

Building a Community of Belonging
Kol Nidre 5786

Imagine if, instead of having to get dressed in your finest clothes, drive across town - or from Kitchener, Guelph, or Cambridge - to Temple Shalom or instead of having to tune into Zoom at a very specific time, you...could just stay home. Repent on your own timeline, when it's convenient for you, when you need to, when it works into your busy schedule. You wouldn't even need a *mahzor*, a High Holy Day prayerbook. All you would need is a phone with a specialized chatbot.

Earlier this month, *The New York Times* highlighted faith-based spiritual chatbots, which draw from religious texts and “are like on-call priests, imams or rabbis, offering comfort and direction at any time.”¹ Users bring their spiritual questions - “why do I have less money than others? Why am I not at peace with myself?” and find answers, prayer, and comfort. Sounds great, right? There is an ease and accessibility to these chatbots. They are available at all hours of the day - when you are awake in the middle of the night, feeling the anguish of the world, the chatbot is there. Why not a repentance chatbot too? For that matter, why do we need religious communities at all, if our religious needs can be fulfilled through technology? Of course, there are limits. The *New York Times* article notes that “the chatbots are based on foundation models, like ChatGPT and Gemini, that are designed to validate users.” Is that the purpose of religion - of Judaism - and of religious community? Validation? To be affirmed that we are always in the right, to have our fears, worries, and aspirations validated? **Jewish community demands more from us.**

These are innately human qualities: desiring to be in community, building community, even when it's hard. Community is hard work - it asks something of us, and it is not always convenient, as all of you who have devoted hours to lay leadership, in this or other communities, know. But community is an essential antidote to the loneliness that pervades our world. This is not a sermon about AI and the ways that it is a threat or a benefit to Judaism, although I have colleagues giving that sermon this year! This is a sermon about what we are to each other, and what we can be, when we treat community as a verb, something we have to do actively, not receive passively.

Tonight, on Yom Kippur, this is part of our work. We are not meant to be validated in all the ways that we have been right over the last year. Through our *teshuvah* work over the next day, we are taking a close look at some hard times when we were wrong. We are not meant to be comfortable. This is not easy. The Torah verses describing the practice of Yom Kippur call us to *t'anu et nafshoteichem* - you are to afflict your selves, which the rabbis of the Mishna then interpret to include fasting and refraining from other embodied actions.² **Jewish community is not always supposed to make us comfortable. It is not meant to be convenient and easy.**

¹ Lauren Jackson, “Finding God in the App Store, *The New York Times*, September 14, 2025, [Finding God in the App Store - The New York Times](#).

² Leviticus 16:29, translation by Everett Fox.

It is not meant to be a 24/7 convenience store, where we show up, grab what we need off the shelf, and leave. Jewish community demands more from us.

Sometimes Judaism *is* comfortable and convenient, providing us exactly what we need, when we need it - and that's great. Our Torah and texts are full of meaning and comfort for when we are grieving or scared. But that is not the sole purpose of why we are here.

We attach ourselves to more than just the texts, but to the Jewish community too. Last week on Rosh Hashanah morning, Mike made a compelling case for why membership at Temple Shalom matters. "Don't be a member this year because your daughter will have her bat Mitzvah in February. Be a member every year because you want there to be a place in Waterloo for daughters to have bat mitzvahs. Don't join so you can make friends. Join because Jews need a place to be friends. Don't join just to get the support of our community, join to help ensure that there is a supportive community for all who need it."

But actually being all in on this great project of Judaism and Jewish community building requires more from each and every one of us than filling out a form and e-transferring a meaningful but not too onerous amount of money. That's Step 1. Tonight, I want to talk about Step 2, building a community of belonging.

Tomorrow afternoon, we'll read from the section of Leviticus known as the Holiness Code, which outlines the ways we build a holy community.

Dabeir al kol adat b'nai Yisrael v'amarta aleihem "Kedoshim tih'yu" - "Speak to all the community of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy."³ This commandment - "you shall be holy," is in the plural, and is explicitly, almost redundantly, addressed to *kol adat b'nai Yisrael*, the entire Israelite community. We are all implicated in the obligation to build this holy community. This work is not restricted to the priests of biblical and Temple times, or to rabbis and board members today. This work is incumbent upon each and every one of us, every single person who counts themselves to be part of this community. Our community makes demands on us! It asks us to practice chanting a text in an ancient language so we all can hear Torah read. It asks us to figure out how to make noise come out of an animal's horn, so we all can hear the sound of a shofar waking us up. It asks us to contribute food and money to our communal food drive with Waterloo Region Food Bank, so our community's efforts can be magnified. It even asks us to put up with other people making noise, wiggling, being human - on the most holy day of the year.

