



## ACTIVITY

### TORAH, COMMUNITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

#### Goal

To explore the role and relevance of community in living a Jewish life

#### Materials Needed

Two signs

#### Time Needed

30-45 minutes

#### Directions for Activity

1. Place a sign on one side of the room that reads:

“I get nothing from the Jewish community and see it as irrelevant in my life.”

Place a second sign on the other side of the room that reads:

“I get a great deal from the Jewish community and see it as extremely relevant in my life”.

2. Ask the participants to put themselves along that line in between the two signs and then break the line in the middle (numerically). Divide the line into pairs such that people from each end are facing people from the middle of the line.

3. Give the participants time to discuss their (opposing) positions.

4. Bring the group back together and have them discuss whether Jewish community is meaningful or not for them and what it would take for it to be meaningful?

5. Finally bring the piece from this text by Rabbi Amy Eilberg to the group and try collectively to understand her position.

“For us as Jews, this greatest of all gifts [Torah] comes to us primarily in community. While today, each of us must accept and wrestle with Torah in our own ways, we must also be willing in some sense to be part of a community of God-wrestlers and students of Torah. For Torah was a gift given to us as a collective, and continually reinterpreted by our people’s evolving wisdom. In a sense, Torah is only Torah if we stand in relationship with our people as we study it.”

*Rabbi Amy Eilberg: Bamidbar: Are you Ready to Receive the Torah Again? 1998*



This 1998 piece is taken from an article written on *Erev Shavuot* by Rabbi Amy Eilberg who was ordained in 1985 as the first woman rabbi of the Conservative movement, following on the heels of women rabbis who had been ordained by the Reform and Reconstructionist movements.

The article, which urges in general the relevance of Torah for all Jews (recognising *Shavuot* as the holiday which celebrates the giving and receiving of Torah by the Jewish people), encouraged each individual to find their own relationship with Torah and as such expressed a typical pluralistic and individualistic approach such as has characterized liberal forms of Judaism over the last generation or so.

However Rabbi Eilberg brackets this appeal to the individual by a series of comments highlighting the importance of the individual finding their own path within the framework of the Jewish community. This attempt to balance the role of the individual in Judaism and the role of the community highlights a major challenge for large parts of the Jewish collective and as such for the whole enterprise of the Jewish People.

Judaism, far more than Christianity has always emphasized the place of the individual within the community. That is one of the essential dimensions of Jewish Peoplehood. The demands of Jewish people always emphasized the communal. Whether in the prayer setting which stressed the importance of the Minyan as a communal framework in which ideally prayers should be said and the relationship of the individual with God should be expressed or in a hundred other dimensions of Jewish life, the Jew was always seen as living his or her life within a communal framework.

It seems no exaggeration to say that as Rabbinic Judaism developed over millenia, the emphases of the Rabbis made it impossible for an individual to live a full Jewish life in isolation from a surrounding community.

However as Jews became part of the modern world and as that world began to de-emphasize the communal in favour of personal autonomy and (in some circles) an unbridled individualism, the communal ideals of Judaism began to be challenged and undermined. Movements within Judaism such as the *Chavurah* movement of the 1960's and the Renewal movement of more recent years have tended to emphasise a search for personal meaning and spiritual searching within a congregational context that turned away from the large established movements of North American Jewry.

This tendency has grown with the proliferation of individual *minyanim* that do not necessarily affiliate with larger collective Jewish frameworks. The rise of the idea of Judaism as a basis of individual spiritual searching has for some Jews rendered redundant the need for any wider framework whatsoever.

As a number of studies of western Jewry have made clear, there are many self-identified Jews especially in the younger generations who accept the fact of their own Jewishness but find no need to connect with any wider framework. "Making *Kiddush* for oneself" has become a philosophy that many accept for themselves. This constitutes a major threat to the idea that all Jews should see themselves as part of the Jewish People.

There is a need for a new calibration of the relationship between the individual and the community in order to find a balance which was once completely natural and taken for granted as a component of Jewish life. It is the need for that balance that Rabbi Eilberg addresses here.

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