. We reveled in our shared history and pledged a common destiny.

When we recite Birchos HaTorah



Learn more about the laws of Birchot Hatorah at
<https://www.yutorah.org/halacha/jewish-law/birchot-hatorah>

in the morning or when we get an aliyah, we say *asher bachar banu mikol ha'amim, v'nassan lanu es Toraso*. Before acknowledging having received the Torah, we recognize having been formed as a sacred nation with a divine mission — first, *asher bachar banu* (He chose us from all the nations), and only then, *v'nassan lanu es Toraso* (He gave us His Torah).

Shavuot is undoubtedly a time for renewed commitment to mitzvah observance. It is unquestionably an occasion for reinvigorated dedication to Torah study. But above all, it is a time to reflect on what it means to be a member of a sacred community. Shavuot mandates us to think and consider how the community empowers us and how we can empower the community. At the Pesach Seder we proclaimed that it would have been enough to arrive at Har Sinai even if we never received the Torah. Shavuot reminds us that *dayenu*, to be a member of a sacred society and purpose-driven people would have been enough to obligate an expression of gratitude.

Human beings are wired with a longing for belonging and a great desire to be connected. The antidote to loneliness is community. Each day in our Birchas HaTorah we express gratitude and praise for the gift and blessing of having a community and people to belong to.

Belonging to community is not about conformity, but commitment. We don't have to forfeit our individuality or our diverse needs. However, we do have to come together, to collaborate and complement, not compete with one another.

This past year, among other things, the pandemic helped us learn a lot

about ourselves. When locked down, many created a mini “community” in their own home, serving as president, gabbai, ba'al tefillah, rabbi or rebbetzin. As things began to open up, outdoor minyanim formed, creating small communities within the community, bringing neighbors together and creating new bonds. Some of these groups persevered through extreme cold, others extreme heat and still others, both. Talents, skills, and leadership abilities, which might otherwise have remained dormant, were discovered and harnessed.

As things slowly come back to normal, we must embrace the opportunity to come back together, to draw on those discoveries and recruit those talents in a way that collaborates and complements, never competes. We have learned that we can grow larger and smaller at the same time when we simultaneously empower individuality and diversity, always with a sense of unity and community.

This Shavuot, as we b'e'zras Hashem continue to emerge from a horrific pandemic that divided and isolated us, let's affirm our commitment to the central role community must have in our lives. Let's pledge our participation and promise to contribute our talents and gifts.

Our Home Away from Home

Rabbi Shalom Rosner

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As the world comes to terms with the new “normal,” we as Orthodox Jews must also adjust and acclimate to the new “rules of engagement” in fulfilling our spiritually driven lifestyle.

The past year has been both challenging and rewarding, filled with both deep tragedy and amazing human resilience and communal support. Our emotions have swung like a pendulum, from feelings of hopelessness to empowerment as we overcame the impossible. Through it all, though, we know that the Torah remains our guiding light and the beacon of sanity and stability that anchors our existence. Thus, as we crawl out of our Corona abyss, we return to the questions¹ in the Gemara, *Shabbos* 31a, the questions that we will be asked after our 120 years in this world. Rava's second question is, “*kavata itim LaTorah*” — did you set aside time for studying Torah? Besides the simple interpretation, I once heard a deeper meaning;² we are being asked whether we set, *kovea*, the “*itim*,” times in which we live, to the Torah, or *chas veshalom*, the Torah to the “*itim*,” fitting in only the parts of Torah that fit into our lives. We must constantly reassess and make sure that the Torah and the Torah way of life is constant and fixed in our lives. We need to then model and shape our behavior based on that given, that reality.

Rav Soloveitchik (*Shiurim L'Zecher Abba Mari*, Vol. I “*Kibud V'Oneg*”

Shabbos”) has taught us that though Yechezkel HaNavi (11:16) has called our shuls “*mikdishei me’at*” — miniature versions of the Beis HaMikdash, which is even the basis for numerous parallels between our shuls and the Beis HaMikdash — there is also a fundamental difference between the two. On the one hand, the Mishna, *Megillah* 28a, pronounces that even a desolate *beis knesses* retains its sanctity, based on a verse describing the desolate Mikdash:

ועוד אמר רבי יהודה: בית הכנסת שחרב אין מספידין בתוכו, ואין מפשילין בתוכו חבלים, ואין פורשין לתוכו מצודות, ואין שוטחין על גגו פירות, ואין עושין אותו קפנדריא, שנאמר והשמותי את מקדשיכם - קדושתן אף כשהן שוממין.