A couple of years ago, an article circulated among clergy, as we shifted from being exclusively online through the worst of the pandemic, to hybrid models, and then eventually, towards ways of gathering for worship that were mostly in-person. This article, written by a pastor, made a case for why in-person worship matters. Not that having Zoom options does not matter - creating more accessibility and ways into community and spirituality is crucial. Joining services on Zoom asks very little of us. We sit in our own space. We can make it *perfect* - eliminating

³ Leviticus 19:2

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distractions, setting it up just so in order to create an ideal space to pray. But that's not what communal prayer is about. Communal prayer is also about being in a space with people who are different from us, who have different needs. People of different ages and generations. People who make noise even when they're "not supposed to" - babies, folks with neurodiversity, folks who can't hear what the rabbi said and ask the person next to them to repeat it. People at a different income level than we are. Showing up in community *asks* something of us - to be patient. To maybe not always be able to hear so well ourselves. To remember that those who are caregiving for little ones might feel torn between meeting those little ones' needs, and finding their own spiritual centre. We are not meant to be sealed hermetically in our own bubbles, focused only on our own experiences. For that, yes, we have ChatGPT. **But Jewish community demands more from us.**

Being in a community is a two-way street. As humans, we have a deep-seated desire to belong, to connect, to fit in. We are social creatures. But belonging doesn't happen automatically. I often turn to this definition of belonging from John Powell and Stephen Menendian: "Belonging occurs when everyone feels as if they are not only welcome, but they are empowered and have a stake and a say. Under belonging, you are fully able to participate in the norms setting, and ideally, in co-creating the culture and life of the organization."⁴ Not only are you fully *able* to create the norms, the culture, the life of the organization, but you have a responsibility to do so- and you're not really going to feel like you belong until you do. Dr. Fern Chertok's research on volunteerism and responsibility in communities gives us a way to understand how this works. She brings the example of a recovery group that she observed. In this particular recovery group, nothing was set up in advance. The first person to arrive started putting the chairs into a circle. The second person to arrive - even if it was their very first time! - was responsible for putting out the cookies and coffee. Every single person had a job to play in the successful functioning of the group. To a certain extent, we're pretty good at this here. Many of you are used to rolling up your sleeves to turn around the pews, to set up an oneg or a pot luck, to take part in fall and spring clean-ups of the Cedars grounds. And, often, we look around and see many of the same faces, to whom we're so grateful for the ways they keep our community rolling. If you haven't had the opportunity yet to take on a volunteer role here at the synagogue - it's never too late (and I promise you don't need to start with being a board member!). **Jewish community demands more from us.**

This mutuality is at the core of all of our human relationships - even the relationships between newborns and their parents are mutual. Of course, we all know intuitively the ways that holding and caring for a newborn baby is good for the baby - they are dependent, and rely on the adult caregivers around them for their basic needs. But less known are the ways that caring for a newborn baby impacts the caregivers, by stimulating the release of oxytocin. Mutuality, however, makes relationships *hard*. People need things from us! They need care, they need attention, they need affirmation, they need support, they need patience, they need love. And so do we.

⁴ John Powell and Stephen Menendian, *Belonging without Othering: How We Save Ourselves and the World*, 137.

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Jewish community, and our relationships within it, demand more from us. It is not a one-way street, in which we show up, take what we need, and leave. The section of Leviticus that we read tomorrow afternoon offers us a blueprint for what it looks like to be obligated to each other, to treat community as a verb:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not finish by reaping the corners of your field; and you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest...leave them for the poor and the stranger.⁵

You shall not exploit your neighbour, and you shall not rob. You shall not keep a worker's wage with you overnight, until morning.⁶

Rise before the one whose head is white with age, and regard an elder with respect.⁷

It is often easiest to put ourselves, and our own needs, first. To feed our own families, to harvest our fields to the edges, to pay employees when it is convenient for us, to ignore the needs of the generations that came before us. But Jewish community demands more from us. Jewish community calls us to take an active role in building our communities, in creating spaces where we find that elusive sense of belonging.

A verse from the book of Isaiah: *v'chol baniyich limudei Adonai, v'rav shalom banayich*. And all your children shall be taught about God, and great shall be the peace of your children."⁸ This verse becomes the source of a pun for the rabbis of the Talmud. "No no, they didn't actually mean *banayich*, your children," the rabbis argue, "but *bonayich*, your builders."⁹ In the context of the original verse from Isaiah, this makes sense! The prophet Isaiah is imagining a return to Jerusalem, one that requires significant physical rebuilding, not only of the Holy Temple, but all of the structures of the community. British rabbi John Rayner points out that "the building or rebuilding of a city requires not only technical skill but also moral vision: a vision of how it can best promote the quality of life of its citizens and good relations with one another. In other words, town planning also has a spiritual dimension."¹⁰ The act of building physical structures to support communal life is one that requires deep knowledge of God, of the needs of the Jewish community.

Let us be builders this year. When you arrive at Temple Shalom - for religious school, for a Shabbat service, for an adult education lecture, for a potluck, know that you are not walking into a finished building, but an incomplete community. An incomplete community that is waiting for *you* and your contribution.

⁵ Leviticus 19:9-10

⁶ Leviticus 19:13

⁷ Leviticus 19:32

⁸ Isaiah 54:13, translated by John D. Rayner.

⁹ Berakhot 64a

¹⁰ John Rayner, "Children and Builders," sermon at Finchley Progressive Synagogue, May 13, 2020, [00000028_DOSPDS](#).

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Let us each be builders of this holy community.

Let us build a community of belonging.

Let us build a community that asks something of us - and let us say yes.

Let us build a community, grounded in moral vision, a community built from love.

G'mar chatimah tovah.