

Building a Holy Community

Rosh Hashanah 5779 – Day 2
Rabbi Ari Saks
Huntington Jewish Center

What we are marketing here at HJC

Full disclosure before I start: The story I'm about to tell you did *not* happen...

A suburban synagogue ran a contest to choose its next marketing slogan. The idea was to choose a slogan for the shul that parodied a popular movie quote. Third place went to Goldberg, the synagogue's ritual director who was in charge of the honors for the service, for her parody of the Godfather: "We'll offer you an honor you can't refuse!" Second place went to Kaufman, who was a father in the Hebrew School, for his parody of *A League of their Own*: "There's no crying in Hebrew School!" And the first-place winner was Cohen, the resident JFK (Just for *kiddush*) Jew who doesn't come to the service but shows up for the *kiddush* food afterward. He had an affection for *Field of Dreams*, hence his slogan: "If you feed them, they will come."

Now, while this is a fictional story, I think there's something profound in the winning slogan about what we are marketing here at HJC. "Cohen's" insight – *if you feed them they will come* – is that food brings people, brings community together. Food is the means, the little details, that accomplish the big goal of bringing community together for the purpose of being a holy community. That's why the name we give for the time of communal fellowship after religious services is *kiddush*, from the word *kadosh*, meaning holy, distinct, unique, and special. For as much as it may seem like *kiddush* is about the food, it's not. ***It's about institutionalizing interaction as a critical tool for building special, unique, distinct, and, thereby, holy relationships with one another, because what we are marketing here at HJC is the value of being part of a kehillah kedoshah – a holy community.***¹

¹ "Although certainly not relational organizing in the strict sense of the term, *Kiddush* institutionalizes interaction as an important tool for community building" (Aron, Isa, et al. *Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary*. Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010. 138).

A holy community in which each individual is infinitely valued

Take a look at the “Huntington Jewish Center Vision Statement”² that you received when you walked in today. Notice how the *very first* of the core values listed is that we are a *kehillah kedoshah*, a holy community in which each individual is infinitely valued. Now, I was not around when this statement was crafted, so like most of you, I’m not fully aware of the conversation and debate that waged in wordsmithing it, but for me, it evokes a beautiful midrash about how God created us as if God was minting a coin; one side of which contains the same image as all other coins whilst the other side is completely different.³ The infinite value of our “coin,” so to speak, lies in this juxtaposition between being uniquely different from everyone else *and* being no different than anyone else – there is no one like us in the world, and at the very same time, we are no better than anyone else out there. ***I think our vision statement is implying that that if we live within that juxtaposition, if we conceive of being unique from everyone else and being just like everyone else, then we will yearn to live in a holy community because a holy community is made up of people whose uniqueness gives them the chutzpah to teach and whose likeness gives them the humility to learn.***

Interaction as the lifeblood of a holy community

See, interaction – the give and take of teaching and learning – is the lifeblood of a holy community. When *kiddush* works well, that’s what we’re doing – teaching and learning about ourselves in a casual, informal setting for the purpose of building meaningful relationships that are unique, distinctive, special, and ultimately *kadosh*, holy. But the *kiddush* lounge isn’t the only setting where holy interaction goes on, because in addition to being social animals we are meaning making creatures as well. Yes, *if you feed them, they will come*, but feeding them doesn’t just have to mean filling their bellies; it can and *should* mean nourishing their minds and souls as well.

The HJC Torah Discussion

Other than the *kiddush* lounge, there are many other settings at HJC in which we cultivate a *kehillah kedoshah*. But one of the primary and unique settings for our *entire community* to

² <https://hjcny.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/HJC-Our-Vision-Statement-A.pdf>.

³ *Sanhedrin* 4:5.

gather for meaningful interaction is right here in our sanctuary on Shabbat mornings with our Torah Discussion because it is here that we play around with ideas and questions that nourish us, plumbing their depths to find out what they mean and how they impact our lives.

