



Shabbat Table Discussions

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CENTER FOR THE JEWISH FUTURE

CONNECTING TO COMMUNITY

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Steven was never very active in his local Jewish community. He led a busy life and didn't have much time for community meetings and responsibilities. After his mother passed away, he started attending synagogue daily in order to recite *Kaddish* for her. After a few months, he realized that, beyond the value of reciting *Kaddish* and praying in the synagogue, his daily interactions with fellow community members had a very positive impact on his life. Three years later, he continues to attend daily services, is a regular in many of the synagogue's educational programs and serves as a volunteer for a number of community projects.

There are numerous benefits to being an active member of the community. Yet, participation in the community can entail challenges as well.

Let's look at the following scenarios:

CASE ONE

Every Wednesday night, Elizabeth and her friends get together at a local synagogue to fold pamphlets for their youth groups. Recently, it occurred to Elizabeth that while she enjoys the company, a lot of time is wasted at these gatherings and she can fold more pamphlets in the same time if she would do it when nobody else is there. Should she abandon her friends and choose the more efficient way of folding pamphlets?

CASE TWO

Mordechai has been attending a youth group every Shabbat for the last few years, where some of the time is spent studying the weekly Torah portion and some time is spent playing games. Lately, a few of the kids in the group have been misbehaving and Mordechai feels that he might benefit more if he stays home and studies the Torah portion on his own. Should he stop attending?

CASE THREE

Shira's friends have been encouraging her to run for a position on the student council because they feel she would be a good leader. Shira is hesitant to do so because she doesn't want to be criticized by her peers for decisions that she makes. What would you advise?

Let's Examine the Sources

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* discusses the importance of being part of the community:

Hillel said: Do not separate yourself from the community.

Ethics of the Fathers 2:5

הלל אומר: אל תפרוש עצמך מן הצבור.

אבות ב:ה

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Why does Hillel phrase his statement in the negative- “do not separate yourself from the community,” and not the positive- “be a part of the community”? What is the difference between the negative and positive formulations?
- 2) Why is it so important to be connected to the community?
- 3) How does connecting to the community benefit the community and how does it benefit the individual?

The next two sources discuss different benefits of connecting to the community. As you read the sources, think about how they deal with the questions presented above:

Our rabbis taught: When the Jewish people are suffering and someone separates from them, the two angels that normally accompany a person place their hands on this individual's head and say “this person who separated from the community will not get to experience the consolation of the community” ... Rather, one should share in the suffering of the community, as it states [regarding the battle against Amalek] (Shemot 17:12), “And Moshe’s hands were heavy, and they took a stone and placed it under him and he sat on it.” Didn’t Moshe have a pillow or sheet to sit on? Rather, Moshe said “Since the Jewish people are suffering, I too shall share in their suffering” and anyone who shares in the suffering of the community will experience its consolation.

Ta’anit 11a

I would like to explain [the Mishna about separating from the community]. Our rabbis stated that a person should be soft as a reed. This means that one should envision oneself as being soft like a reed which cannot support a ceiling alone and only by binding many reeds together do the reeds have the power to support a ceiling ... the language “do not separate” was used to teach that even if one previously attached oneself to the community and only afterwards separated [that is also not sufficient.]

R. Chaim Y.D. Azulai, Chasdei Avot 2:5

תנו רבנן בזמן שישראל שרויין בצער
ופירש אחד מהן באין שני מלאכי השרת
שמלוין לו לאדם ומניחין לו ידיהן על
ראשו ואומרים פלוני זה שפירש מן
הצבור אל יראה בנחמת צבור ... אלא
יצער אדם עם הצבור שכן מצינו במשה
רבינו שציער עצמו עם הצבור שנאמר
וידי משה כבדים ויקחו אבן וישימו תחתיו
וישב עליה, וכי לא היה לו למשה כר אחד
או כסת אחת לישב עליה אלא כך אמר
משה הואיל וישראל שרויין בצער אף אני
אהיה עמהם בצער וכל המצער עצמו עם
הצבור זוכה ורואה בנחמת צבור.
תענית יא.

נראה לפרש דאמרו ז"ל לעולם יהא אדם רך
כקנה פירוש יצייר בדעתו תמיד שהוא רך
כקנה שאי אפשר להעמיד עליו תקרה ורק
אם יהיה חיבור לקנים הרבה ביחד שאוגדים
אותם כולם יש בהם כח להעמיד עליהם
תקרה ... ונקט לשון אל תפרוש לומר אפילו
שמתחלה נתחברת עם הצבור ורק לבסוף
נפרדת מהם לית לן בה.
**הרב חיים יוסף דוד אזולאי, חסדי אבות
ב:ה**

Question for the Table:

- 1) The Gemara highlights feeling the pain of the community in times of crisis and R. Azulai highlights what one can accomplish when working within the community. Can you think of other reasons to connect to the community?
- 2) Is it always helpful to experience suffering as part of the community?
- 3) According to R. Azulai, is it always better to work together or are there times when it is better to work alone?

The Challenges of Communal Work

Sometimes, activities performed in groups can seem inefficient. People can get distracted in conversation or delayed waiting for another group member to complete his/her task. Does that justify separating oneself from the group to find a private, more efficient way to get the same results?

