

B'midbar – 5769 – Community Conversations

Shabbat Shalom.

Raise your hand if you've ever heard of *Yom Hameyuhas*?

Don't be embarrassed if you haven't. Because, although I am the product of thirteen years of Jewish education, a rabbinical home and five years of rabbinical school, I first learned of it from my senior rabbi, Vernon Kurtz, in Chicago.

Now that you are all on the edge of your seats, ready to hear about this day, let me take a step back and tell you a Hasidic story Rabbi Kurtz once told me.

A king invited four great artists to paint the dining room of his palace. What an honor! Each artist was given one of the four walls and told to create a masterpiece. Sensing the urgency of the task, the artists went right to work. They painted beautiful works worthy of the king and his palace. All except one of them. Instead of painting, one artist sat and thought. While his colleagues urged him on, he simply thought. Finally, as they completed their walls, he went out and got mirrors. He carefully placed them on his wall and had them face different directions. The king came to see the fruits of their labor. While he was impressed with the three paintings, he thought the fourth was the best since the mirrored wall contained the beauty of the other three.

Like the mirror, this story reflects *Yom Hameyuhas*, which is coming up soon. As you learned from the *haftarah* and blessing of the new month, tomorrow is Rosh Hodesh Sivan, the beginning of the month of Sivan. Thursday night begins Shavuot when we recall and reenact receiving God's revelation at Sinai. Tuesday through Thursday also relate to Sinai – they are “the three days of holy removal.” The Torah tells us that the Israelites prepared for God's revelation for three days. So what does that leave?

Monday.

So what's special about Monday? Well, this year in America it is Memorial Day as we remember those who fell for this country. But I am thinking about the Jewish calendar.

Monday actually has a name; it is called *Yom Hameyuhas* or "the day of special relationship." It does not have any intrinsic uniqueness to itself – it is not the new moon, ushering in a new month, nor does it recall the three days of holy preparation as we prepared for God's revelation.

A medieval commentator, the Magen Avraham, asks, so if nothing of great significance happened on this day, why is it significant at all?

Rabbi Yisrael MiRizhin, a Hasidic rebbe, explains that this is a day whose importance only comes from being next to other special days – its grandeur comes from reflecting the beauty of the days before and after it. There is an almost humble aspect to this day in that it is aware that it can serve as a bridge between the beginning of a new month and the days leading to Sinai. Similarly, a person should be humble and aware of the merit of those who came before us and those who will follow.

Yom Hameyuhas, this day of special relationship, reminds me of the importance of relationships. Relationships are the glue that builds a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sanctified community. Temple Emunah or any shul's most important part is not its building or its program or even its services, but its people.

A shul is people.

But the strength of a shul is how well its people are connected. How well they can reflect each other's beauty back to each other, as the fourth artist did in that Hasidic story.

Having been blessed to be a part of this community for five years, I have seen and felt first hand just how strong our community is. It is made up of so many people who care deeply about our tradition and each other. It is made up of those who love davening, traditional prayer, and those who simply enjoy the community. It is

filled with those who are passionate about Jewish learning, Israel, and *tikkun olam* – healing and repairing the world.

But the truth is whether you are active on our softball team, the Brotherhood, Sisterhood, 55 plus, the preschool, religious school or a committee, whether you are here every Shabbat or every Wednesday morning for our breakfast class, chances are that, while you may have some close friends in the shul, most people are familiar, but not friends. To build community, one needs to deepen one's relationships with others.

This has been our focus. How can we build and strengthen our community? It means having deeper conversations – at a Shabbat Kiddush, over a cup of coffee after breakfast, in someone's home or as part of an intense experience. I have seen those connections form and grow in our learning opportunities or as we care for each other through our Hineini committee which helps in times of transition – celebratory like birth or tear-filled like coping with illness and loss.

While I love Israel, and our Emunah trips to Israel certainly deepen our feeling for the land and State of Israel, the group experience is especially gratifying and vital.

We are entering a special year here at Temple Emunah as we celebrate our 50th anniversary. During this year, we will hold many events to share our past and celebrate this milestone. But this year is also an opportunity for reflection, to see where we have come from as a synagogue, where we are as a shul, and where we are going.

But how can we deepen our relationships while we look to the future? When I first came to the community, I attended dozens of parlor meetings in members' homes where there was meaningful sharing and conversation. Over the last few months, a Community Conversations committee has been meeting and planning a new type of gathering that will occur in each other's homes. These house meetings will be a chance for 8-12 people to share their stories, deepening their connection to each other and to our shul and helping us think about where we want to go. We hope that not only will our bonds be strengthened, but that common themes and common concerns will emerge from the discussion.

As the committee and Lois wrote in the May bulletin: “Community Conversations’ is an exploration without an explicit agenda. Its purpose is to unearth whatever is in the hearts and on the minds of those who participate, whether the concerns are personal, familial, communal or civic in nature. The goal is for us to listen to, share with, and learn from one another, extending the value of our relationships and strengthening the bonds that unite us. Thereafter, the steering group will take a close look across these conversations to identify common themes and interests—and present a snapshot of our community back to the community.”

On Thursday night, we held a meeting to train facilitators, and a number of us participated in this and shared our stories. As I sat there and listened to people, many of whom I already knew fairly well, I was struck by the gift of sharing one’s narrative. It was a privilege, a gift, to hear these stories and feel the almost palpable sensation of community that was created. Stories are shared, narratives explored and relationships are deepened.

Even those of us who are here regularly know most of the rest of us as acquaintances, but not as friends, not with that level of relationship. One of the participants at Thursday’s conversation, Eric Goldstein, explained the difference. An acquaintance – you know that they are present. A friend – you know their past. That’s the key difference: to have a relationship with someone, we need to know about where they are coming from and, maybe even better, where they want to go.

So, it’s time for all of us to join in the conversation. If you are invited to host, facilitate or participate in one of these conversations, please step up to the plate. Or even better, call or email us and tell us you want to be a part of this, and we’ll get you involved. It is our goal to hold a good number of these meetings over the summer beginning in June.

It is my hope that these conversations will deepen the relationships among us, help us look to the future, and strengthen our community.

At the end of this morning's Torah reading, there is a strange law about the Levites. One group, those descended from Kehat, is in charge of the schlepping – the carrying of the ark. This does not feel like such a critical task, and we might ask why the Torah adds that the priestly descendants of Kehat cannot go in and see all the sacred objects in the Tabernacle. A medieval commentator, the Malbim, highlights the phrase the Torah uses to describe their assignment: “*ish ish*,” from one to another. God wants them to model a sacred spirit of cooperation. They must carry the ark, but constantly share it with each other and share the burden and the privilege of moving the ark. God presents this group of Levites with a seemingly mundane task, but offers a process that contains a central value – cooperating with others. This model of relationships is more important than viewing the sacred objects.

These Levites carry the ark as partners, and they model collaboration. In an increasingly atomized world, where Facebook has seemingly replaced real faces, interactions, and relationships, we need to cultivate a spirit of sharing that will nurture our *kehillah kedoshah*.

As we inaugurate our fiftieth year, may the model of a *Yom Hameyuhas*, a day of relationship be the foundation for how we can hear and reflect each other's narratives, building a stronger community for us all.

Shabbat Shalom.