

Mattot 5771

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By Rabbi Boris Dolin

A rabbi and a soap-maker once took a walk together. The soap-maker said to the rabbi: "What good is Judaism? After thousands of years of teaching about goodness, truth, justice and peace, after all the study of Torah, all of our praying, and all the fine ideals of the Prophets, look at all the trouble and misery in the world! If Judaism is so wonderful and true, why should all this be so?" The rabbi said nothing.

They continued walking, until the rabbi noticed a child playing in the gutter. The child was filthy with soot and grime. "Look at that child," said the rabbi. "You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that kid? What good is soap? With all the soap in the world, that child is still filthy. I wonder if soap is of any use at all. The soap-maker protested, and said, "But Rabbi, soap can't do any good unless it is used!"

"Exactly!" cried the Rabbi. "So it is with Judaism. It isn't effective unless it is applied in daily life and used!"

This week as I join the TBI community as one of your rabbis, I enter in awe at how this community has brought Judaism to life. I enter in awe of the diverse TBI family, and the wealth of knowledge and experiences which all of you have, and a deep respect for the history of the synagogue and especially its inspiring spiritual leaders, Rabbi Yitz and Rabbi Maurice who have created such a strong *kehilla kedosha*, a holy community, over the past many years. While I am just beginning to understand the inner workings of the TBI community, it is easy to see how everyone has been able to create a place where Judaism is meaningful *and* useful. It is good to be a rabbi in an environment where Judaism is on every level, a living and dynamic part of congregational life.

TBI was a difficult place to leave after my first few years in the community over a decade ago, yet as I come back with fresh eyes and a new role, I am inspired and filled with hopes of how I can help this community grow. I hope to work together to create a place of inspiration and learning, a welcoming spiritual home, and a supportive congregational family—where each of us is able to grow as individuals with the support of every member of this community.

This week's parsha, Mattot, holds a powerful message about creating strong communities, and is a useful reminder of the blessings and challenges of being part of a community while holding onto our own individual needs and desires. The Israelites are nearing the end of their years of desert wandering, and they are preparing to cross the Jordan River to take possession of the Land of Israel which God has promised them. After all of the people make it to the other side and conquer the land, it will be divided up among each of the 10 tribes, each receiving their own portion. Yet two of the tribes do not buy into this plan, and even though they understand the power of the Promised Land, they instead would rather stay where they are. The two tribes,

Reuben and Gad, both very rich and whom we are told “owned cattle in very great numbers” (Numbers 32:1) tell Moses that they would rather settle on the other side of the Jordan—away from the Promised Land—where the land is more fertile and better for grazing.

Moses is rightfully very angry at this proposition, since the leaders of the two tribes are requesting to separate themselves from the other tribes, from the rest of the community; it seems, primarily for the sake of their cattle and their possessions. After so much wandering, after God’s own promise of the holiest, most important land on earth, the tribes want to stay in their place where their cattle can graze, and where their wealth can grow.

Interestingly, Moses’ first reaction to this request does not focus specifically on the selfishness of the tribes, but instead delves straight into the psychological consequences of their choice for the rest of the community. After staying together as one people for so many years, to break away now might leave the rest of the community demoralized. He says: “Why will you turn the minds of the Israelites from crossing in to the land that God has given them?” The tribal leaders respond to Moses’ reaction, insuring him of their commitment to their people, saying: “We will build sheepfolds for our livestock and cities for our children” and will send out shock-troops, *halutzim* to lead the troops into the Promised Land (Numbers 32:16). Only after all of the Israelites have settled in their land, will they return home. Moses agrees with this plan and says that if they keep their vow, and promise to continue to fight until the Israelites have settled in the Promised Land, then they can stay. Yet, in his response, reverses the order of their original request. He says not that they can take of the animals and children but should “build cities for your children and corrals for your flocks” (Numbers 32:24). A subtle reminder that caring for their families and community should come before caring for their wealth.

At first glance the choice of the Reuebenites and Gadites to stay behind seems undeniably selfish, to stay behind for what seems like a better life instead of making the final push into the Promised Land for something greater. Yet, I would guess we all have been in similar situations before, where the call to help others for the greater good of the community clashed with our own individual needs and desires. This is an inherent part of community life, and the challenge of existing with so many levels of connection with the people around us. We have family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, strangers, the people sitting next to us during Shabbat services—all demanding out time and compassion as members of our community.

Thankfully, Jewish tradition both commands us to care for the community and also to not forget the needs of ourselves and our families. We are told on the one hand to “not separate yourselves from the community” (Mishnah Avot 2.5) yet also told to tell ourselves “For me the world was created” (Mishnah Avot 2.5). To hold both of these values as we live our daily lives means constantly having to struggle with the desire for independence and the inherent obligation to others in our community. We are asked to care for and recognize the holiness of the most basic and mundane parts of our personal lives, such as eating and washing our hands and *also* work on the most challenging aspects of improving our world. And these two goals of Jewish life are tied together, we know that we need one for the other. We need to focus on the miracle of our own lives, and this leads to a greater recognition of the miracle of others. And

opening up our compassion to the needs of the larger community often helps us improve our own lives, as we gain a greater understanding for our own spiritual and emotional needs.

Rabbi Aharon Liechtenstein points out that harmonizing our values, the personal needs and the needs of the community—needs which are sometimes in tension—are one of the key aspects of a spiritual life. He writes that "Balance...is very important...Throughout his works, the Rambam (Maimonides) stresses its importance in different areas of one's life: action, emotion, thought, one's personal, social, religious, and moral self...The Rambam views the element of balance as a condition of one's ideal service of God...".

So to live in community does not need to mean fully devoting oneself heart and mind to the needs of others or sacrificing your personal well being to support the greater good. It is instead the acceptance of the challenge of creating balance, finding one's way on the path that can lead us toward greater good for the community, while not giving up on the desire for personal gain and comfort. Yet, being part of a community is also a reminder that our lives are interwoven in ways we may not understand and that our personal choices can, and do influence the people around us.

Shabbat brings us together once a week, sits us down next to the people we care about but may not have had time for during our busy days, and asks us to take a moment to examine where we have put our effort, where we have put our time in the past week. Through the words of prayer and the moments of silence, we are given time to check in and readjust our balances—bringing our individual needs in check with the needs of the community.

As we step together at this time into a new stage of the journey of the TBI family I stand here excited and ready to work to help this community grow and make a difference in all of our lives, and in the lives of our greater human family. May we continue to make Judaism meaningful and useful, and be blessed with the strength to support each other as we continue to nurture a spiritual and welcoming community, creating a place that fully welcomes *all* of who we are, and allows us to shine our light on others.

Shabbat Shalom.