The next two sources teach us the value of being part of the community, even when doing so includes some challenges:

It is stated "Do not separate yourself from the community (tzibbur)." The word TZiBuR is an acronym for TZaddikim (righteous people) Beinonim (average people) and Reshaim (wicked people). A gathering and bonding can exist even when wicked people are included, just as the galbanum was part of the incense offering [despite its terrible smell] ... When there is a connection between them, we allow the wicked [to participate] and evil will not take over. However, this is only when the righteous take a leadership role ... one may not separate from this type of community.

R. Yosef Patzanovski, Pardes Yosef, Bereishit 49:1

One should not think that through one's involvement in the improvement of the public, one will not reach the same level as one who spends that time on personal development because this is not true; the two goals are united; and the spiritual benefit created by the improvement of the community affects all the individuals that are part of the community. Therefore, it is equally or more effective in improving the individual than only being involved in self-improvement.

R. Avraham I, Kook, Ma'amarei HaRa'ayah, Vol. II, pg. 447

וכתוב אל תפרוש עצמך מן הציבור, צבו"ר ראשי תיבות צדיקים בינונים ורשעים, כינוס וחיבור יוכל להיות אף אם רשעים בתוכם, דחלבה גם כן היה מסמני קטרת ... כשיש חיבור ביניהם הנח לו לא יוכל לשלוט בהם רע, אבל כל זה אם הצדיקים עומדים בראש ... מצבור כזה אין אתה רשאי לפרוש.

הרב יוסף פאצאנובסקי, פרדס יוסף, בראשית מט:א

ואין לחשוב שעל ידי עסקו בענין השלמות הכללי לא יבוא לחלקו כל כך כאילו עסק בשלמות פרטי, כי לא כן הדבר שהמה מתאחדים והכח הפנימי של השלמות הכללי פועל להשלים הפרט הנכלל, שזה ממש ויותר עוד מאילו עסק בשלמות פרטי.

הרב אברהם י. קוק, מאמרי הראי"ה חלק ב' עמ' 447

Questions for the Table:

- 1) According to R. Patzanovski, communal work involves working with people who don't share one's same values and is beneficial as long as there is a positive influence among the members. How would you apply his comments to case #1? Is a group of people who waste time comparable to a group that allows people to negatively influence others?
- 2) According to R. Kook, one should be involved in improving the community even if one doesn't perceive it to be as productive as working on oneself. How are his comments applicable to case #2? Do you think there are times where R. Kook would say that the benefits of being part of the community are outweighed by the benefits of working on personal growth?

Fear of Criticism

Community and their institutions benefit from people who take leadership roles. Those leaders might be subject to criticism. Is fear of criticism a legitimate reason to turn down a leadership role?

R. Mordechai ben Hillel teaches us what to do when offered a leadership position:

One who is approached to be the treasurer of a charity fund should accept the offer.

Mordechai, Baba Batra no. 488

גבאי של צדקה יש לו לקבל על עצמו להיות גבאי.
מרדכי, בבא בתרא ס' תפח

Does this mean that everyone who is offered a position of leadership in the community is obligated to accept it? R. Elyakim Getz, *Even HaShoham* no. 39, maintains that while R. Mordechai ben Hillel encourages someone to accept a leadership role, the individual cannot be compelled to accept it. R. Shalom Shwadron, *Mishpat Shalom*, no. 331, (first footnote in *Kuntrus Tikun Olam*) disagrees and maintains that one can be compelled to accept the position.

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Why would someone not want to take a leadership position in the community? Why do you think R. Mordechai ben Hillel encourages taking the position despite one's hesitation?
- 2) Does R. Mordechai ben Hillel's comment relate to someone who doesn't want to accept a position of leadership because he/she fears criticism? Is the dispute between R. Getz and R. Shwadron relevant here? Why or why not?
- 3) How would you apply these sources to case #3? What other factors should be considered?

When we work with other people, we inevitably encounter individuals with different views and values. We might also hesitate to get involved in the community because of potential criticism. That should not deter us from joining and participating in the community. In fact, diversity is an integral component that strengthens a community. Being part of a community is an important part of Judaism. It provides numerous benefits to the individual and the community.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, CJF

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Chaim Y.D. Azulai (1724-1806) was born in Jerusalem. He was a prolific author, authoring more than eighty works on a range of Jewish topics.

R. Yosef Patzanovski (1875-1942) was born in Poland and earned his livelihood selling lumber. His *Pardes Yosef* presents halachic analyses of verses in the Torah.

R. Avraham I. Kook (1865-1935) was the chief Ashkenazi rabbi of Israel under the British Mandate. After studying in the Volozhin Yeshiva, he assumed a few rabbinic posts in Lithuania before moving to Israel in 1904, while the country was under Ottoman rule. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential leaders of Religious Zionism.

R. Mordechai ben Hillel (c. 1250-1298) was a German rabbi and authority on Jewish law. His commentary on the Talmud collects many rulings of rabbis of previous generations and is considered a primary source on matters of Jewish law.

R. Elyakim Getz (d. 1705) served as a rabbi and teacher in a number of communities in Poland and Germany. He authored *Even HaShoham*, a collection of responsa, as well as *Rapdunei BaTapuchim*, a work on Aggadah (Jewish legends).

R. Shalom M Schwadron (1835-1911) was born and lived in Ukraine. He was considered a leading halachic authority of his time. He wrote a number of works on Jewish law.