October 12, 2016
Yom Kippur

What we talk about when we talk about community

L'shana Tova.

Today is a day when we look at our lives with fresh eyes. We try to step back, to take what we are accustomed to seeing and find new possibilities. Today we are called upon to look again at how to define ourselves as individuals and as a community.

This morning I want to talk about community. And I want to start with a recent experience.

A few weeks ago a small group of us from Machar and friends from another Jewish congregation went to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to register new voters by house to house canvassing. Our assignment took us to a very poor area in downtown Harrisburg that was home to mostly African-Americans. We saw only one white person in four hours of canvassing. And to speak an uncomfortable truth, I was initially apprehensive. But far less so in a short time. After people realized we weren't Jehovah's Witnesses, they were unfailingly polite and often quick to joke and chat with us. We had so many good interactions – the young

boy who accompanied us for a block so that we would know who was home or had a dog to avoid. The 68 year-old Vietnam vet who had never voted but was fiercely eager to vote this year. And the young woman sitting outside who we helped register and who called us back after we had headed to the next house where a group of men were hanging out. She said, I just want you to know that they might look scary, but they're really nice. And they were.

That day Maryland volunteers registered several hundred new voters in the area. Our small group returned to Montgomery County to eat and share stories. To put it simply, we felt good.

There was an intensity and pleasure to being accepted by people living such different and obviously hard lives. I felt – and what others said reinforced my feeling – that our little group had done a small good thing that multiplied many times over could help both them and us. And I felt importantly that we had done this – not simply as individuals – but as part of a group, and it was as a group that we sought to turn our Jewish humanist values into concrete action.

Let me get back to this and community in a moment.

The costs of individualism

For many of us, modern America has afforded us a comfortable life with a nearly unlimited range of possibilities for individual satisfaction. None of us would willingly go back to a time of stifling conformity.

But that focus on individualism comes at a cost. Individualism deprives us of the comforts of community, of shared feelings of loyalty and belonging. For some of us our personal loyalties have shrunk to family and a few friends. Studies document the high rates of depression, anxiety and chronic loneliness in modern American life.

A sociology book from the 1980s, called <u>Habits of the Heart</u>,[1] argues that our hyper-individualism often leads us to weak forms of community. We are so used to valuing our autonomy and our own schedule of preferences that "the ultimate ethical rule is simply that individuals should be able to pursue whatever they find rewarding" as long as it does not interfere with others.[1]

But, the book argues, this leads us to an uncomfortable self-absorption as we try to make moment by moment cost/benefit assessments based on our desires. To provide a crude example, it is so easy to stand back and rationally evaluate every affiliation, including, for instance, a Jewish congregation, in terms of whether the costs in time and money are worth it, the way one might judge a

gym. How much am I getting out of it? Do we decide to pay dues for another year

based on our sense of how interesting the educational programs were? How

enjoyable the services? As the authors argue, when we so value our individual

preferences we downplay the role of tradition, obligation and commitment to our

community in defining ourselves.

Community may come to mean just the gathering of people with similar

individual interests, what the authors of Habits of the Heart call lifestyle enclaves

or community. A tennis club or a yoga studio has its appeal, but communities in

which our participation varies with our shifting preferences and which have no

particular ethical or historical hold on us fall short of satisfying our deeper need

for community.

Solidarity *in extremis*

Are there ways to establish bonds beyond a small circle of family and

friends or a transitory group bound primarily by a hobby or other narrow shared

interests? Yes, but some of the clearest paths to community are not ones we

would choose.

One is poverty. I recently read a new book by Sebastian Junger called Tribe:

On Homecoming and Belonging,[2] in which he refers to a global survey by the

World Health Organization finding that compared to people in poor countries,

people in wealthy countries suffer eight times the levels of depression. Junger

argues that "poor people are forced to share their time and resources more than

wealthy people are, and as a result they live in closer communities."[2] Junger goes

on to argue that "A wealthy person who has never had to rely on help and

resources from his community is leading a privileged life that falls way outside

more than a million years of human experience. Financial independence can lead

to isolation, and isolation can put people at a greatly increased risk of depression

and suicide."[2]

Junger describes how satisfying community can be, but his examples come

from people facing extreme adversity. In the run-up to World War II the British

feared that bombing of their cities would cause mass hysteria. Government

planners were reluctant to build bomb shelters because they worried that people

would never leave them and economic production would plunge. But that didn't

happen. Despite months of aerial bombings, killing hundreds of people at a time,

Londoners continued making their way to work, returning in the evenings to the

shelters. Before the war psychiatric breakdowns were projected to reach

millions, but in fact voluntary admissions to psychiatric institutions fell during the

Blitz. One doctor observed that "Chronic neurotics of peacetime now drive ambulances" to be of help to the community.[2]

The sociologist Emile Durkheim first wrote about the positive effects of war on mental health. He observed that suicide rates fell when nations went to war. Parisian psychiatric wards were empty during each world war. An Irish psychologist, H.A. Lyons, observed that during the riots of 1969 and 1970 in Belfast suicide rates dropped to one half of what they had been.

