

*It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.*

Charles Dickens penned these words for the beginning of his 1859 historical novel, A Tale of Two Cities, yet they very accurately describe the paradox of our lives in 2004. This seems to be the best of times for us as Americans and as Jews. We are living in a place where we have freedom of religious practices and Judaism is more than accepted, it has become the "in" thing. As Rabbi Zeplovitz shared last week, each of the Democratic political candidates shared their own yichus, connection with the Jewish people, and Britney Spears gave out bags to her wedding guests emblazoned with Hebrew letters. Never mind that the letters, meant to spell HaShem, the name of God actually were printed on the bag backwards to spell Mahash.

We are living in the best of times as Americans: technology is advancing with the speed of light. Communication is faster and easier- literally putting the world at our fingertips. Our economy is finally on an upswing, with hiring freezes thawing and companies needing able bodies. We live in a place of great riches, where we have more than we physically need, where we don't have to think about where our next meal is coming from, or where we will spend the night. And in a month, we will be able to exercise our democratic prerogative, choosing our next president, based on what is best for this country- not best for us as Jews on a world scale. There is much that is right with the world and on the surface this seems to be the best of times. But like Dickens' words- we are also living in the worst of times.

In spite of higher pay, bigger homes and faster cars... in spite of better health and stronger education and abundant opportunity we are slipping into a deep social recession and creating for our children a world lacking in responsibility for and commitment to others. We are working longer hours and spending less time with our families, less time enriching ourselves and less time helping others. We can get what we want and need delivered right to our door, making face to face contact obsolete-

distancing ourselves from community. Our politicians stress family values but make it more and more difficult for us to have quality of life and be active parents, grandparents and spouses. We are forced to choose between the American dream and the American reality. As a result, our neighborhoods and neighbors are suffering: the divorce rate has doubled, teen suicide has tripled and reported violent crime has quadrupled in incident and severity. With all of these statistics, it is hard to argue with Tom Brokaw's statement that the accumulation of material goods is at an all time high, but so are the number of people who feel disconnection in their lives. These are hardly the best of times.

We need to think about what it means to build community. We are faced with a crisis of separateness in our culture- a crises expressed by the numbers in many recent studies. Robert Putnam, a sociologist, states, "That while more Americans now bowl than at any time in the past, less Americans are members of bowling leagues". People would bowl as a way of being part of a community. And, at a time, where spirituality is the buzzword on talk shows on bookstore shelves and in popular magazine, a time where everyone is searching for the meaning of life, congregational affiliation is at an all time low.

Why is that? What happened to our sense of connection to the world with all of its valuable outgrowths? What happened to mutual obligation and responsibility for our community? Why do our children feel a sense of entitlement rather than gratitude? When and how did our focus change from us to me?

Psychologist David Myers determines that "part of the explanation lies in the radical individualism familiar to us in pop psychology and traditional American libertine values." The United States was founded by people seeking personal freedom who authored a constitution based on the individual's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. French statesman, Alexis De Tocqueville analyzed the American spirit in 1831 as "a calm considered feeling that disposes each citizen to isolate him or herself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends...gladly leaving the greater society to look after itself." De Tocqueville concluded his

statement about the American spirit, stating that such a people owe no man anything and imagine that their entire destiny is in their own hands.

We are not any different from our American forefathers of 1831 and DeTocqueville's statement still rings true. Most of us are involved in our own individual worlds. We awake, go to work, return from work to an hour in front of the computer or behind the television, to sleep and begin the cycle again, without time for ourselves, without time for our families, and certainly without time for our community. This is a life- and it may be our life, yet it is not what our American or Jewish ancestors imagined for us when they set out to create a better future. We are a country so obsessed by the notion of individuals perusing their own agendas, by themselves, ala Survivor and The Apprentice that we have forgotten that we also need each other.

Imagine for a moment the world of our grandparents or great-grandparents on the Lower East Side of New York or Baltimore, Maryland or Charleston South Carolina, or Dorchester, Massachusetts or wherever they landed in this new country. Whole families lived in the same tenements- aunts and uncles around the corner, grandparents the floor below. Neighbors intimately knew each other's business and although they did not have two nickels to rub together, what they had belonged to each other. They celebrated life's fortunes and marked misfortunes as a community. There was a true sense of people hood and belonging and caring for one another. A true sense of *kahal* - community.

We possess so much more than they could have ever imagined. We who live in mansions and drive cars, and eat to our stomach's content have the world, but we don't have each other. Instead of seeing ourselves as belonging to the world, we see the world as belonging to us.

In Judaism, we need people. And the modern response for that is synagogue life. We need kahal-community to pray. We cannot say kaddish without a minyan. Or get married without aydim, witnesses. All of our souls received the Torah at Mount Sinai together. We are all connected. We belong to each other. The Talmud reminds us of the lesson that our grandparents understood kol yisrael ahevin ze l'zeh- we are responsible for each other.

The High Holydays are our communal -wake-up call. We come together, thousands strong to plead for forgiveness. We acknowledge in the "we" - anachnu, rather than the I our mortality- we are clay urns easily broken, flowers that bloom and wither. As one, we hear the words of Torah, *atem nitzavim hayom---* you (plural) stand together. The rabbis of old realized that we would most keenly feel the power of the day, surrounded by community, uttering words of joint history, a shared inheritance, and the possibility of future legacy. We can state emphatically, as we look around the room at the young faces, as we look at the ancient Torahs in the ark, that a part of us will live on.

