

Weaving our Communal Challah Together

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First you roll it. Then you break it into three parts and roll them so they are the same size. Then you pinch them together at one end. Cross the left strand over the middle strand, then cross the right strand over what's now the middle strand. Repeat until you reach the end, then twist the ends together and pinch.

Working as a preschool teacher at the Jewish Day School, I became quite good at the art of very hands on 3- and 4-year-old challah making.

Though the challahs rarely came out in a perfect braid, it was always the highlight of the day for the kids to eat something they had made with their own hands.

We gather here today as a community on Rosh Hashanah, the annual meeting of the Jewish people. At our annual meeting, we see people we haven't seen in a while. We notice the people who are jarringly absent, including our loved ones who passed away this past year. It's our annual meeting, so naturally we all come here for slightly different reasons.

Some of us feel the yearly pull of our tradition. Others are here nearly every week. Some of us come for the melodies, for the shofar. Some of us may not even be sure why we are here. But we are here, at our Jewish home. Like individual strands of challah, we are braided together, person by person, into one community.

Ecclesiastes teaches "Two are better than one, for they have greater benefit from their earnings. For if they fall, one can raise the other... Also, if one attacks, two can stand up to the attacker. [And] a three-fold cord is not easily broken."¹ The message is clear: we are stronger together.

But, as Rabbi Dusty Klass teaches, we are only stronger when we truly are together. The text teaches about a three-fold cord; it says nothing about three individual strands. The strands only gain their durability through being bound together. And their durability is determined by the strength of their bonds.

And so it is with challah. A strand of dough on its own does not a challah make. But through the weaving of multiple strands together, a challah comes into existence. Through the weaving of people together, a community comes into existence.

Let me tell you, preschoolers go wild for challah. If there were no teachers or parents at tot shabbat, each JRM student would probably eat an entire challah on their own. But,

¹ 4:9-12

preschoolers, and us non-preschoolers, have a different attachment to challah we have created with our own hands, that we have put time and effort into, that we have taken ownership of and made our own.

Investing time into your challah makes it taste better. It makes it yours.

Investing time into your community makes it that much sweeter, that much more your own.

I feel lucky to have been a part of so many strong communities, including many close by. I attended JDS- the Jewish day school in Bellevue, where I grew to know and appreciate Judaism. I formed strong friendships at BB Camp in Oregon. My calendar in high school was filled with BBYO, where I gained some of my best friends to this day and where I learned to see myself as a leader. I worked at Camp Kalsman and the JCC, communities in which I took on leadership roles.

But it was in college where I learned the importance of braiding a community together. Carleton College, in Minnesota, is a small liberal arts school with a Jewish community so small we did not have a Hillel. We had a house that was ours and a part time rabbi. Whatever we wanted in our community, we needed to create. When we wanted a more musical shabbat service, we created Beatles shabbat. When we wanted to celebrate Purim by reading the book of Esther, we gathered to do it. Knowing that the dining hall in rural Minnesota did not quite understand the rules of Passover, we created a rotation for who cooked meals at our house and the entire Jewish community came together nightly. Matza pizza was always the biggest hit. We took our individual strands and wove them together by building relationships and showing up for each other.

But don't just hear about community from me, hear about it from people involved in Temple's community.

Listen to the words of Josh, although that is not his real name, a member of Tribe, our 20s and 30s group.

Picture yourself walking through our main doors. You walk in alone. You scan the room and see no one you recognize. You see a few circles of people who are talking, but as Josh explains, nothing is more terrifying than inserting yourself in a conversation like that. Suddenly, as you enter the room, a smiling face greets you and introduces themselves. And that is who Josh tries to be, welcoming in a new person into the community, because for him, Tribe has become his community. Tribe gives him strong relationships, a reason to leave his house. When he went to the hospital and had no one to pick him up, someone from Tribe helped him out. Josh's investment in Tribe created a support system for him.

By braiding the strands of community together, Josh's communal cord was strong enough to support him when he needed it.

And it is not only true for people in Tribe.

Listen to the words of Aaron, also not his real name, a senior in high school. He speaks of Temple as his second home. As the place where he can be his full self. And it is no wonder he feels so at home here, he is here 3 or 4 times a week!