Lyons published his interpretation: "When people are actively engaged in a cause their lives have more purpose… with a resulting improvement in mental health…. It would be irresponsible to suggest violence as a means of improving mental health, but the Belfast findings suggest that people will feel better psychologically if they have more involvement with their community."[2]

Another University of Chicago researcher, Charles Fritz, studied 9000 accounts of communities confronting catastrophic events of all kinds and found none collapsed into panic. His manuscript began with the question: "Why do large-scale disasters produce such mentally healthy conditions?"[2]

Fritz's theory was that our highly developed society has weakened social connections and that disasters force people to return to more ancient ways of

relating. Catastrophes allow people to experience an extremely satisfying solidarity with each other. Junger summarized Fritz' view: "As people come together to face an existential threat, … class differences are temporarily erased, income disparities become irrelevant, race is overlooked, and individuals are assessed simply by what they are willing to do for the group. It is a kind of fleeting social utopia that … is enormously gratifying to the average person and downright therapeutic to people suffering from mental illness."[2]

These examples of solidarity and community were born in extreme circumstances. We have to ask: Is some version of these communities reproducible outside of these horrific circumstances?

Communities of Memory

The authors of <u>Habits of the Heart</u>[1] speak of true communities as communities of memory. Such communities have a past that resonates through time. In the retelling of their past, members of these communities offer examples of people who embody the values of the community. They tell stories of how a good person acts and what kind of success is admired. Importantly, they connect us to a purpose that is larger than individual self-interest. In words that should resonate with Machar, "the communities of memory … tie us to the past … [and]

turn us toward the future [to tomorrow] as communities of hope."[1] They allow us to organize our lives by reference to our social and ethical commitments. The authors illustrate what they mean in describing one woman, Cecilia, who became involved in local political activity. She described her transition to activist not so much as a choice – like whether one takes up painting – but as "fulfilling a responsibility to which her life, her heritage, and her beliefs have called her."[1] Cecilia described herself as choosing a series of moral commitments through which her own identity would be fulfilled.

This is something that we can imagine a Jewish humanist organization doing. There are several non-religious American Jewish institutions that define themselves in terms of a shared commitment to tikkun olam, repairing the world. The Workmen's Circle, for example, which was formed more than 100 years ago as a mutual aid society, is committed to the idea that "our Jewish identity is intrinsically linked to our passion for social activism."[3] Avodah, the service program for young adults, aims to create a "Jewish community rooted in a shared commitment to promoting social and economic justice …."[4]

To return to my original story: A small group of Jews from Machar and another congregation went together to register voters in a critical election. Since

then many more of us have gone to Pennsylvania. I am sure we saw ourselves as

furthering our Jewish and humanistic values. It may be true that ephemerally

enjoyable shared activities – like biking or softball, for example - help build

community. But there is a special richness to the connections when we act

together as part of a community of memory to try to better lives, our own

included. A Jewish community of memory responds to the needs of its members

for meaning – among them the need to place ourselves in history, the need to see

ourselves as forging together a future informed by our Jewish humanist values

and, importantly, our need to need one another.

I realize this path may be hard to envision. We are modern Americans – we

are not living close together in a Jewish religious community bound by daily

rituals. We value our autonomy. We would be sacrificing immediate personal

preferences to further community and, through community, our efforts to repair

a broken world.

The idea of community raises many questions. How interconnected do we

want to be? What would it take to achieve that? Do we want to make a key pillar

of our individual and community identity that we act together as members of

Machar to help repair the world? What would it take to sustain ourselves in

making such commitments?

Here's one example of what I mean: Two years ago Machar joined a vigil in

front of the National Rifle Association's headquarters to bear witness to the

tragedy of gun violence and to advocate for policies to reduce it. Rabbi Nehama

and a handful of Machar members participated under the Machar banner.

Similarly, last year a small group of us gathered for a rally on the mall for climate

justice during Pope Francis' visit to Washington, D.C. Other members, I am

certain, equally believed in these causes, but for various reasons, including

personal preferences, did not attend. What would it take for Machar to be the

kind of community of memory that summons us to join with others committed to

our values to take right action and not merely hold right thoughts?

My hope is that through talking among ourselves and experimentation, we

can see whether some form of this vision resonates. Thank you, and L'Shana

Tovah.

References

[1] Bellah, Robert N; Madsen, Richard; Sullivan, William M.; Swidler, Ann; Tipton, Steven M. (1985) *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper and Row.

[2] Junger, Sebastian (2016) *Tribe: On Homecoming and Becoming*. New York: Twelve.

[3] Retrieved from: https://circle.org/who-we-are/our-values/

[4] Retrieved from: https://avodah.net/who-we-are/our-values/