Instituted by Rabbi Kurshan many years ago as an innovation for the synagogue service, the Torah Discussion begins with the rabbi coming down from the bimah to engage the congregation in the “process of discourse.”⁴ When it works well, a generous, thought-provoking question centered around the Torah portion leads members of the community to openly share an array of diverse opinions. These opinions are not meant to convince one another but to look at the question from all sides, much like how rabbis of the Talmud go back and forth with one another in a holy process of interactive learning called *shakla vetaria*, which is Aramaic for “give and take.” In one moment they are using their *chutzpah* to give a teaching, and in the next moment they are accessing their humility in order to learn. ***The Torah Discussion is thus a critical piece of building a “participatory culture” in which people are engaged as active participants in the process of cultivating a kehillah k’doshah through teaching and learning, through chutzpah and humility.***⁵

The Torah Teaser

A unique feature of the Torah Discussion is the Torah Teaser, an e-mail sent out to a LISTSERV of current members and former members who span the globe, to tease the ideas to be discussed during the Torah Discussion. This feature offers another similarity to the *shakla vetaria* of the Talmud. Just as the editor of the Talmud brings opinions and ideas from rabbis who are separated by time and geography onto the same page of text, the Torah Teaser gives me the ability to bring in e-mailed responses into the shared space of the Torah Discussion. Thus, time and distance do not have to be impediments to meaningful interaction. It’s not quite like editing a conversation of scholars through the centuries, but it’s pretty cool nonetheless.

⁴ “It’s far more important to participate in the process of discourse than to specify the outcome” (Jordan Peterson on “Rubin Report: Jordan Peterson, Ben Shapiro, Eric Weinstein, and Dave Rubin LIVE!” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PagNM_oxssE&t=957s, 6/29/18. Minute 11:24”).

⁵ *Sacred Strategies*, 44.

Together, the Torah Teaser and the Torah Discussion do the job of creating a space for meaningful interactions in our community that nourish our minds and our souls by plumbing the depths of key ideas to find out what they mean and how they impact our lives. ***The question that needs to be asked today, on Rosh Hashanah, as we begin a new year together is are we maximizing this space to its fullest potential to build a kehillah kedoshah, a holy community?*** And truthfully, the only way to really see if we can maximize this opportunity is to try it together, today.

Introducing the Discussion

Take a look at the *other* side of the vision statement page we looked at earlier. For those of us here who are not on the LISTSERV, this is an example of the Torah Teaser you'll receive once you sign up by following the instructions on the bottom of the page. Here's the gist of what it says and where I want to go with our discussion today...

Each year on Rosh Hashanah we have the chance to ask how our personal, human story is going; how our new year will go differently than our previous year; and how we're going to make a difference in our lives. And today we are talking about how we move forward together as a *kehillah kedoshah*, a holy community, with *chutzpah* and humility. The idea of going, of moving forward, is captured by the Hebrew term *lalechet*, which also means to walk because, as they say, "every journey begins with a single step."

In today's Torah reading, the root of the word *lalechet* appears twice – at the end of Verse 6⁶ and Verse 8⁷ – as part of the phrase "*vayelkhu sh'neyhem yachdav*," which means "and they [i.e. Abraham and Isaac] walked together." It's strange that the same phrase would repeat so soon right after the other, which leads Rashi, the great 11th-century commentator from France, to pick up on this repetition and say that Isaac's understanding of where they were walking

⁶ Genesis 22:6 –

וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵצִי הָעֵלֶה וַיִּשֶׂם עָלָיו־צֶחֶק בְּנוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת־הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֶת וַיֵּלֶכְוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and ***the two walked off together.***

⁷ Genesis 22:8 –

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹקִים יִרְאֶה־לוֹ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי וַיֵּלֶכְוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." ***And the two of them walked on together.***

toward and what they were about to do was *different* after each of the verses. Thus, after Verse 6, Isaac “had no feeling about what was to happen.”⁸ Yet, after verse 8, “Isaac knew that he was going to be slaughtered [and yet], ‘they walked together’, with the same ready heart.”⁹ The juxtaposition of Isaac not knowing what was about to happen to him with Isaac fully knowing and accepting what was about to happen to him just two verses later is striking. This leads our machzor to make the following, interesting comment on the whole episode:

