

Jews do not live in isolation; we may joke about it but- we do not pull a Thoreau or a Ted Kozinski because we are Jews. We are made up of Minyans and Shtetls and Newark 80 years ago, and families that stretch as far as our arms, each generation weaving something into the next. We are mother- daughter apartments and families who all lived on the same block. We are schnapps and long tables filled with delicious mouth-watering foods. We are mishpocha and mishpacha. We are home.

Every synagogue I've served has referred to itself as a family even one whose membership, at the time, was over 1300 families. "We're one family." All 6000 of us. When someone new affiliated, we would welcome him or her to, "our synagogue family." Many congregants felt very connected- those on the board, active volunteers, and those who attended services weekly. With 960 kids in the religious school from grades k-7 and 150 students in the Hebrew High School and many different groups and clubs- people felt connected to "their" part of the synagogue and that was enough. They sat with their own crowd during High Holidays and connected with their clan. Now that I think about it- there were probably five different synagogues under one roof- and a large office and clergy team. We did a decent job of connecting to each member of our individual synagogue after all, there were three Rabbis and a cantor and a cantorial intern. You could not have passed through synagogue life without a connection to one of us. Perhaps it was not so much as a family- rather a really large cousin club.

For most of us nothing is more important than family. To refer to a congregation as a family is an expression of warmth, caring, and social cohesion. It is a way of saying, "We're here for you." "We care about you." "You're one of us." Family is a defining relationship and an expression of mutual concern. People watch out for their family, and are there for them in times of need, or when there is reason to celebrate.

Of course family can also be complicated. No two families are the same, and some families are more dysfunctional than others. Its in our DNA- the Torah is filled with stories of he, she, your brother, your father, brothers who kill brothers, fathers who try to kill sons. My professor at HUC-JIR- Rabbinical College used to say, "There is no one in the Torah that you want your kid to grow up and be?" After studying our forefathers and mothers in depth, I concur.

Like our Biblical ancestors, how many of us have someone in our immediate family to whom we rarely talk? I often hear stories of family members who have not spoken for forty years. No one seems to remember what the initial fight was about but you cannot invite Eddie to a family affair if cousin Joey will be there or vice versa. Sometimes, the hurt and the emotional distance is valid, other times it is simply easier to remain apart then to reach out again and try to resolve the nascent issue grown huge over the years.

I am part of a family too- we have our mishagas- but we are very lucky in the honest, open relationships we share and the strength of our bond.

When we call a synagogue a family it begs the question how close do we want to be? Do we really want to live with each other's warts and private rituals? Would we be

the Kardashians or the Kennedys? I say neither. Rather than I family, I see us on the road to becoming a Kehillah Kdoshah- a spiritual, caring, connected, creative place that draws people in because of who we are, and how we fulfill our sense of purpose together.

I have found that many members of our TSS community are very linked. Just the sheer number of people who show up to pay a shiva call is astounding. Those that I have led or attended are standing room only, filled with hugs, tears and laughter.

Our Shabbat services, even during the summer have many more attendees than the larger synagogues; I have served or been a part of. And most of those were lay led with those coming out to support “their congregational family”. I taught a class on the High Holidays in August when most therapists are away and families have their last hurrah after summer camp and before school. I expected perhaps 8 individuals at the first class and made 50 handouts just in case- I am very optimistic. Those 50 were shared between members of the class. 50 people at an adult ed class during the summer where the Temple Membership is 200 families- mind blowing!!!!

So here we all are, trying to determine why we connect and how we can connect with intent, spirituality and responsibility.

Underlying the drive for a spiritual connection are several yet disparate compelling desires. Some of us here are looking for friends, and love. Others come for a shared cultural, social or spiritual life; still others seek support. Those poised to give of themselves often find that they derive more from the community membership than they give. In a Kehillah Kedoshah- just as in family- we find strength in what we give, receive and share. And in a strong community we share great deal- life rhythms, values and a way of living. The kind of sharing that infuses life with meaning and richness found any other way. The truth is that community is transformative for everyone. Teachers become students, students turn into teachers. It is hard to feel connected to that many people, even for a rabbi- but as part of a community we try. Kehillot Kedoshim members do feel a responsibility for each other. We need to do better in making sure that those who are ill have meals and visitors. We need to do better in moving beyond our comfort zone of friends and opening ourselves to people of different generations. We need to do better as parents’ assuring that our kids attend Religious School through confirmation. I want our kids to know how Judaism translates to modern life and that its rituals still speak to us. I want all of us to know how to do Jewish and make our own traditions.

Most important, I want us to model Derech Eretz, translated as the way of the land- morals and ethics for each other and act in those ways towards each other. We are commanded love your neighbor as yourself. Speak with care- do not triangulate or take place in L’shon Ha’rah- gossip.

