

Building Community
Member Reflections Given At Kahal B'raira Services
Rosh Hashanah 5767
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Tonight, as we participate in this service we engage in a communal celebration of Rosh Hashanah. Communal celebration is an essential element of this holiday. We sing, we observe traditions, we read meaningful words, we reflect – and we do these things together - with each other.

During this period we focus on the process of self-examination and the “returning” or in Hebrew – Teshuva - from patterns of behavior or thought that we may have fallen into that cause harm to self and others. Although this requires each person to look within themselves, in the Jewish tradition the process of self-examination is done as a community. If you have experienced a traditional Jewish service for the high holidays, you will remember that the congregation recites the Al Chet, the traditional recitation of our sins. By the way, according to this reading, we have committed a long and impressive list of sins, but don't get too distracted by the long list of sins, notice that implicit in that traditional recitation is the notion that “we as a community have sinned”. After the recitation of sins the congregation makes a request for god to pardon “US”. We (in a traditional congregation) ask God to pardon US – not just me as an individual. We bear responsibility for each other. How we behave affects others. How they behave affects us. We can and do influence others -- for good and -- for bad.

In our service here tonight, there will thankfully be no long recitation of sins. But there will be recognition of our connection. So for example, from tonight's liturgy, we read the words:

I depend on others as they depend on me
I nurture others as they nurture me
I draw strength from others as they draw strength from me

Tonight, I would like to share with you how community has been important to me, why community is ever more important to us today, and give you my thoughts on how we can better build community in the year ahead.

When my children were young, they attended a school where there was a strong sense of community among the families. It was a good place for them. But I speak to you now not about what that school community did for my children but about what it did for me. I found there an important connection. The connection was built over time with those little interactions that happen in community life. When I pulled up my mini van in front of the school or when I served as a field trip chaperone, or sat alongside the playground, I had the opportunity to talk, to laugh and to share with other parents. Our connection grew. We had the simple but very meaningful social interaction with others that makes life a joy.

The connection was founded on our shared purpose. We wanted so very much for our children to have a good school experience. We had some similar ideas but we had differing ideas as well. We had meetings with heated discussions and disagreements. But we had common purpose – to obtain a good experience for our children. Our common purpose was the basis of our community.

Our community also provided mutual help. Parenting is a too big job when you feel you have to do it all alone. In community, it feels better and it is easier. There were carpools and rotating supervision of after school play dates. I remember the day that the pipes burst in the school and they dismissed the children just two hours after the school day began. Many parents couldn't be contacted immediately and/or couldn't get there right away. I was driving west on the Mass Pike to a consulting job when I heard the news. I hurriedly called another mother who agreed to take my children to her house. When I arrived there, hours later, I saw that she had ten children plopped in her living room in front of a kid's video all waiting for parents to pick them up. I understood the valuable help she had provided me and I believe that she understood the good she had done for me as well. It is an awfully nice feeling to know you have been a mensch, to know you have been a good person. Don't we all long for a community where sharing and helping is in the normal course of things?

Our caring in this school community grew and became deeper when it went beyond the well being of our individual child or children to caring about the

well being of all the children. One day, I became aware of a child who couldn't participate in a program because they didn't have enough money. Almost before I had a chance to ask, parents opened their wallet or purse and contributed. They did this because they had grown to care about more than just themselves and their family. They knew the good feeling of caring about others and putting your caring into action.

As time went on, the people in our school community shared joys, - babies were born, children were successful in the classroom, parents raised enough money to keep the program afloat. We shared sorrows, too. Children fell ill, families moved away, some children did not succeed in the classroom. Our children faced their own losses – their hamsters, guinea pigs and pet birds died. We adults faced losses as well. My father died during that period of my life. These moments – the happy and the sad – were shared not experienced alone.

The autumn after my children graduated from that school, I felt an unexpected sadness. I expected simply to feel relieved because I would have less school related meetings to attend and more free evenings. But, I missed belonging to that community. I felt the absence of the real help and support and caring I had given and received. I missed those people and the community life I shared with them.

