

Vayakhel: The Bigger Jewish Community

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No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.

John Donne

The epic project of constructing a house of God is introduced by an iconic expression. The phrase "*Vayakhel Moshe*" portrays Moshe Rabeinu gathering the entire population to launch the most ambitious project in history. Miraculously, over three million people who previously had been scattered across desert dunes gathered, to celebrate the launch of the Mishkan. A project of this magnitude and of this historical resonance was inaugurated by a community, and not by a group of individuals. Sefer Shemot began with a list of twelve shevatim and their families but by the time the sefer ends and the mishkan is crafted, those twelve families had morphed into a community, or a *kahal*.
Vayakhel.

Hundreds of years later, Shlomo Hamelech initiated his own Beit Hamikdash by assembling the entire population. The Tanach employs the identical term to describe his gathering: "*Az Yakhel* Shlomo. Both the original desert Mishkan and the majestic Mikdash in Yerushalayim were communal products. Alongside our personal relationship with Hashem, communal identity is integral to our religious consciousness.

Community

Community both reinforces shared values and promotes social cohesion and cooperation. Additionally, by encouraging us to act more selflessly on behalf of a larger community, our moral behavior is dramatically improved. Communal life provides us with belonging, security, and connectedness. By stepping out of our small personal space and interacting with others we connect with life beyond our narrow internal world. Finally, Community improves our emotional well-being. Studies have indicated that middle age white males live in greater social isolation

and often suffer greater levels of depression and suicide. In general, communal experience shapes character, and fosters psychological well-being.

During a crisis, however, we rely more intensely upon our communities for assistance and for emotional support. During the past four months we leaned heavily upon our “classic” communities, but we also realized the impact and value of newer Jewish communities.

Family and Kehilla

Traditionally, Jews lived in two complimentary communities. Throughout history, family was always our foundational community. Prior to the modern era and to advances in communication and transportation, extended multi-generational families lived in close proximity. Family life wasn't centered primarily upon the nuclear family but upon the larger family group which provided religious education, moral upbringing, financial and emotional support, friendship, advice, and medical care for the sick and elderly. Marriages were family arrangements and not primarily personal or romantic encounters. The Torah's strong emphasis upon honoring elders reinforced the family as the foundation of communal life. Blood is thicker than water, and ideally families are meant to function and prosper without contracts or promises. Families are the most efficient communities.

The second tier of communal identity was the *actual community* or the *kehilla*, a word taken from the same root as *Vayakhel*. Kehilla life, which had profound impact upon Jewish identity was typically supervised by a council of select community members known as the *kahal*. Though numerous other cultures enjoyed various degrees of autonomy within their host countries, the Jewish kehilla was often granted sweeping authority to supervise everything from tax collection to ritual life, from administering judicial systems to collecting mandatory charity payments. Our community structure was so sturdy that even during periods in which the official kehilla was banned it still, de facto, administered Jewish life.

For the past 2000 years Jewish communal identity was built upon the twin foundations of family and of kehilla. During the past few months each of these pillars helped us navigate the darkness and struggle of this

tragedy and the ensuing war. Families provided a primary support system for family members whose husbands and fathers were at war and also offered emotional relief for so many who lost relatives or who sustained serious injury. In addition to family, local communities in Israel also rallied to deliver food, provisions and services to families of soldiers, families of hostages, and evacuees.

National Identity

Having returned to Israel we uncovered a new communal identity which hadn't been experienced for close to 2000 years. Israel is the epicenter of our entire nation and of the Jewish future. We all belong to one large people who have returned to lay historical claim to our ancient homeland. Life in Israel is dominated by an overarching national identity. Though we live in separate communities, in Israel, powerful national identity overwhelms any "local community" identity.

Many olim to Israel are frustrated by the diminished role of local communities. Many olim are nostalgic for a communal life which is almost irreproducible in Israel. Many of the reasons for diminished communal identity in Israel are purely practical. Israelis, typically have larger families, and their married children live "closer to home", in what is, a small country to begin with. Shabbat, Chagim, and national holidays are centered more upon family and less upon friends. The absence of Sunday in Israel leaves less time for local communal activity and additionally, Israelis, typically, have less disposable income available for communal activity and projects. Communal infrastructure such as shuls are paid for by the government and are therefore less impressive. After all, in overseas communities, activity centers upon a central synagogue or, more recently, upon community schools. Additionally, in Israel, crucial services such as marriage, burial, and mikvah are provided by the government, eliminating the need for volunteerism. Many of the factors and ingredients which contribute to communal activity in overseas Jewish communities are absent in Israel.

Aside from these practical differences, in Israel, communal identity is smothered by national identity. Our profile as Israelis diminishes the significance of any secondary profile based on local community. We share too much in common with the entire nation to divide ourselves based upon community. Every Israeli resides in the same time zone,

watches the same news programs and purchases the same food brands. There is little cultural difference between a Jew up North in Kiryat Shemonah and one down south in Sderot. In Israel the “national community” has overwhelmed classic kehilla.

During the past four months most of us processed the tragedy and the war through our national identity and through national lenses. We collectively lost our breath when fallen soldiers or seriously injured soldiers were announced, regardless of which local community they lived in. We volunteered alongside people we hardly knew. Our children served side-by-side, in makeshift IDF units with complete strangers who wore the same green fatigues and fought the same battle. We stood as one nation fighting for our survival.

This national identity, which is compelling during peaceful times, became overpowering over the past few months. It filled us with meaning and support, hope and grittiness. We felt unity with millions of Jews, not just with thousands. Many overseas Jews who visited Israel, commented that they perceived this national energy the moment they landed in Ben Gurion and conducted their first conversation with a taxi driver. The war amplified national identity, and increased our appreciation of our national community, even though it sometimes swamps local communal identity. As the gemara in Horiyut (3a) comments הני איקרי קהל הני לא הני איקרי קהל - only in Israel do we achieve complete and sweeping communal identity.

An International Community

The war also heightened our appreciation of the community of worldwide Jewry. During normal times Jews in Israel felt little solidarity with Jews abroad. Though we all shared love and concern for Israel, on a day-to-day basis our agendas were different, and our thoughts were localized. Over the past few months, we rediscovered how deeply bound we are as one international community of Jews. The war reminded Israelis that even Jews who have not yet resettled in Israel are part of Jewish destiny and of the battle for Jewish history. Just the same, non-Israelis were reminded that those who reside in Israel are heroically and selflessly endangering themselves for the future homeland of every

single Jew. As comfortable as life appears to be outside of Israel it is illusory. The state of Israel is absolutely crucial for any Jewish future. We have been drawn together into one large Jewish community separated by oceans and by miles but sharing prayers and dreams.

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