The Mussar movement, established first in the 10th century by Sa’adia Gaon who wrote a treatise on how people should behave in the world, was re-introduced in the late 1800’s Lithuania by Rabbi Israel Lipkin Salanter as Jewish ethics or spiritual living for every day. It reminds us that to live as spiritual beings we need to be humble, patient, gracious. Compassionate, have and give honor. We need to live simply with enthusiasm, silence, generosity, truth, moderation, loving kindness, responsibility, trust, faith and awe. When we live with these qualities before our

eyes, we reach our true potential for holiness. For me this is where spirituality comes in. We know that we are created B'zelem Eloheim, in the image of God and that each of us possesses an innate sense of holiness. But if cannot let those sparks of holiness inform our humanity, our menschliche our sense of being in the world and in this holy community then we have lost our holiness. As Jews, as people who connect with Judaism, our individual goal is to live a life of mussar, ethics and morals. We recognize that we are not the Creator, but that, like our Creator we can create goodness in our world. Even the more so for our kehillah Kedoshah. If we respect each other and we are kind towards each other, we become generous and honest, tolerant and patient, understanding of different viewpoints, excited to change our corner of the world. We have compassion for each other and most important, we listen to each other to hear the other's truth. The reason that we have started to begin all committee meetings with a blessing for Torah, and then study a bit of Torah is to remind us that the work we do is for the sake of heaven. Disagreements with love are for making this community stronger and a home for all who are a part of TSS. Rather than focusing on the past, we need to look ahead and see who we have the potential of being.

We are not a business. Our bottom line cannot be measured by financial gain. Our financial return comes in souls changed through the struggle, children who are comfortable sitting on the floors of the sanctuary or falling asleep in the pews, large classes of teens stretching their minds, grandparents doing their congregational "thing" while their kids and grandchildren are in the building doing their own "things". The doing is not important- it's being equally as comfortable in the same place at the same time. A Temple for all people- a place that is like your home, where you are known and loved.

Healthy congregations have four things in common. Creativity and innovation in Judaism- our education, our prayer, our programming, our outreach to those in need- a strong, committed backbone of congregants who are willing to dig in and help- making all who enter our doors feel welcome and cared about. Those who bring their different talents and abilities with them to help the synagogue.

The ability to experiment with different modes of connection outside and inside the synagogue space- retreats for families, for different congregational groups where we can explore what it feels like to live and socialize Jewishly for a weekend, my future pipe dream of creating a Sunday morning experience where we blend cooking classes and stories of long gone ancestors, where we stretch and move together, where we study Torah or current events or how to replace a pipe or knit a kippah. Where our kids do a massive lego of Masada to the sounds of the Mah Jong tiles. And the newest Israeli pop songs play on phones with creative dances inspired by our kids- who can really dance. Where we open ourselves towards each other and eventually God.

and a healthy sense of pride in our shul, and a sense of gratitude that we are together.

We have already begun to see the effects of change- new members, members coming home, new committees, a renewed interest in doing and helping and being part of the fabric of what makes TSS, TSS at her best.

We are putting into action what Judaism is all about. Not the Me but the WE. And doing for others ignites the sparks of holiness in ourselves.

Shlomo Carlbach, z'l told this story: One of the greatest masters of modern Hasidic times was Kalonimus Kalman, the master of Piezenchza, who was killed in Treblinka. He would say that at five years old children already needed a master to connect their souls to heaven. So he gathered around him a Kingdom of children and created a school for thousands. To these children, Kalman was their father, their mother and their best friend. In 1940, he was moved to the Warsaw Ghetto where he wrote a most precious book published posthumously. This book called The Holy Fire was a collection of the sermons he gave in the dark of the Ghetto. Carlbach was so moved by the teachings that he sought to find some of Kalman's disciples, his children. But he was told over and over again that there was no one left. That the Nazis had killed them all. One day, while Shlomo Carlbach was walking down Yarkon, a street near the beach of Tel Aviv, he saw a hunchback who was so broken. The man's face was beautiful, but his body was completely turned in upon itself. The man was sweeping the streets and Carlbach greeted him with a Shalom. The man replied in the heaviest of Polish accents. And they began a conversation. Carlbach excitedly asked if the man knew of Piazencha. "What do you mean," replied the man, "I am from Piazencha." Carlbach asked if the man had ever studied with the holy Kalonimus Kalman. The reply, "I was a student at his school from the age of five until eleven. When I was eleven, I went to Auschwitz. I was so strong they thought I was seventeen. I was whipped and hit and kicked and never healed- that is why I look like I do now. I have no one in the world. I'm all alone." And the man continued sweeping the ground. Shlomo Carlbach, with tears in his eyes said, "My sweetest friend, do you know that my whole life, I have been waiting to see you, a person who studied with the master. Please give me one of his teachings." The hunchback glared back, "do you think that you could be in Auschwitz for five years and still remember teachings." The man went to the water fountain and washed his hands. He fixed his tie and put down his broom and then he began, "there was never such a Sabbath as this one. We danced, hundreds maybe thousands of children and the master was singing a sweet song to greet the holy angels, and at the meal, he would teach a story between every course. And after each teaching the master would say, "Kinderlach, der goyseh zach in de velt iz tuen emetzen a tovah- *the greatest thing in the world is to do someone else a favor*. After telling the story the hunchback sighed, "You know my parents are gone, my family, and I was in Auschwitz- hell on earth. And in the moments of my greatest despair, I could hear the master, "kinderlach"... Do you know how many favors you can do in Auschwitz at night? I would walk from person to person and say why are you crying. They would tell me about their families, people they would never see again. I would hold their hands, and cry with them. And I would walk to the next person. It would give me strength for another day. Now I'm in Tel Aviv, and I have no one in the world. When I feel despair, I hear my Rebbe's voice, "the greatest thing in the world is to do someone else a favor." You know how many favors you can do on the streets of the world. And with those final words, the hunchback picked up his broom and continued sweeping the streets.

The holy hunchback cleaned the streets of the world by reminding everyone of his master's lesson. That was his call. He was the only one who could keep the lesson alive. And with his sweeping, his soul came alive.