

Rosh Hashanah evening – September 29, 2019
Rabbi Helen Cohn – Congregation M'kor Hayim

Last week I met with Todd Rockoff, head of the JCC, to arrange space at the J for a MH board retreat. I told him our congregation had just joined the URJ and a representative was coming to spend a day with the board to do some long-term planning. You should have seen his face when I mentioned we had joined the URJ.

URJ stands for the Union for Reform Judaism. It's the national organization of nearly 900 Reform synagogues in the US. Todd realized what it means for us to join the Union (as it is called) and that's what I saw on his face: a big smile of appreciation for this significant step.

Hillel famously said, "Do not separate yourself from the community." Our decision to join the URJ came from a discussion this past spring about our congregation's place in the "Jewish community"—writ large. Once the idea of joining the Union was suggested, it seemed so natural, so right. And now here we are, connected in many new ways to over 800,000 Reform Jews. I tell you true: this change makes a positive difference to our congregation emotionally as well as practically. Being connected to a community generally does.

Come with me now on a leap from the particular to the general as we consider the different types of "community" within the Jewish world.

My first encounter with what is called "the organized Jewish community" came when I was in my early 40's. Some of you have heard this story, but stay with me: tonight I'm thinking about it from a new perspective.

Something moved me, decades ago, to attend Rosh Hashanah evening services in Burlingame New Hampshire when I was there on a business trip. I called the synagogue's number given to me by my hotel and the woman who answered told me I was welcomed to attend services. That night I drove in the dark to an unfamiliar location. I walked up to the building shyly. I knew no one. But the greeters had been alerted and they seemed to know me, welcoming the stranger in their midst.

That was the night something changed. Well, many things changed for me that night because it began a winding road that led straight to us being together tonight. But to our point about community: that was the night I changed from being a Jewish individual to being a part of the Jewish people. It was a sudden realization, as an adult, that being Jewish meant I was part of something much larger than myself, larger (I came to see) than I even realized at that moment.

Have you ever had that kind of moment when your Jewish identity came forcefully into focus? When you realized you were part of something much larger: the Jewish people? [pause]

For some of us it might have been the shadow of the Holocaust and the realization that we would have been among those rounded up. Secular or religious, it didn't matter. Who of us has not wondered what we would have done during those dark days? What our fate would have been?

But for decades that history has been more of a shadow, a part of our Jewish consciousness but not our daily reality.

That has shifted, of course, as anti-Semitism increases here and overseas. We Jews are one community—among others—who are targeted by individual fanatics and organized hate groups.

But I'm not here tonight to rail against anti-Semitism, because in the problem lies a solution, or so claims Bari Weiss in an article titled "How to fight anti-Semitism" (NYT 9/8/19). She says, "The long arc of Jewish history makes it clear that the only way to fight is by waging an affirmative battle for who we are."

She is using "fight" and "battle" imagery, but I prefer the more positive image of being *strengthened* through community. Here are some examples of what I mean.

Perhaps you are sensing, as I did years ago in Burlingame, NH, that coming together on Rosh Hashanah beats staying home trying to stir up a new-year feeling all by yourself.

Besides, Judaism is from top to bottom a spiritual path of community. You've noticed, I think, that all our liturgy is almost entirely in the plural. We need a community of ten to say the Mourner's Kaddish. The Veduï—the confessional—that we say during these Days of Awe is in the plural. We are not confessing that we personally have transgressed in all those ways. Rather, we are taking responsibility for being in a community where these things may have happened, and it is up to all of us to create an environment where they will not happen again.

In a larger sense we feel ourselves part of a community as we gather together tonight: congregants, our HHD regulars, guests. The sum is greater than our individual parts.

That is true for our congregation's place in the community as well. We Jews like to organize, like to create ever-expanding circles of community, which is why we have a Synagogue/Federation dialogue, a Tucson Board of Rabbis, and agencies like the JCC, the JFCS, and Handmaker that are all part of the "organized Jewish community."

Not surprisingly, all these organizations have national and even international counterparts as well: ever-expanding levels of community.

We are also a community across time. We have been inspired by Isaiah since the early days of our long history: "*I the Lord have called you in righteousness...and given you a covenant of the people, to be a light to the nations.*" (42:6)

This is why our community food drive during the HHDs is called "Project Isaiah." Think of the impact—and the message—our outpouring of donations of food and money make on the wider Tucson community. When we make choices and participate in Social Action based on our Jewish values, we are indeed a light to the nations.

So what does it mean to connect with the Jewish community? Here's what the Talmud has to say. It's discussing what commandments to teach someone who wants to convert to Judaism. It

says we are to begin by teaching that person about leaving the corners of the field for the poor when we harvest, to tithe for the poor. We don't begin with the laws of Shabbat or *kashrut* or prayer. Rather, we begin with *tzedakah* and caring for those who have less. First comes community, says the Talmud; only then do we teach rituals and holidays.

Now here's a contemporary take on the question "what does it mean to connect with the Jewish community?" At a recent meeting of Rabbis and the heads of Jewish agencies in Tucson, we began speaking of "affiliation." Someone asked what, precisely, did we mean by that word? The responses varied. Some viewed it narrowly: a person "affiliates" if he or she belongs to a synagogue. Others defined "affiliation" more openly, as being connected with any Jewish organization – to affiliate as a volunteer, on a board, or otherwise participating with a Jewish organization.

There is no single right answer. We each affiliate, touch down, connect with Judaism and the community in our own way. "The Jewish Community" is not a single, monolithic thing. Yes, we are all part of a people, a history, an identity, a light to the nations. But each of us needs to find our own points of connection.

One option might be to help us explore what belonging to the URJ can mean to our congregation. Several of us are attending the biennial convention in December, and I invite you to join us. It's a blow-out event that will leave you energized, inspired, and with an expanded vision of what Reform Judaism can be. It's an experience that takes community to a whole new level. And the more of us that attend together, the greater the fun and the benefits. Talk with me if you are interested.

We have done quite a circuit in the past few minutes of the role of community in the Jewish world. What would I like you to take from my words?

First, I hope you feel pride in being Jewish and being part of a community of people that is connected in ever-widening circles across space and time. We are a community committed to social justice and being a light to the nations.

Also, I hope you will reflect on the ways you are currently "affiliated" with the Jewish community. Where is your Jewish soul nourished? Where are your Jewish values expressed? Where can you make a difference? Where in the larger Jewish community is *your* community? Each time we make a connection our personal Jewish identity is enhanced, and each connection strengthens all of us as a community and as a people.

Hillel said it two thousand years ago and his words ring just as true today: *Al tifrosh min hatzibur*: Do not separate yourself from the community.

As we enter 5780 with all its possibilities and promise, may you be blessed to find new and ever-expanding ways to connect.

Amen