

Rosh Hashanah – 5770
New Emanuel Minyan
Rabbi Jonathan Aaron

Our Place in the Crowd of Community

Obviously, I've been thinking about the idea of community. I say obviously, because that subject has been the theme this year, from the Elul reflections all about community down to all of our sermons containing a bit of community in them. It seems especially appropriate to discuss it and to study it in this service, since many of the reflection were from the regular members of this minyan.

Most of the time we speak of community as a place where people are looking out for each other, where members of the group consistently share lives over a long period of time. We usually think of communities like the TV show "Cheers," where everybody knows your name. But really communities are places where everybody knows much more than your name. They usually know your birthday or anniversary (because you've celebrated it together), or your ailments and your doctor's visits (because you've moaned about them together), and of course everybody knows your kids, and have seen them since they were this small, and are now this big. A community is a place where you can share your fears, where you can express your concerns, where you can ruminate and pontificate about anything without any one thinking your crazy for thinking that way – or thinking your crazy for thinking that way and loving you anyway, or even *for* thinking that way. In the best of communities you think of everyone in it as your extended family.

There's something else, however, something that penetrates the deepest part of what it means to be human. We all feel it in a different way, it is manifest in each of us differently, but for all of us it is there. Safety.

I was talking to someone about our theme of community, and he said, "Oh, you've got to read this book called "Crowds and Power" by Elias Canetti. The book was written in the early part of the sixties, but contains universal ideas that were true way before then, and are still true now. The first half of the book is about crowds and their essence. How they form, why they form, what has to happen with them and so on. But the one thing that is clear from his book is that human beings have a deep-seated need to be a part of a crowd. Why? Because of one fear that all of us share...the fear of being touched by the unknown.

He asserts that one of our greatest fear as a human being is being touched by the unknown. Think about when you are walking in a mall and someone bumps into you, or you bump into someone by mistake – how quickly do you say, "I'm sorry," or "excuse me," and if the person doesn't say that, you kind of look at them, like "that's rude!" or just give a mean face to them. Why? We don't like being touched by strangers. We feel secure in our home, especially when it's locked up, because it protects us from the outside world coming into our space and touching us. Of course there are some exclusive

people that we do allow to touch us, but that's family and friends, and they are invited into our space regularly.

Being in a crowd changes all of that. In a crowd you are surrounded by people, bumping you, pushing up against you, maybe even a hand on the shoulder for balance – and it's all O.K. Why? Why in a crowd do we allow it? Canetti maintains that it is in the crowd where you are able to let go of the I, and be a part of the we. In those moments when you're in the crowd, all the inhibitions of space and personal walls are let down so that you can be a part of the crowd, a part of the whole.

And the crowd has a purpose, the crowd has a reason for existence. It needs more and more people, and the more that join it, the stronger the crowd becomes. And all along you are just one of them, one of the people, one of the mass of humanity – and that is comforting to us as human beings.

There is another thing that happens in a crowd as well...there is no hierarchy, there is no rank, there is no division between its members. The person next to you isn't a doctor, or a lawyer, or a truck driver, they are another member of the crowd, no more, or no less than you. So in essence, the I you have in your regular life disappears – all of your identity in the day to day world around you ceases to exist, and you become a part of the whole, and that gives power to you.

As I read about this crowd, I couldn't help, of course, to imagine that he was talking about community as well. Then I turned to the minyan. Just think about the crowd that has gathered here today. There are lawyers, bankers, professors of different kinds, teachers, musicians, writers, rabbis, cantors, doctors, business people, psychiatrists, actors, managers, agents, casting people, directors, librarians, real estate brokers, did I leave anyone out – give a shout...

But here, you are one of the congregation. Here you are just you, flesh and blood human being, sitting next to another human, recounting your deeds just as they are, participating in the service just as they are. No one's prayers are more important than any other person's prayers. They are all the same – we are all the same here. And, you know, there's a lot of kissing and handshaking, maybe even brushing against your neighbor. Here we can do that as well. Here we are safe.

But on Monday, we go back to our lives, and some of us, in this society, may have a job that is of "higher stature," and some may have work that is considered more "lowly." Some of us may feel that the power we have in this room doesn't exist in our society, and there we are less than, there we are meaningless – or that we have meaning in our professional life, but that in the scheme of things, we aren't really doing anything.

Judaism doesn't believe that. And I hope in ten minutes, you will come to understand that as well. Just as in Canetti's crowd, we are all equally important to the crowd, Judaism can show us that every moment we can think of ourselves in the same way, in that same

“Every person’s existence here serves the crowd, the community, the others that are around us, and those not within our vicinity as well.

Read these two texts and then consider – **where do I fit in to this scheme? What do these texts say about the individual and the community?**

TEXT STUDY

Ben Zoma once saw a host [of God] on one of the steps of the Temple Mount. He said, “Blessed Be the one who discerns secrets, and blessed be the one who has created all these people to serve me.” For he used to say: How many labors did Adam have to engage in before he obtained bread to eat! He plowed, he sowed, he reaped; he stacked the sheaves, threshed the grain, winnowed the chaff, selected the good ears, ground [them], sifted [flour]. Kneaded the dough, and baked. And only then did he eat. Whereas I get up and find all these things done for me...How many labors did Adam have to engage in before he obtained a garment to wear! He sheared the sheep, washed [the wool], combed it, spun it, wove it, dyed the cloth, and sewed it. And only then did he have a garment to wear. Whereas I get up and find all these things done for me. All kinds of craftsmen come early to the door of my house, and when I rise in the morning, I find all these things ready for me.

Berachot 58a

“And it came to pass that the tabernacle was one.” (Exodus 36:13) In the building of the tabernacle, all Israel were joined in their hearts; no one felt superior to any one. At first, skilled individuals did their own part of the construction, and it seemed to each one that their own work was superior. Afterwards, they saw how their several contributions to the service of the Tabernacle were integrated – all the boards, the sockets, the curtains and the loops fit together as if one person had done it all. Then they realized that each one of them had depended on the other. Then they understood that what they had accomplished was not by virtue of their own skill alone but that the Holy One had guided the hands of everyone who had worked on the tabernacle...so that “it came to pass that the tabernacle was one.”

R. Mordecai Yosef of Izbica