

Becoming a Community

Rosh Hashanah 2009
Sanctuary Services

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I meditate most mornings. Sometimes it is boring. But sometimes it is genuinely enlightening. About six months ago as I was meditating, I noticed that I was thinking about the things I wanted to do before I die. Maybe that has something to do with approaching sixty.

To my great surprise, the first thing on my list was to become fluent in Hebrew. I had no idea that this was so important to me. My Hebrew was always good enough; I can get by on the street in Israel; I can read classical texts with a dictionary; I can lead prayers. But I am not fluent. I decided that I should listen to my longing. Soon after, I heard about the famous language schools at Middlebury College in Vermont, and their new Hebrew summer program. Rich and I decided that I should go.

So that is how I ended up going back to college, for seven weeks. There were forty-two students in the program – Jews, Christians, and Muslims. I was more than twenty-five years older than the next oldest student. I felt very safe leaving my cholesterol medicine in the bathroom because it will be at least thirty years until any of the other students will need it.

What distinguishes the Middlebury program is that it is a total immersion – you speak, read, write, and listen only to Hebrew, not only during the five hours of daily classes, but also during meals, in the dorms, in the library, or in the gym. It means no English newspapers and no NPR. Brief phone calls to non-Hebrew-speaking family members are permitted in private spaces, and English e-mail is extremely limited.

So, from day two on, all we spoke was Hebrew. My Hebrew was good enough for meal-time conversations about trivial matters, but not good enough to really communicate who I am. I was just some older woman, a rabbi in Los Angeles, no history, no back story. I felt invisible.

Over the weeks of the program, as our language skills deepened, something extraordinary began to happen. As we told our stories, we began to be seen by each other. We discovered connections we didn't know we had. The young rabbinical student whose room was around the corner from mine turned out to be a fraternity brother of Richard Brucker's (Barry and Sue's son). The Christian doctoral student at Notre Dame had studied with my beloved late teacher Rabbi Michael Signer.

No longer just sharing the same space and taking the same courses, through our conversations with each other, relationships developed. We saw each other's gifts and

we stopped being invisible. I could ask the twenty-year-old down the hall to teach me how to create a powerpoint presentation; she could ask the twenty-eight-year-old graduate student to teach her how to recognize which berries were safe to eat on the Robert Frost Trail; he could ask the Muslim political science student from Gaza to help him understand Israeli-Palestinian relations. We became a community.

I knew I would learn a lot of Hebrew this summer. I didn't know I would learn about creating community. The lessons I learned were reinforced when I read Peter Block's book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. He argues that the essential challenge of our time is to transform our isolation and self-interest into connectedness and caring for the whole. It is not enough to talk about individual transformation; we need to think about collective transformation as well. He describes the profound loneliness and fragmentation so many of us feel. Ironically, as connected as we are through the internet, e-mail, facebook, and twitter, none of this creates the feeling of safety that comes from a place where we emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically belong. There is no sense of home. What we long for, he argues, are "restorative communities," communities that value relationship over problems and self-interest, communities that emerge out of the accountability of one member to another. What I learned in college this summer is that restorative communities are created by conversations that build relatedness and make it possible to make claims on each other.

Restorative communities, restoration – it is another word for *teshuvah*. Mostly, at this season, we think about our own individual spiritual work. We pay attention to healing our own personal woundedness, or the fragmentation we feel in our families and closest relationships. And of course that work is important. But it is not enough. This is also the moment to look at our community. After all, we are all here, together. We confess our sins in the plural. We are not alone. We pray within the embrace of a community, face to face.

I must admit it irritates me to read an ad for "an innovative shul created just for the High Holy Days" or for the virtual synagogues that one can access on line. Those are too easy; they demand so little. All that matters is one's own spiritual journey. But real *teshuvah* happens within an on-going, face-to-face community, with all the blessings and all the challenges of being part of something much larger than your individual self. In community, we are accountable to other people, and because of this, it is in community that our spiritual needs can be heard and healed.

It is not good for a person to be alone, says our tradition. It is not good for a person to be alone, especially now. At this uncertain time, we need connections, face-to-face connections, with people whose stories we know, with whom we can talk, to whom we can turn; we need restorative communities. As the Federation's slogan puts it: "A bad economy demands a good community." That's why, in preparation for the High Holy Days, we asked congregants to share with us a story about a time in their lives when community mattered, stories you have hopefully been receiving every day during Elul. The stories had so much in common – whether they were about a school, a sports team, a class, or a shul.