R. Yehuda further said: In a shul that is desolate, one cannot eulogize, spread ropes, nets, or fruits, or use it as a short cut, as the verse states, “I will make desolate your mikdash,” it is still the mikdash in its sanctity, though it is desolate.

Moreover, often the actual structure of our shuls is modelled after the Mikdash. *Chasam Sofer* (O.C. 28) strongly urges the bimah to be in the middle of the shul, since the *mizbeach hazahav*, the golden altar, was in the middle of the Heichal. Rav Soloveichik (cited in *Eretz Hatzvi* Siman 12) explains that the root sanctity of the shul flows from the sifrei Torah stored in the aron, just as the Luchos served as the source of sanctity for the Mikdash. We light our chanukiyot in shul on the southern wall (*Shulchan Aruch* 671:7),

emulating what was done in the Mikdash centuries ago.

On the other hand, we acknowledge fundamental differences in their essence, reflected in various halachic distinctions. The Mishna, *Berachos* 54a, teaches us:

ולא יכנס להר הבית במקלו, ובמנעלו, ובפונדתו, ובאבק שעל רגליו,

We are not allowed to enter the Mikdash with a walking stick, shoes, or a money belt, items that we may wear and enter with into a shul.

What is the reason for this distinction? If a shul is a *mikdash me’at*, then why are there any differences? Isn’t the difference just one of quantitative *kedusha*, not of a qualitatively different experience?

Rav Soloveichik explains that no, there is a major distinction between the Mikdash and shul experience, not more or less, but different. The secret is found in two words toward the end of *Maseches Berachos* 63a.

Rava is explaining to us why we are not allowed to shortcut through the Mikdash or a shul, while we can wear shoes (and spit) only in a shul and not in the Mikdash.

אלא אמר רבא: כי ביתו. מה ביתו, אקפנדריא - קפיד אינשו, ארקיקה ומנעל - לא קפיד אינשו, אף בית הכנסת: קפנדריא הוא דאסור, רקיקה ומנעל - שרי.

Rava said: it is like one’s home. Just like one would mind if someone took a shortcut through one’s home, but one does not mind if guests spit [in those times] or wear shoes, so too in a synagogue, using it as a shortcut

is prohibited, shoes and spitting are permissible.

This, then, is the secret of our discussion. In the words of the Rav:

נראה פשוט, כי רבא הציב כאן עקרון חדש ביחס להשראת השכינה. לפעמים הקב"ה מזמין את האדם לביתו, בית עולמים, והאדם הוא אורחו של הקב"ה. על פי ההלכה, האדם אז נמצא בבית הקב"ה. לפרקים, הקב"ה, ממלא כל עלמין והסובב כל עלמין, יורד משמי ערבוב, נענה לתפילת האדם, והוא משרה שכינתו בביתו של האדם. יציר כפיו של הקב"ה, האדם, שהיום הוא כאן ומחר בקבר, שוכן בתי חומה, הוא בעל הבית, והקב"ה, כביכול, הוא אורחו. הוא נכנס לביתו של האדם ודר עמו ככפיה אחת...

It seems clear that Rava has established here a new principle regarding the revelation of the Divine. Sometimes God invites man to His home, a permanent home, and man is God’s guest. According to Halacha, man is then in the house of God. At times, God fills every world and surrounds every world, descends from the heavens, responds to man’s prayers, and reveals His presence in the house of man. The handiwork of God, man, who is here today and tomorrow in the grave, a mere mortal, is the master of the house, and God, so to speak, is his guest. He enters man’s house and lives with him in a single abode.

Both a shul and the Mikdash represent places of intense connection and communication with God. The only difference is who is the host and who is the guest. In the Mikdash, we are God’s guests. We are invited at least three times a year to visit our Father’s house, and to spend time close to Him on His holy turf. But every single day



Learn more about the sanctity of the synagogue at <https://www.yutorah.org/halacha/jewish-law/beit-hakenesset>

we have the opposite opportunity, to invite God to our holy communal houses, to host Him in our religious centers, and to commune with Him on our home court. This distinction, then, explains both the parallels and the differences between our two institutions.

Over the past year, most of us have been communally misplaced. We have, BH, found many creative ways to come together to daven and function as a *tzibbur*. The surprising reality created a whole area of psak that became fertile ground for the *gedolei haposkim*. Mirpeset (porch) minyanim, Zoom connections, and backyard get-togethers have become part of our normal jargon. But we must all realize, individually and communally, that this is not the ideal or *lechatchila*. Our shuls have quietly been waiting for our return. The seforim and the chairs themselves have wept silently day after day, waiting for our words, our singing, and even our cholent, to return to them. Our *mikdash me'at*, our home court, our rendezvous spot with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, is just a walk away. We need to return as soon and as fast as we can.