Last year, in a study, the Medical School of the University of California in San Francisco, found that one of the factors leading to longevity is congregational affiliation. We live longer lives and we live better lives when we have people to celebrate life's joys with and when we do not have to mourn our losses alone.

We know that community is important, so how do we begin the process of affiliating like a family in a place as large as this? Like anything else, creating *kahal*- community takes work. It is built, value by value, lesson by lesson. *Kahal* does not come from names etched on buildings, rather names etched in the heart. Not from money amassed but hugs accrued and lives changed. *Kahal* comes from living with purpose, being with potential, acknowledging responsibility to the greater world around the self. Before you leave this sanctuary today - look at the people around you. Truly look at them for they are your surety. We are responsible for each and every soul around us. We are obligated to assure that they have food to eat and comfort when they are ill. And someone to dance with when they celebrate. We are obligated to guarantee that they have a place to go at the holidays and that their children and ours have a synagogue to pray in. We are obligated to love every member of this community even when we do not like them. Like family, we are bound by something greater than our own needs and desires.

Dr. Naomi Rachel Remen tells of a woman who once came to her and shared that she despaired the selfishness of her children. The woman could not understand how her kids had turned out the way that they did as she had always set a good example. "And how did you model caring?" Dr Remen asked. The woman's reply? By making their

beds, serving them nutritious meals, taking care of their every need. I cared for them, so that they might care for the world.

We do not become generous by giving, we become generous through service. Service to community is something that needs to be taught. Like Judaism, it needs to be modeled. We can't expect our kids to be Jewish without teaching them daily how to be Jewish. We can't expect our kids to be involved in helping others when they do not see us, doing the same. When we participate in the life of the community, we assure the continuity of the community. Become involved. Hillel says "Don't separate yourself from the community"- I say become the community. That is essential. There are many opportunities at The Community Synagogue that are waiting to be hallowed by you. Join the mitzvah corps or the adult Tikkun Olam committee and make a difference in our immediate and far reaching world. Become a part of the Brotherhood or Sisterhood participating in programs of service. Help to educate our youth, lead or attend shiva minyanim for people you do not know. Prepare Shabbat dinner for the ill or homebound. Drive the elderly in our community to doctor's appointments, read to our youngest members. Work with B'yachad to assure that our building meets the needs of the next generation. Come and do and teach and be. It is up to each and every one of you to be a Jew for yourself. Rabbi Zeplovitz, Cantor Franco and I are not Jews for you, we practice Judaism for ourselves. If you want something done, than do it. Rabbi Brad Artson tells this story: several times in my rabbinic career I have received phone calls that go like this, "Rabbi I am really angry with you. I was in the hospital for a month and you never came for a visit." When asked, "if they called to even let the synagogue know that they were ill, the answer is invariable no, I assumed that one of my friends had done it. Each friend figured that someone else had done it and so no one did". It is up to each and every one of us to call the synagogue when we know that someone is ill, that someone is having difficulties that someone has a simcha to celebrate. Be involved with us and we will be involved with you.

The Hebrew word for responsibility is ah-revhin, literally surety or one who makes him or herself responsible for another either as a sponsor, a godparent or a guarantor of a loan. As a Jewish community we are guarantors for each other's lives. We are

supposed to be there to take care of one another- to help each other through illness, loss or crisis- to help each other celebrate joys, create kahal. More often than not, we expect these rewards by merit of our humanness. We expect the community to come together to mourn with us or to be by our side as we struggle through illness and we are hurt when no one is there. But to assume that others will be there for us when we have not been there for them is egotism and arrogance. Rabbi Larry Kushner teaches that, "The more we comprehend our mutual interdependence, the more we fathom the implications of our most trivial acts. We find ourselves within a luminous organism of sacred responsibility."

We are all tied together in the process of living. We can't escape it. Every step we take is somehow felt on the other side of the world, reverberating for generations. Kol Israel ahrevin ze le ze- we are responsible for each other.

I was told a story several years ago which touches me by the small importance of the act. An older member of the Jewish community had lost his wife of over 50 years. As friends and family were sitting shiva, a teenager enters the man's home. He came over to the mourners, offered his hand, and in a soft voice said, "I am sorry for your loss." Retreating to the back of the room, the young man prayer with the family during the minyan service and then quietly slipped out. After the service, the granddaughter of the deceased turned to her grandfather, and asked, "Who was the young man?" The old man shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't know, I guess some kid from the community." With his mere presence at the shiva minyan, this teenager had made a difference. He showed the elderly man and his family that the community cared. That his loss mattered.

Imagine if we all, like this young man, performed one small act for the betterment of the community. Imagine if we and our children offered one hour per week in the life of our family to participate in kahal. Imagine what this world could become if each and every one of us would but reach out our hands to another. It would truly be the best of times- a time of hope, of wisdom, of belief, where everything stood before us

and we stood together, connected and whole. The future is truly in our hands- we can belong to each other and God or we can remain alone.