

We need the minyan

Are we getting together more? It seems to me that we have more community-wide enterprises now than formerly. Maybe, after four years in the area, I simply am more in the know, but I also think that there is a trend toward greater communal bonding and cooperation.

My little hamlet, Emerson, was one of 212 cities in 33 countries that participated in the Shabbos Project over October 24-25. On October 30, I took part in the panel that launched CoNNectJ, the new umbrella for adult Jewish education in Bergen County, sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey. Give Me Harmony, a countywide program honoring Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's 20th *yahrzeit*, will take place



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over the Shabbat of November 14-15. The sponsors and planners represent a wide range of backgrounds, perspectives, and movements. "The Golem and the Jinni," the book for the federation's One Book, One Community program, has Jews in our catchment area on the same page, both literally and figuratively. The Pascack Valley Thanksgiving Interfaith Service, scheduled for Sunday, November 23, at Temple Emanuel in Woodcliff Lake, is an

annual ritual that connects people of different faith traditions. This year, the sense of community is enhanced, as people are coming together, also, to honor Cantor Marc Biddleman, who is retiring as a leader in the Pascack Valley Clergy Council, and after 48 years of service to the Jewish community.

And that is my keyword and theme for this column: community.

In casual conversation, a friend recently felt the need to qualify that word by saying, "I mean community community, not virtual community." It was not the most artful phrasing, but I knew what she meant. Even with all the convenience and accessibility of online communication, there is no substitute for sharing experiences in real time and getting together live.

In 2001, Rabbi Avram Reisner wrote a futuristic responsum about whether or not it would be halachically permissible to gather a minyan on the internet. (It's hard to remember those olden days, but Skype wasn't even launched until 2003.) His answer was that the quorum must be gathered live, in a particular place. In other words, a minyan requires "community community." Once a minyan is constituted the old fashioned way, people in other locales can then join together with that minyan through any technology available. In Reisner's opinion, they are even permitted to recite Kaddish or hear the shofar through the efforts of those who gather in person. Of course, all this applies to weekdays. The use of technology on Shabbat opens up a whole new set of questions, and the Conservative movement's Committee on Law and Standards has produced eight responsa related to audio and video monitors and taping on Shabbat and holidays.

This may seem a bit heady and theoretical, but in recent weeks real and virtual minyanim were the subject of two encounters at my synagogue. The first was a conversation broached by a retiree in my synagogue who watches the live stream of Central Synagogue's Shabbat services when he does not feel up to coming to shul. He had some questions about the technical halachic issues surrounding a livestreamed minyan, but his major concern was connecting to community. As much as he appreciates the broadcast, he doesn't feel himself to be part of the minyan, and it is a second-best substitute.

A few weeks ago, on a Shabbat morning, a recent bat mitzvah happened to be the tenth person in the building, and she made the minyan. We had talked many times about bat

mitzvah as a new adult status. She even had mentioned in her bat mitzvah speech that counting in a minyan would be part of her Jewish future. But this was the first time that she experienced it live, in community. In that moment, in that minyan, she felt embraced, mature, accepted. Her face shone with pride.

Sometimes, community seems like one more constituency to satisfy. Do I really need the demands, the obligations, the aggravations? In a word: yes. Because with those also come the gifts, the support, and the shared memories and endeavors that shape our lives.

Last Shabbat, Lorraine Breitman Eras died. She was a consummate community member. When I moved to town, she was the first person to reach out to me. She regularly contributed time, energy, and ideas to friends and neighbors, old and new, and as a volunteer for Temple Beth Sholom of Teaneck, Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County, professional associations, women's groups, and charities. The outpouring of support for her and her family was not mere reciprocity – "She was there for us, so we will be there for them." It was a response born of the kinds of connections that can be forged only in community: "She was part of us, and we are part of them."

We feel the power of community most potently during major lifecycle events – both tragedies and simchas. But it operates continually, sustaining us – and others – in ways we cannot always name.

Imagine Kol Nidrei without the crowd. Imagine Thanksgiving dinner alone. Of course, it's possible to atone and to give thanks in private. It may even be easier that way. But a minyan adds more than numbers.

Years ago, I attended my first silent meditation retreat. It was a five-day commitment. As a rabbi who spends a great deal of time in community, I looked forward to the silence as restorative and to this new experience as an adventure. But... five days is a long time.

My mother thought the whole enterprise was hilarious. She is the wife, mother, niece, cousin, daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter, great-great-granddaughter (you get the idea) of rabbis. When she learned that 35 rabbis were getting together to "not talk," she sat down and laughed until she cried.

That retreat turned out to be one of the most powerful spiritual experiences of my life. At the end of five days, I didn't know half the people's names, but I loved them. I felt their effort, their energy. We had uplifted one another, and we shared something profound. I know deep in my bones that meditating silently by myself for five days – even if I could have mustered the grit to persevere in that discipline – would not have been the same. Not even close.

During that same retreat, I was amazed when I dreamed Sylvia Boorstein's meditation talk, word for word, each night before she delivered it. I later told her about my dreams, and she observed, unruffled: "Once you clear away the chatter and the clutter, it's much easier to tap into what connects us."

That is not only a description of mindfulness; it's also an insight for living in community. We have so much to connect and unite us. Yet relatively minor differences in experience, approach, needs, or affiliation can send us to our separate silos.

At community-wide events and at home, at your local synagogue and online, in conversation and in silence, let's tap into what connects us. As Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi liked to say, "The only way to get it together...is together."

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