Of course, we must adhere to all health guidelines and make sure that we follow all medical protocols. But we also must adhere to *kavata itim LaTorah* and not *Torah l'itim*. Yes, it might be more comfortable to daven right outside, to roll out of bed and have a minyan. I might even have more *kavana* in my backyard and in a smaller group. These are all excuses, and if I may be so bold as to draw a parallel, the Jews during the beginning of the Bayis Sheni said the same thing to Ezra HaSofer. "You can return and rebuild the Mikdash. We are comfortable here in Bavel. We are comfortable with our religious institutions. We feel spiritually fulfilled where we are. We don't need the Mikdash!" On a smaller scale, some communities are experiencing similar realities today. We must not forget where we belong. Our shuls are the places that we call home, the centers of our religious existence, the geographical sources of our Torah and tefillah. Let us make sure that we appreciate these gifts, these opportunities, and these experiences. Hashem is calling us back. "I'm ready for you to return. It's been a long, hard, year, I haven't seen all of you together for so long. Please let me hear

your communal voices in the ideal place possible." Here, in Eretz Yisrael, when our shuls were mandated to close, large banners appeared on many locked-up shul buildings, bearing the pasuk from Eicha: "*Hashiveinu Hashem eilecha v'nashuva*" — return us to you Hashem, and we will return. BH, the time has come. Let us all go home.

Endnotes

1. To be honest, in the Gemara they are not labelled as questions; they are declarations, since the video of our life will speak for itself.
2. Heard originally from Rav J.J. Schacter. See *Menachem Tzion* Bamidbar, based on *Midrash Tehilim*, for a similar thought.

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Collective Revelation and Responsibility

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This incredibly challenging year highlighted a remarkable element of our shul, and I am sure other shuls too. Beth Jacob Congregation has a diverse membership of several hundred families, and we initially thought that COVID had completely broken apart the community with members distanced, quarantined, and isolated. Over the course of the year, however, we realized that while it was unquestionably difficult to be unable to join together in regular fashion to daven, learn, do chesed, and support one another through our physical presence, the community was still going strong. It was truly special to see how people were going above and beyond to be there for each other in creative and new ways.

Davening, learning and personal growth continued, demonstrating the resilience and commitment of our members. An example of this inspiring commitment: a member of our shul walked 25 minutes to shul every Shabbat morning, even during the weeks the campus was closed, because Shabbat for him meant walking to shul!

With all its devastation, COVID taught us that our shul is not only a physical space but a spiritual home without walls that gives us a feeling of belonging, wherever we might be. It became more evident that the hallmark of a shul is the creation and nurturing of relationships — with Hashem and His Torah, with Israel,

with shul clergy and one another — and these connections are more valued than ever.

In a certain sense, then, COVID compelled us to rethink the notion of community and its place in our lives. As we emerge slowly from the pandemic and have the unique opportunity to rejuvenate our kehillot, perhaps it would be helpful to go back to the basics and reexamine why being part of a community is so central to being Jewish.

In tefillah and kiddush, we describe Shavuot as “*zman matan Torateinu*” — the time when the Torah was given to the Jewish people at Har Sinai. A fundamental principle of our tradition¹ is that Jews throughout the generations — including all of us living in the 21st century — are obligated to observe the mitzvot based on that original acceptance over 3,300 years ago.

We could wonder how it is that future generations are legally bound to a transaction they did not consent to. How can there be an execution of a covenant with people who haven't yet been born?

A well-known mystical tradition² suggests that all Jewish souls throughout the generations were present spiritually at Har Sinai, when we all committed ourselves to the Torah. Another answer offered by the commentaries is that our obligation today is based on the halachic principle of *zachin l'adam shelo b'fanav* — we can confer a benefit upon someone even in their absence. The Jews at Har Sinai accepted the Torah, the ultimate privilege, on our behalf.

The Maharal of Prague³ develops a different answer by explaining the unique character of our covenant with

Hashem. Hashem says to Moshe at the burning bush that, “I have seen the affliction of the Jews because I have known their sufferings (*machovav*).” The Rabbis in the Medrash interpret “*machovav*” to be the suffering and pain the Jews will cause Hashem when we falter. “I am fully aware of the future rebellions of Israel and nevertheless, I will not refrain from saving them.”