“The text repeats this phrase [i.e. ‘and the two of them walked together’] within the space of a few verses. This leads Rashi to raise the question of whether what is hinted at here is ironic – though they walked together they were of two minds – or whether it is to be understood as meaning that they were truly ‘together’ – that is, Isaac sensed what was intended and accorded with Abraham’s resolve.”¹⁰

So, I’m wondering, which is it? Were they of two separate minds, that even though they were going together to the same physical destination their minds and emotions were distanced from each other, not unlike when you’re driving in the car with your family and everyone’s on their own cell phone or listening to their own music? They’re there in the car, but they’re not really...there. Or did they walk not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually together, with one heart, ready to accept their collective fate as a single unit?

I’m also wondering how all of this relates to our topic today of how to move forward as a holy community. Many of us are part of individual arms and social groups within the synagogue – called “silos” – that house our primary experiences of what it means to be a part of the synagogue community. This is natural – it’s hard to exist within a multifaceted community without a strong connection to a silo of people we want to spend time with. And the positive side effect of being part of a vibrant silo is that through the lens of that silo we feel a part of HJC. But the negative side effect of being part of a silo, vibrant or otherwise, is that if we were

⁸Rashi on Genesis 22:6 – וילכו שניהם יחדיו AND THEY WENT BOTH OF THEM TOGETHER — Abraham who was aware that he was going to slay his son walked along with the same willingness and joy as Isaac who had no idea of the matter.

⁹Rashi on Genesis 22:8 – וילכו שניהם יחדיו THEY WENT BOTH OF THEM TOGETHER — with the same ready heart (**Genesis Rabbah 56:4**).

¹⁰ *Mahzor Lev Shalem*. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2010. 104.

coming up with a slogan to market our community, we tend to focus – like Goldberg, Kaufman, and Cohen did in our opening fictional story – on the particular sub-community we are a part of; which leads me to ask: ***When we walk together as an entire HJC community like we are doing today, are we emotionally and spiritually distant from each other's understanding of what a kehillah kedoshah, a holy community, looks like at HJC?*** Ultimately though, what I'm really wondering about after being inspired by today's Torah text is the following: ***What does walking forward together as a kehillah kedosha, as a holy community, here at HJC look like to you, and is it possible to walk together with one collective heart?***

DISCUSSION!

With our old and with our young we move forward together

In thinking about this conversation, and in particular about the idea of how to move forward together, of *lalekhet*, I'm drawn to the phrase that appears in the lobby of our shul – *bin-areinu uvizkeineinu neilekh* – “with our young and with our old, we shall move forward.”¹¹ Without meaning to be too reductive, we can break ourselves down into those two subgroups – old and young, elders and youth. Perhaps we break ourselves down into these subgroups by how old we are, by how much or how little exposure we've had to Judaism and Jewish life, by how much time we've spent in our community, or by how much experience we have in a particular field needed by our community, etc. But regardless of whether we consider ourselves old or young, at the core of the idea behind the verse in our lobby is that our challenge is to be able to journey forward together in *kedushah*, with *chutzpah* and humility.

But that journey is not easy, especially when there is conflict between the two groups on what the path of *kedushah* forward looks like. That's where some of our traditional Torah commentators give us some insight based upon their reading of the phrase *vayelkhu sh'neyhem yachdav*, “and the two of them walked together.” Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch,¹² the Malbim,¹³ and Radak¹⁴ all agree that the first step in any kind of move forward is that the

¹¹ *Exodus* 10:9.

¹² Germany, 1808-1888.

¹³ Rabbi Meir Lebusch ben Yehiel ben Michel Weisser (Italy, 1809-1879).

