

**Rosh Hashanah Evening – 5770**  
**Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills**  
**Rabbi Jonathan Aaron**

**Internet Communities vs. Real Communities: Do we have to choose?**

Last year at this time there was an economic storm brewing. There was anticipation, nervousness, uneasiness, and we were all unsure as to how everything would unfold. Over this past year, that storm hit, it all unfolded in front of us and on top of us, and I think that everyone in this room was effected by it in some way. Some were more personally effected, others through relationship, but we all felt it, and continue to feel it. The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles declared that “A Bad Economy Demands a Strong Community.” I hope that over the last year Temple Emanuel has been that kind of strong community. People came together over the last year to help each other in many different ways, and tomorrow Rabbi Geller will be talking about one way we can all help each other and have compassion for each other. From the bima we hope that throughout the year we have been able to provide a calming of spirit and a place where you can see the beauty of life even at its most difficult times.

Lets just change that slogan just a little bit and instead of bad economy it read – “Suffering times demand a strong community.” Because there’s a lot of suffering right now, and it’s not just the economy that’s weighing us down, it’s everything on top of it as well. It’s our scheduled to the hilt lives, it’s our daily grind and how the tension builds because of our cares, our concerns: for our children, for our parents, for our friends...and they are also hurting, they are sick, their businesses are failing, their nest egg has been scrambled, they are being teased at school, their dreams have vanished.

Suffering times demand a strong community. Where is that strong community? What community have you turned to? Is it here? Is it at work? Is it within your circle of friends? I found a place where communities abound – and hundreds of millions of people are in those communities – I’m sure many of you are, too. Where did I find those communities? *Online*. Searching there I found a couple of communities. I looked at lots of websites and took note of some of the descriptions: Facebook (helps you connect and share with the people in your life), MySpace, Twitter (share and discover what’s happening right now, anywhere in the world) , LinkedIn, Orkut, Friendster (helping people stay in touch with friends and discover new

people), bebo, tagged, hi5, classmates, 360 Yahoo, friendster, (social music site), Tribe dot net, Skyrock, Peachhead, Genie, Eons (that's a special one for baby boomers), PerfSpot, Badoo (the greatest place to meet), Experience project (the world's largest living collection of shared experiences), A Small World (small community of people connected by three degrees of separation), Faces (a bunch of creative young people), The Student Center (they didn't let me in, too old), Dandelife (a social biography network – where you tell your life's stories), Face Junky and Peers Only. Those aren't the only ones, because I left out all of the movie communities, music communities, book communities, cooking communities, communities for people with certain diseases, and comfort communities for those who have lost loved ones, communities for making the world green, and communities for those who love video games. And then there are all of the professional communities, where doctors and lawyers and accountants and scientists and real estate brokers, and rabbis, and even cantors, and musicians, and teachers, educators, Jewish educators, dog lovers, cat lovers, fundamentalist Christians, traditional Jews, liberal Jews, Athiest Jews...you get the picture, there is a community for you there, if you want it.

These are virtual communities with a lot of people. Imagine this: Facebook in 2007 had 17,672,679 monthly visitors (whether they visited once or a thousand times). In 2008 they had 28,563,983, and in January of 2009, it more than doubled in size to 68,557,534. That's a lot of friends.

One of the dictionary definitions of community is “a common goal or bond.” On the internet you literally have millions and millions of people to search through to find others that share your passions, your interests. Even if you went to a convention where everyone had the same interests as you – how many would you really connect with? How many of them could you tell your story? Online, every single person can know you. Just a show of hands. How many of you have a facebook page? Myspace? Linkedin? For those who didn't raise your hand, how many of you would say you are a part of a community online?

It's amazing. Families can let everyone they are acquainted with know what's going on their lives even though they live many miles away. People who are ill can inform others of how they are doing, forming their own online communities where they can communicate freely and allay the fears of the people who care about them the most. It has allowed us to tell people what we're doing, what we like and dislike, what we think about the world,

and really express who we are in a free way. Now, of course there are people who use this self expression to denigrate others, to say things one would never say to a person's face, misrepresent themselves, take advantage of others, and other kind of dastardly things, much like in a real flesh and blood community. And cyber-bullying amongst teenagers and middle school children is almost an epidemic. The internet world has provided an easy venue for lashon ha ra, disparagement and untruths... and although I could speak exclusively on this subject tonight – go online to Temple Emanuel's website, read my lashon ha ra sermon from several years ago, and just imagine that I'm talking about the internet. The biggest difference being that spoken words can fade into the past, whereas the written word online is there forever...