What are the mechanics of this guarantee that Hashem will be there for us even if we are not worthy? The Maharal explains that Hashem entered into a covenant with Avraham not as an individual but rather in his capacity as founder of the nation. Indeed, several generations later, Hashem entered into a brit (covenant) with the Jews not as individuals but as a collective entity. This helps us understand, writes the Maharal, how the covenant made at Sinai can bind present and future generations. Since the brit is with Klal Yisrael as a nation, anyone born into the nation automatically becomes obligated in the covenant.

Moreover, because it is a covenant with the collective, if a group of Jews sins or even a generation is unworthy, this will not nullify the relationship. We weren't chosen because of our unique merits and we therefore cannot forfeit it through misdeeds. Of course, we're all obligated to observe the Torah to the best of our ability and the level of Divine providence we receive is a function of our behavior. But whatever our level of commitment, the covenant itself is eternal and the special relationship we have with Hashem endures. This is true because the brit was not made with individuals, which would have made it dependent upon individuals'

behavior, but with a nation, Am Yisrael, unconditionally.

This new understanding of the covenant teaches us that the core identity of every individual Jew, for each of us, is that we are part of the Jewish people. There is an indivisible entity, with a legal analog of a corporation, called the nation of Israel that spans all the generations, with a covenant that is unbreakable. Our nation's span is not only vertical, incorporating every single generation, but also horizontal, including every single Jew alive today.

We are bound by a collective covenant that impacts the way we pray, how we do teshuva, and triggers a responsibility to identify with the needs of the Klal, the nation, the community.

While we have individual responsibilities, we are bound by a collective covenant, with this dual commitment impacting the way we pray (in plural), how we do teshuva (“*aval anachnu v'avoteinu chatanu*” — “we and our forefathers have sinned”) and triggers a responsibility to identify with the needs of the Klal, the nation, the community.

The Rambam⁴ writes that “*haporesh midarchei hatzibbur*” — “a person who separates himself from the ways of the community ... even though he has not committed any sins but merely disconnects himself from community members, who doesn't perform mitzvot together with them and doesn't identify with community challenges ... loses his portion in the world to come.” With striking language, the Rambam indicates that shorn of the framework of community, there is no concept of Torah and mitzvot! Even if you fastidiously fulfill all the mitzvot, if you don't identify with the tzibbur, if you don't share in the sorrow of the Jewish people, if you don't actively get involved to help others, if you are on your own, then your Jewish identity is dreadfully deficient.

Why is this so? Apparently, since the covenant was with the nation, a person who disregards the broader collective ignores our basic foundation. The Sages emphasize⁵ the benefits of being part of something bigger than ourselves. This may be because individual revelation posits that one person can fathom the whole truth. Collective revelation and communal religious experience provide both humility as well as checks and balances. Being part of a kehilla provides a measure of moderation for what could otherwise become dangerously unrestrained religious fervor for God, which is what occurred with Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Eliezer, after their years of solitude in a cave.

In Judaism, our religious expression needs to be applied to the real world, in society and our human interactions. Judaism teaches us to transcend ourselves and stand with others. In a

related sense, Judaism teaches us to transcend ourselves and stand with others. When we become part of something bigger, with each person contributing his or her strengths and talents, it helps us achieve our potential and complete one another.

This past year, we hopefully gained a new appreciation of our blessings, our relationships, and our community. While our personal, communal, and professional lives radically changed, we discovered new strengths as individuals and new dimensions of communal bonds.

Shavuot, *zman matan Torateinu*, is a time to reflect on the covenant established at Sinai with the Jewish nation as a collective, and how this defines our identity as Jews today. As we emerge out of this pandemic, our ability to resume in-person shared religious and social experiences will enable us to only further strengthen our bonds and be there for each other with a renewed sense of purpose. During this season, when we celebrate the spirit of “*k'ish echad b'lev echad*,”⁶ we must reaffirm our commitment to the community and the Jewish People. While uncertainty remains and challenges lie ahead, we are firm in our belief that the more we connect with Hashem and the more we attach ourselves to the community, the brighter our future will be.

Endnotes

- 1 See Devarim 29:14 and Rashi there.
- 2 *Shmot Rabbah* 28:6, *Tanchuma Yitro* 11.
- 3 *Netzach Yisrael* perek 11.
- 4 *Hilchot Teshuva* 3:11.
- 5 For example, *Pirkei Avot* 1:14, 2:5.
- 6 Rashi Shemot 19:2, “*Vayichan*.”