¹⁴ Rabbi David Kimchi (Italy, 1160-1235).

young should exercise their humility to follow the lead of the old. Hirsch sees this as an example for all time on how a relationship between fathers and sons should be deferential and respectful, ultimately leading to an ability to move forward with one heart.¹⁵ The Malbim sees it a little differently. At first, Isaac and Abraham were not on the same page as to what exactly was happening (Isaac thought they were going up to offer a lamb as a sacrifice), but even from the outset they both were full of “joy in being able to perform God’s commandment.” Once Isaac knew he’d be the sacrificial lamb, the text repeats, “and the two of them walked together,” to indicate that Isaac accepted his fate with the same joy that Abraham felt.¹⁶ That is to say, Isaac had the humility to adapt to Abraham’s joy. In either case, Radak says that Isaac “accepted with love his fate to give over his body as a sacrifice to God,” which means that though Isaac adapted to his new reality, it was not done out of anger or out of spite but rather with love for his father and ultimately his love for God.¹⁷

Very often in our culture we tend to favor the needs of the young or the new over the needs of the old and the established – however we define those categories. But the lesson from these classical commentators on our text, as well as from much of our tradition, is that it’s much more complicated than that. Yes, the young must take the first step toward the old, to appreciate the wisdom accumulated by institutions that have withstood the test of time in order to understand how their longevity is a strength, not a weakness. But if you notice, these commentaries indicate that Isaac, the young one, fully accepted his fate *out of love*. He didn’t go kicking and screaming, fighting against an act he felt was unfair and wrong. No, Isaac’s *chutzpah* is his complete willingness to humble himself before Abraham and God, to choose to be vulnerable before them, really to *trust* them. ***That feeling of trust, as a result of chutzpah and humility, is the essence of what kedushah, of what holiness, looks like.***

And why did Isaac trust them? Perhaps because he knew that not only would they cherish his vulnerability as if it was their own flesh, but they would make themselves vulnerable to him. According to an ancient *midrash*,¹⁸ when Abraham lifted up the knife to sacrifice Isaac, tears

¹⁵ Hirsch on Genesis 22:6.

¹⁶ Malbim on Genesis 22:6.

¹⁷ Radak on Genesis 22:8.

¹⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* 56:8

streamed down his face and onto Isaac's as a sign of compassion for his son. Lifting the knife with tears in his eyes was a sign of Abraham's humility that he was moved by and cherished Isaac's vulnerability *and* his *chutzpah* that he was still willing to go through with the act. And at the same time, by lifting the knife, Abraham exemplified to God that he was willing to be vulnerable to God by sacrificing his son, only to have God – who could only respond to Abraham and Isaac out of love – to tell Abraham to put down the knife because “I did not tell you to sacrifice him (*shachatehu*) rather only to lift him up (*veha-aleihu*).”¹⁹

To lift him up, to lift us up...that's what it looks like to be part of a kehillah kedoshah, not to sacrifice ourselves for the greater whole but to lift each other up by being willing to be vulnerable with each other and cherish each other's vulnerability as if it's our own. In a world where we're fearful of people tearing us down for doing or saying the wrong thing, living in a community where we can exemplify *kedushah* through upholding each other's vulnerability, through building trust, is so important. Yes, according to our tradition, the first move of expressing our trust and vulnerability should be made by the young, but that's only to get the ball rolling. ***All our young and old need to be engaged in the process; all our young and old need to be willing to be humble enough to learn from the teachings of the other; and all our young and old need to be chutzpadic enough to offer teachings they believe need to be heard.*** And if we are *all* able to do that together, then we will lift each other up and move forward together as a *kehillah kedoshah*, as a holy community. *Binareinu uvizkeineinu neilekh*, let's continue that journey with our young and with our old moving forward. Let's continue that journey together, so I'll see you on Shabbat!

¹⁹ The Hebrew term “to sacrifice” can be either *shachatehu* (שחטתהו) which literally means “to slaughter” or *veha-alehu* (והעלהו) which literally means “to raise up,” since the smoke from the sacrifice “rises up” to the heavens to satisfy God. Here, the midrash is playing off of this double meaning to teach us that God's command to Abraham was to bring Isaac to God in order spiritually lift him up.