I'm a little bit of an idealist, and I'd like to imagine that all of us here are using our social internet communities to enrich our lives, to bolster relationships, to make connections with others, and for entertainment. All of that is good, all of that is healthy. And now I bet your thinking, here comes the, "at what cost" part of this sermon. No cost (except your DSL or cable connection – anyone on dial-up still). I'm not one who believes that the time we spend on the internet takes away from participating in the world. One study I read said that those who were civically minded still kept up their political activism in the "real" community.

But isn't it funny that I have to say that – a "real" community. Internet communities *are* real. But you understood me when I said that. Because somehow, this community – coming together like this, or any other communal gathering in person – has something else. Because there is definitely something that happens when people are interacting in person that you can't get online. The biggest positive of virtual online communities is the number of those you can touch. After all, there are over 68 million people on facebook. Let's put it this way. If you saw a picture with 100,000 people at a rally in Washington, and you knew you were in that picture, could you even see yourself? What about a picture with your best friend sitting and talking on a bench somewhere, how much could you see about yourself in that?

So maybe there is a cost after all, but the good news is, I really only see one: personal interaction... when you're online, *you do it alone*. There's no one there with you. Even though you're in a community – you're not *in the community*... You're in your house or some coffee shop (even as I'm writing

this in a nameless coffee shop, there are at least six other islands of people, all with their laptops opened, and I imagine, writing their Rosh Hashanah sermon), or your office. Maybe that's why it's a "virtual community." It's kind of there, but not something that's shared in person between people. It's hard for me to imagine being at a party and saying, "hey everyone, want to go and watch me write some stuff on my facebook account?! Come on, it'll be fun!" and then thirty people rush to get a close look at the 22 inch screen in my den. "Watch what I'm going to write." (typing) "Friends, I'm here at a party with all my real friends having a party, we're having a great time." (turning back) "Everyone will love to know that!" (high fives all around). It *is* a way to let people know about you. But I don't think those people know you. To know you is to experience you, the feeling, the breath, in Hebrew there's a great word for it – your "*ofi*," your essence, your mind mixed with your personality mixed with your style. Online, it's great to get a little note from someone telling you they support you, and are here for you. But does that give you the same support as when you are sitting or standing across from a friend, and you tell them your troubles, and you see their eyes welling up with your pain, and you feel the warmth of their sympathetic hug? Do you feel the same sense of happiness when you see that someone wrote LOL responding minutes later to something that you wrote – or when you're hanging with friends and you say something that cracks them up?

Judaism demands a community. One of the most famous quotes from Hillel in Pirke Avot is "Do not separate yourself from the community." And the times of your life that matter most, Judaism requires witnesses to verify and share it with you – birth, marriage, conversion. And at the times when you need people the most, when your loved ones have passed, you need at least ten to help you through it, ten people to say Kaddish. And Judaism demands it through the mitzvot of visiting the sick, being kind to the widow, the orphan and the downtrodden. That's all of us in this room. And next week, when we confess our wrongdoings throughout the year, we do it in the plural – Al cheyt She-CHATANU lifanecha, the sins WE have sinned – we are all together, in person, standing with and for each other. We all share the fact that life happens to us, and it can bring us to great happiness, and it can also bring us to heavy times, heavy burdens, and to be with others to share it, that's the "real" community.

There is a story in the Talmud about Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba, who fell ill and Rabbi Johanan went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give

me your hand. He gave him his hand and he healed him. R. Johanan once fell ill and Rabbi Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he healed him. Why couldn't R. Johanan heal himself? They replied: *The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.*

He knew that he needed someone to be there with him to make it through. He couldn't heal himself. It takes another to help, it takes another, by your side, offering his/her hand to be human.

We need other people in this world. I'm not going to sing Streisand... And in our virtual communities, we've got friends, people who are willing and wanting to hear about our lives. But we can't just stay there, we can't make that the only community with whom we share our lives. It's got to be through the balance of both. Because, if we stay only in our real ones, then we miss out on the possibilities that can touch us on the web, and it's great to hear what all of our friends are doing, especially when we don't see them as often. But if we stay in our computer chairs only, then we miss out on the touch of others, the feel of the beating of another's heart, the expressions that move us, the touch that can calm us. Find the balance, the places online where you let people know *about* you, and the flesh and blood communities where you can let people *know* you, feel your *ofi*. If we can find community in both, our lives will certainly be enriched, and those troubles that we are all having, while they may continue, we can share them, and be there for those who need us to be there, in person, to offer our energy, our touch and our warmth, to be human beings who connect with each other. That's the kind of community we hope to be here: The kind of place where you can find those personal community connections.