

Today is the day of We.

The idea of *we* permeates the liturgy of this solemn day. AshamNU, bagadNU, gazalNU dibarNU dofi. Al cheit shechataNU. That little Hebrew suffix, *nu*, is what it is all about. *We* have betrayed. *We* have fallen short. *We* have spoken scornfully. *We* have sinned.

We stand as a community. We fall short as a community. We grow and experience Judaism as a community. Without you, without us without our shared dedication to this, what do we have?

When we gather together on this day, something transcendent happens. We share a voice and a breath, a single purpose: to stand before God and say, *Shema koleinu*. Hear OUR voice. We have fallen short, but we can do better. Together.

This evening, I want to share with you two hassidic stories about community. The first is about what we owe ourselves. The second is about what we owe each other.

The first is a story about a man who has withdrawn from his community. He has stopped coming to synagogue. He is grieving the loss of his wife. He cannot bear to bring himself back to shul. Instead, he spends his days sitting in front of the hearth beside her empty chair.

One evening, his rabbi comes to visit him. The two of them sit together beside the fire, neither saying anything to the other. After a while, the rabbi gets up and walks toward the fireplace. The grieving man watches as the rabbi picks up the tongs, pulls a single glowing coal from the fire, setting it on the hearth, off to the side. The rabbi comes back to his seat, patting the man's wrist as he sits down. And Together, the two of them watch the coal.

At first, it burns brightly. But slowly, separated from the roaring embers, its glow begins to fade. Red becomes orange. Orange becomes gray. And eventually, the coal turns cold and black.

The rabbi pats the man's wrist again, stands, walks over to the hearth, and places the coal back into the fire. It does not take long before the coal begins to glow again. The rabbi, still standing at the hearth, looks knowingly back at the man sitting in his chair.

"Rabbi," the grieving man says, "thank you for the sermon. I will see you in shul."

There are moments in life when we would rather withdraw, when we would rather be alone in our loneliness. There are moments when we do not feel particularly connected. And still, Judaism insists that there is danger in becoming entirely self-contained.

"Do not separate yourself from the community," our Rabbis warn. In fact, the 15th century Italian commentator Bartenura goes even further: rather, he says, we should share

together in the troubles of others Not because the community is always right. Not because synagogue is always inspiring. Rather, so that we are there to share in the good times, too.

We are social creatures, forged in the foundry of community, and we require the warmth and energy of others to sustain our own *neshama*, our own glowing light of God within.

*Hinei mah tov umah na'im, shevet achim gam yachad.* How good it is to sit together, especially here, on this evening.

And if and when you find yourself missing community, if you find yourself slipping away, call on us. I want to see your face. I want to spend time with you. And I am sure others do, too.

That is our first responsibility: a responsibility to ourselves— to resist the instinct to disappear into our loneliness, and to place ourselves back among the glowing coals.

The second story turns the responsibility around. Because it is not enough to say that we need community. Community needs something from us, too.

A long time ago, there was a small village preparing to celebrate a wedding. It had been a long time since the town had celebrated anything, certainly nothing of this magnitude. Everyone was invited. And because there were so many guests, the family asked each household to contribute one jug of wine.

A great barrel was placed in the center of town, and everyone was asked to pour their jug into it. One villager thought to himself: “There will be hundreds of jugs of wine in that barrel And I don't have much wine left of my own. If I pour in a jug of water instead, no one will ever notice.”

So he did. He felt a little guilty. But really, what difference could one jug possibly make with so much wine to go around?

The day of the wedding arrived. The guests gathered. The music played. The bride and groom stood beneath the chuppah and were blessed by family, friends, and the entire town for a life of health, happiness, and a loving community.

And when it was finally time to celebrate, the great barrel was opened. The first cup was drawn. And to the shock of everyone at the wedding— though, of course, not a surprise to anyone in this sanctuary— the cup contained only water.

In that moment, they realized how little they thought of themselves. Every person in the village had thought exactly the same thing about what they had to offer:

To be perfectly clear, I don't think the people of this town were malicious. I don't think there was any ill intent. They had simply convinced themselves that their own contribution was too small to matter. That the community would be just fine without it. They each depended

on the assumption That someone else would bring the wine. That someone else would do it.

But community does not work this way. Like wine, each of you must bring that special vintage That only you can bring. Some of you are sweet, some are just too sweet. Thank goodness, so many of you are bold. And each of you are bright, elegant, and complex. Our community is a robust blend of generations and regions. A product of climate and our roots.

This community would not be the same without you. This community would not BE without you.

When we bring our gifts, when we bring the fullness of ourselves, we make it easier for others to do the same.

The first story says: We, as individuals, need the community. The second says: the community needs you and your uniqueness. And somewhere between those two truths is the meaning of we.

We does not mean that we are never lonely. And it certainly does not mean that we have to remain alone in our loneliness.

We does not mean that every one of us has the same gifts. It means that whatever gift is ours, we should feel welcome to bring it.

We does not mean that every person is always strong. It means that when one of us grows cold, there is a fire to return to. And when one of us does not have enough, there are others who can fill each other's cup.

Again and again, Judaism brings us back into relationship. Kaddish cannot be said alone. A Torah scroll is not read only for ourselves. A wedding needs witnesses.

And on this day, the shabbat ha'shabbaton, Let us proclaim proudly: WE!

*Ashamnu*

*Bagadnu.*

*Gazalnu*

*Dibarnu Dofi!*

*Today our confession is written WE,*

But we shouldn't stop there— We should be “we” on Friday nights and Saturday mornings.

But we shouldn't stop there— We should be “we” when we see each other at the grocery store and at mariners games

But we shouldn't stop there— We should be we when we volunteer at operation night watch and when we attend wrestling with the moment

But we shouldn't stop there— We should be we in ways we haven't even yet imagined.

We need each other. And we are needed by each other.

This is the invitation of this day.

*HineiNU. Here we are.*

*G'mar chatimah tovah*