



## THE SOUL OF FAMILY, COMMUNITY & NATION

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Since congregational membership and vitality often rise and fall with Jewish demographics—the in-migration, out-migration, and birth rate of Jews in a particular area—it’s not uncommon for synagogue leaders to inflate the importance of how many Jews move into or out of their area.

It’s true that demographics can be pivotal when the number of Jews in an area falls below the minimum required to sustain a viable congregational community in any particular movement or branch of Judaism. But it’s also true that demographics are largely irrelevant for the synagogue that has made the investment to develop itself fully as an authentic community, thus becoming everyone’s first choice locally in that movement or branch of Judaism.

There are other ideas with much greater potential to undermine significant investment in congregational community development. These ideas often define certain *necessary* conditions for congregational vitality as *sufficient*, so they divert leaders from the other, more demanding requirements of development:

- “All we really need to do is hire a charismatic rabbi”—which rarely works, since charisma, although captivating, isn’t sufficient to satisfy substantive needs; so while it’s helpful to have a charismatic rabbi, it’s not enough to gain ongoing investment and active participation, and much more must be done to build a vital congregational community—which is not to say that the congregation shouldn’t want a charismatic rabbi.
- “If we have enough entertaining and interesting programs, we can build up the membership”—which isn’t sufficient for two reasons: (1) synagogues can’t compete with public performances and mass media in the entertainment and information arena; and (2) most people who come for programs aren’t interested in

membership or active participation in the life of the congregational community—which is not to say that the congregation shouldn’t offer programs.

- “We’ll attract new members if we offer a wide range of educational programs”—which isn’t sufficient because most Jews, regardless of whether they’re affiliated with a congregation, don’t see their practical self-interest tied to more Jewish learning—which is not to say that the congregation shouldn’t offer extensive educational opportunities.

The flip side of inflating the importance of certain variables in congregational community development is the chronic devaluing of others that have been proven to be significant in myriad studies and personal experiences.

- Most important in choosing to join a *kehilla* is the experience of having been personally welcomed and liked by the members—that they consistently take the time and energy to “plug in” newcomers so they feel wanted and valued.
- And for those who are members, it’s critically important, especially for individuals and families with heavy demands on their time, energy, and finances, that the *kehilla* is relevant to their day-to-day pressures and hopes—that it’s a supportive community which helps its members in practical ways.

It’s clear that if a *kehilla* is going to plug in every newcomer and be relevant to the day-to-day pressures and hopes of its members, there has to be a cadre of individuals committed to those ends. But, of course, the question is how do we get to that point? How does a congregational community get the majority of its members—whether a handful or hundreds—committed to strengthening their *kehilla*? Here’s another way of asking the question: Why should the members who are *not* participating

actively in the kehillah want to make a significantly larger investment of their time and energy to strengthen it?

The Torah (Bamidbar 1:2) has something to teach us about these questions—which shouldn't be surprising, since the challenges we face are in many ways similar to the challenges faced by the Israelites in the wilderness, when the nation was forming as a community. It was only a year and a month since they had left Mitzrayim, when Adonai told Moshe, “שאׁוּ אֶת-רֹאשׁ כָּל-עֵדֻת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל” —“lift up the head of all the congregation of the children of Israel”—or, in plain English, take a count or a census.

Why were we counted in the wilderness or, for that matter, why are we counted every 10 years now? Of course, there are practical reasons, like going out to war then or assessing need and planning for social services now. But the fundamental reason was and is to affirm the intrinsic value of each and every Jewish soul.

We may imagine the “soul” as our animating spirit, uniquely created in the image of God; which, in turn, can make a unique contribution in the service of God and the Jewish people. It's the part of ourselves that we often feel isn't seen or understood by other people, because mostly we don't seem to have opportunities to express it articulately in words or adequately in action.

Those opportunities come in our social life. The people were counted as individuals, but also tallied by family and tribe. We learn from this that we're counted in four ways when numbered among the Jewish people: We are counted individually, but also as members of a family, a *kehillah*, and a nation. Each of us potentially has a relationship with his or her family, *kehillah*, and nation; each of us potentially has a special role to play in family, *kehillah*, and national life.

Torah's lesson for the Israelites then and us now is that we do not work only for ourselves. We have inherited and shall bequeath a family, a community, and a nation—which potentially can unify us and extend our capacity to live in the image of God, not unlike the complex machines we use. When something breaks in the machine, one small but unique part, the whole machine becomes much less efficient or even inoperative. The broken part may cost little, but its value to the whole machine is inestimable—as potentially each of us is to our family, our community, and our nation.

But why do more than satisfy our own individual needs? Everyone might ask, why shouldn't I just “do my own thing”?

- If everything is about *me*, I can never go beyond my own limitations—which in some respects really *are* limiting.

- Fitting myself into the community is much more fulfilling than remaining preoccupied with my individual interests—but I can't truly know that until I do it
- The only way to be whole as a Jew is to be connected with the entire Jewish people—and halfway connections leave me feeling scattered and wondering at times, who am I?
- My spiritual high comes when I'm taking action with a *kahal poalei tzedek*, a congregational community of doers of justice and righteousness in the world—which is not surprising, because the census teaches me that alone I can't fully serve God.
- Every outcome for the Jewish people falls on each individual as well, regardless of individual merit—so each of us personally has a stake in the success of the whole people.
- We go up or down as a people, often including those who have abandoned Judaism or even assimilated—to their shock and chagrin, as in Spain and Germany.
- Others view us not as individuals, but as a whole people—so when we're persecuted individually it's out of proportion to our personal merits or faults.
- But it's also true that even if we do less than our share, we nonetheless get the blessings and benefits that accrue to the whole people.

There is an inevitable question for those of us who conclude that our self-interest is tied to the interests of others: How can *I* make a contribution to serve God and the Jewish people?

The answer is found in our *personal* relationship with God. The relationship is personal when we see God acting not only in the big picture—the Exodus, Reed Sea, Mattan Torah (i.e., the giving and receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai), etc.—but also in our day-to-day life. A grateful student says, the instructor of my class did all the preparation and teaching for me *personally*, even though a whole group of students benefited from it. So we recognize that our *parnasa*, our livelihood and sustenance, is a blessing to us individually from God, even though the whole Jewish people may benefit from the same blessing. And we thank God for creating a world in which individually we enjoy the gift of life and day-to-day blessings, including our own unique soul.

God “judges” us not on our accomplishments, but on how we use the *unique* gifts we've been given. We're “judged” in the sense that we're blessed or burdened in life according to whether we use our particular gifts in the service of God. The gifts lift us up when we use them to serve God and Israel or pull us down when we use them to satisfy our selfish appetites. We're not judged on

our accomplishments, but on how we utilize and maximize our unique potential.

Ramban (Nachmanides—Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270) gives us two meanings for the words “lift up their head”: We may be uplifted in the usual sense of our spiritual or material welfare. But we may also be uplifted in the sense of having our heads taken off.

What can this teach us?

When our unique gifts from God lie fallow, we wither and die. But when we show our gratitude for those gifts by exercising the full potential of our soul, we become indispensable by lifting up our family, our *kehilla*, and our people. And, regardless of our actual accomplishments, we too receive God’s blessings when they are raised up.

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