Think for a moment about the times when you have experienced being part of a meaningful community. By community, I mean people who are connected by having something in common or coming together for a common purpose. That definition also extends to communities that are not formally organized but are nonetheless meaningful. Younger people or those of us who are now older but can remember what it was like when we were younger may remember a special place to “hang out” where the same people always turned up. As in, “Where were you? Hanging. Hanging around down at the corner or Hanging around down at the Pizzeria.” In days of old – we called it the Drug Store or Soda Fountain. No formal organization, but a meaningful community connection nonetheless. Today, young people are making real community on the internet, a little hard for us over a certain age to understand, but very real.

We need community. We always have. But we have less of it today. Robert Putnam, in his book, Bowling Alone, reviewed masses of data to get a look at our habits over the past twenty-five years, and he found that

Americans have become increasingly disconnected from families, friends, neighbors, and social structures. (The title of the book highlights one way this shows up - - Americans today are bowling more but bowling in leagues much less – we are quite literally bowling alone) Putnam concludes that we have shrinking access to the rewards of communal activity and community sharing. He believes that this is a serious threat to our civic and personal health.

Let's take a minute to think about what communities are important to us in our life now? Which ones matter the most to you?

For me, the Kahal B'raira community is one of the most important that I belong to.

All of us here are part of the Kahal Braira community tonight. Some of you are here because of your relationship to someone else who invited you, or you are visiting from out of town and may only come this once. Some of you are new and checking out whether you would like to join us. Some of you are past members, to whom we give heartfelt thanks because after all, it is what you built in the past that gives us the possibility of being here tonight. Some of you are regulars at KB. You and I work side by side to build this community. But tonight, we are all part of one community because we came here for a common purpose. We chose to celebrate this holiday together. We each chose to begin the process of holiday reflection here tonight with each other.

The first time my husband and I came to a holiday service at KB we experienced one of the important parts of community. We realized that we had a shared purpose with others who we were just meeting that day. Our purpose was to take part in a service where the words were meaningful to us – ALL the words. As we read the words of the service for the first time that day, we were touched and relieved. The words, as we joined in saying them in unison, voices coming from around the room, were ones that we believed and could say.

The next year, we participated in the Rosh Hashanah committee so rather than just attending a service, we helped to make that service. I remember chatting and joking with other members in the kitchen as we cut all those many slices of apples and challah. We were beginning to build connection through the little interactions of community life.

We began to see how much it helped us to belong to this community. We learned from others – people with so many interesting different lives. We loved knowing people of different generations – older and younger. We loved being helped when we were new to join in and we loved passing on that help to newcomers. We received so much help from you so that we could support each of our daughters to become bat mitzvah. We were glad to be present at each service when people Kvell about the joys of their life and share about the hard times and losses. People hunger for community where sharing is in the normal course of things.

I come to the KB community because I want to join with you in common purpose. I have no legal or societal obligation to be here. I feel no obligation to a higher being. Even if I did, attending KB wouldn't get me very far in that regard. I come because we share the framework of Humanistic Judaism and to express my beliefs in a way that is true to me.

I am part of this community also because I want to be with you. Who you are, your stories, your interests and your lives – YOU draw me to this community and keep me here. It's worth mentioning that despite sharing a common purpose, we don't all think alike here. We have differences. We have differences about politics, world events, how to do things in the congregation and how we should build KB's future. Sometimes our differences can even get heated. But, we continue to care and try to reach for each other and understand. For me, the fact that we have differences gives my caring even more meaning. To care beyond the differences emphasizes how much I care about you as people not based on a requirement of any belief. That kind of caring is for me the core of my spiritual experience as a Humanistic Jew.

As we begin this year's process of self-examination, include in your thoughts your relationship to community wherever in your life that may be. This is a world of disposable things, a world where it is cheaper to replace something than to fix it, a world where we are told that we can find the perfect "anything" to fill "any" need, even the perfect relationship. In a world such as this, hanging in with people, building community with them, sticking past the stuck spots, valuing each other and valuing yourself as a member of a community - These acts are a victory, a contribution to the greater good, of real value. You know something, these are the kinds of

things that deserve to be written up as a headline in the Book of Life. These are the big news of today.

My best to all of you in the year ahead!