I quote from just one of them, Debra Carnow's: "After my heart surgery, first came the not-unexpected calls, cards, and hospital visits. But then the meals arrived, every night, for three weeks. Many dear friends pitched in and drove Leah from her school to Temple Emanuel so that she could remain in Religious School. Others helped out by running errands for us or driving me to my doctor's appointments. Whatever we needed, someone was there to provide assistance. Without the community's support, I do not know how we would have survived the two months post-surgery. I will always be grateful for the love and caring that was lavished on my family and me by Temple Emanuel."

Debra's story, along with the stories of so many others, describe a good community, a restorative community where people actually live the question: how can we help each other create the world we want to live in?

On this New Year morning, we imagine the world we want to live in, and then we ask what we need to do to make it real. So imagine with me. Imagine what High Holiday services would feel like if you walked into this sanctuary and you know many more people because you have talked with them, you know a part of their story, and they know some of yours. Imagine that you have been in each other's homes because they have baby-sat your kids or because you taught them how to plant a vegetable garden. Imagine that the congregant a few rows from you once taught you how to make sushi, and someone else walked your dog when you were away. Or that you drove a senior to temple or welcomed people on a Friday night as a greeter. Imagine that you taught that widow how to play bridge and your high school senior taught someone's grandfather how to use photoshop.

How different would prayer feel then? How much more powerful your own spiritual work of *teshuvah*? How much richer your life, no matter what challenges the New Year might bring?

If this is the congregation we want to imagine, how can we make it happen?

And if not now, when?

Some months ago a congregant came to talk about her struggles with this difficult economy. She shared with me that she wanted to look for a job but couldn't afford a babysitter. I was sure there were people in the congregation who would volunteer an hour to help her out. But I didn't know how to network people to help each other. I brought the question to the leadership team of Hineni, our community-organizing project through ONE LA. They suggested a solution: we create a Time Bank here at the Temple Emanuel.

It is a very simple idea, one more step toward that congregation we want to imagine. Time Banking involves spending an hour doing something for somebody in the temple community. For that hour of your time, you earn a Time Dollar that you can spend on having someone do something for you. It is like barter, except in a Time

Bank, the unit of exchange is an hour, and every hour has equal value. Each of our gifts matter equally, no matter how old we are or what we might do for a living. An hour of financial planning is of equal value to an hour of baby-sitting or an hour spent driving someone to a doctor's appointment.

A talented group of congregants spent months researching Time Banks, responding to liability concerns, securing the software, setting up the website and convincing our leadership that this would have a powerful impact on our goals of creating a community that matters in people's lives. The idea is like in the movie *Pay It Forward*. You thank someone for doing something for you by doing something for someone else. And we all benefit.

We are not inventing this idea. Presently there are about two hundred Time Banks around the country, mostly organized around neighborhoods, community groups, churches, and non-profits. I think we might be the first synagogue.

The Time Bank can actually help some of those members of our community who are having a tough time by providing services that they can't pay for, and even for those of us who could easily pay, imagine how different it will feel if we offer this to each other as part of being in a community together. Suddenly we are no longer isolated individuals engaged in "parallel pray," but rather members of a community that are concerned for one another.

And then imagine, some years down the road, that the Temple Emanuel Time Bank expands to include other faith-communities in Los Angeles as well. What will Los Angeles be like when we have turned strangers into friends?

It might be more like the dorm I lived in this summer – lots of different people, different ages, different gifts, helping each other in unpredictable ways, with lives made more meaningful by the common language of community we spoke, the stories we shared, and the relationships that were created by the simple acts of helping each other, face-to-face.

So make this promise: give a gift of just one hour, and promise you will open yourself to receive the gift of someone else. Take the card on your seat. Fill it out, give it to an usher as you leave; one of our volunteers will contact you to talk about what gifts of time you can volunteer and what gifts from others can enrich your life. Pay it forward.

I still meditate most every morning. I still try to listen to my longing. What emerges now is not what I want to do before I die, but how I want to live – now – more awake, more present in the moment, more connected to other people. It is a longing for a real community, a restorative community that makes a difference in all of our lives.

Listen to your own longings as we listen to the shofar. The shofar calls us to imagine the world we can create together through the quality of our connections with

each other this New Year, moment by moment, and hour by hour. *Shana tova u'metukah.*