Aaron first became involved as an 8th grader, when older teens invited him to join Temple activities. He keeps coming back, because, in his words, “Temple friends are better friends. I feel closer to my Temple friends than my school friends.”

Aaron is now in his 4th year as a madrich in Religion School. He treasures the small moments he shares with his students, like the knowing smile on a student’s face when they see him. Aaron lights up talking about teacher appreciation day, when students come running to him and give him big hugs. Aaron describes the moment of hugging a student, saying, “[I] feel like I can be a friend to that kid and give them something more. I can teach them and sometimes being a friend is the best way to teach someone. When I see a kid so happy to see me and who thanks me, it makes me feel so good.”

The challah tastes better when you make it yourself, just as those hugs from younger Temple kids are more rewarding because Aaron invested his time and energy into building relationships with them.

Our tradition offers a story to illustrate the power of community. And it too, focuses on food. (aren’t you glad I didn’t give this sermon on Yom Kippur?)

Legend has it that a 19th century rabbi, Rabbi Haim, would travel around and share this story: I once ascended to the afterlife. I came upon a beautiful dining room. Filled with elaborate paintings on the wall and the finest wood tables. Row after row of tables were filled with platters of yummy food, its smells wafting into my nose and making my mouth water. Yet, I immediately knew that I was in Geyhenum, a purgatory like place in the Jewish tradition, and the sight was horrifying. The people seated around the tables were pale and emaciated, moaning in hunger. As I came closer, I understood their predicament.

Every person held a full spoon, but both arms were splinted with wooden slats so they could not bend either elbow to bring the food to their mouth. It broke my heart to hear the tortured groans of these poor people as they held their food so near but could not consume it.

Next I went to visit Heaven. I was surprised to see the same setting I had seen – row after row of long tables filled with food. But in contrast, the people here in Heaven were sitting contentedly talking with each other, obviously full from their yummy meal.

As I came closer, I was amazed to discover that here, too, each person had their arms splinted on wooden slats that prevented them from bending their elbows. How, then, did they manage to eat?

As I watched, a person picked up her spoon and dug it into the dish before her. Then she stretched across the table and fed the person across from her! The recipient of this kindness thanked her and returned the favor by leaning across the table to feed his benefactor.

I suddenly understood. Heaven and Gehennem offer the same circumstances and conditions. The critical difference is in the way the people treat each other.

The way to strengthen community, the way to weave the strands of challah together, the way to make sure we are all fed, is to invest your time and effort into our community.

People at Temple, too, care for those who need help. I spoke with one of the women deeply involved with Sacred Journeys, a group of lay leaders who offer support to people who have experienced the death of someone close to them.

Let's call her Julie. She spoke of feeling so lonely when a close family member died. In her words, it was "a difficult time to go through and I don't want anyone to go through it alone."

Sacred Journeys has grown into a community of people who make calls, deliver soup, write letters and care for people who have lost someone. It also has grown into being a community of its own.

Julie's message to me was that the goal of everything we do should be to create community. And that we need a lot of "relationship managers", people who are invested in building connections in the community and it cannot only be staff who see themselves in that role. We all should see ourselves as relationship managers.

Julie braids her communal challah through connecting with people who, like her, have experienced a significant loss in their lives.

Whether as a relationship manager, a hugger or a welcomer, each person invested in our community and as a result were lifted up by the community.

Gathered here on this annual meeting of our people, there is so much potential in this room.

We are all connected, and the more we connect, the more connected we will feel. Our community will become whatever we shape it to be.

If we want Temple to be warm and welcoming, we must be warm and welcoming

if we want to be greeted and engaged, we must greet and engage.

If we want Temple to be a place where people celebrate together and are comforted, then we must celebrate and comfort.

If we want to make Jewish friends, then we must be friendly.

Like a homemade challah, a community is best when braided by the hands of its members.

Join me, join all of us, in kneading that dough. In rolling the dough. And in braiding our community together.

In this new year, how will you braid our community to make it sweeter and stronger?

Shanah tovah!