

Shima Now

A Journal of Jewish Sensibilities
October 2016 | V.47 No. 720

אַל תִּפְרוֹשׁ מִן הַצִּבּוּר

Al tifrosh min hatzibur

Do not separate yourself
from the community

Coming to Community

Aaron Potek

Hillel the elder, who lived in Babylonia and Jerusalem during the first century BCE, writes in *Ethics of Our Fathers* (2:5), “*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*” “Do not separate yourself from the community.” These four Hebrew words can be understood in three very different ways.

This could be a statement about what it means to be human. As it says in the book of Genesis (2:18), “It is not good for a person to be alone.” While this refers to finding an *ezer k’negdo*, a partner, Hillel might be suggesting an additional remedy to loneliness. To Hillel, then, a community is more than a group of people sharing a space, experience, or activity; it should nurture a sense of belonging by helping each member feel seen, cared for, and supported. Our tradition has many beautiful practices for creating those deeper connections (visiting the sick, providing meals to those in mourning, etc.). But to benefit from this type of community, we must sometimes sacrifice some of our independence and adapt to the culture and norms of a larger entity. This sacrifice of individuality runs contrary to contemporary culture.

Another interpretation suggests that Hillel’s statement emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships in Jewish practice. Rather than Judaism providing us with ways to build community, community provides us with ways to be Jewish. An entire category of commandments outlines how we are to engage with other people (*bein adam l’chaveiro*). Even the commandments between an individual and God (*bein adam l’makom*) often should, and sometimes must, be performed with others. Any legitimate interpretation of Judaism, according to Hillel, must involve a Jewish community, even though each community’s specific features will depend on its membership.

A third interpretation is less about practicing religion with a subset of Jews and more about belonging to *all* other Jews — referred to as “the Jewish community,” or *klal Yisrael*, the people

Israel, or peoplehood. Perhaps the strongest demonstration of this notion is when Naomi tells her recently widowed daughter-in-law, Ruth, to go back to her own people. Ruth replies: “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.” (Ruth 1:16) The order is significant: Ruth’s commitment is first and foremost to the “people” and then to the religious aspects of Judaism. This idea is reflected in a related ruling of Maimonides, the twelfth-century rabbi and philosopher: “Those who separate themselves from the ways of the community have no portion in the world to come, even without committing any sins.” (*Hilchot Teshuva* 3:11)

While Jewish peoplehood is often seen as something one is born into and can never leave, Hillel’s four words — “*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*” — suggest otherwise. But before we can define what constitutes “separating” and why it’s ill-advised, we first have to acknowledge our different understandings of what defines us as a people: our nationality, ethnicity, ethical behavior, or religious commitments. Hillel leaves these critical questions about Jewish identity open, for us to answer.

With so many diverse Jewish communities across the world, it’s hard to imagine a single defining norm that could or should apply to all Jews. This might be a good thing. Any defining norm might, ironically, alienate some parts of this people. Besides, different understandings of our identity have allowed us to adapt to new surroundings and host societies, to become a diverse people, and to evolve over time. But without any defining norms, it’s hard to know what, if anything, unifies us. With so much fighting between Jews today, in Israel and the Diaspora, the idea of *klal Yisrael* may feel like a fantasy — it may have always been a fantasy. But despite our differences and disagreements, this idea — that we somehow remain connected to each other — is an aspiration I’d like to keep.

Rabbi **Aaron Potek** works with Jews in their 20s and 30s in Washington, D.C., as the community rabbi for Gather the Jews (gatherthejews.com).

Art by Yevgenia Nayberg
“Homage to Roman Vishniac,” 2006
oil on canvas, 43” x 54”

“Inspired by the Jewish photographer Roman Vishniac, I created this image — with a man carrying a suitcase with the Hebrew letters seeping from it — to represent the history of community. Along our journey from one place to the next, we carry our history, our belongings, and our sense of belonging.”
— Yevgenia Nayberg

Please see pages 7–9 for *Consider and Converse*, our guide to this issue

NiSh'ma

On this page, we offer three takes on the verse, “Al tifrosh min hatzibur” — what it means to belong fully to a community. Please visit jd.fo/shma2 and join the discussion about stepping up and being counted. Our online version is new and interactive, and we welcome your comments. —S.B.



Yakir Englander: This saying is from the Mishnah Tractate *Avot* and teaches that effective critique must come from within a society. Social reformers, to have any influence on the hearts of their people, must be one of them

in their pain and struggles.

Some sources attribute the verse also to Rabbi Zadok (*Avot* 4:7), the same person who foresaw the rotting ethical fabric of Jerusalem 40 years before its destruction, and who began

to fast and pray for the city and its morally righteous citizens. This same Rabbi Zadok criticized the Temple priests' interpretation of holiness, which privileged the purity of the sanctuary above human life.

In Genesis, Abraham argued with the Most High over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah because he felt responsible for the welfare of everyone in Canaan, which had been divinely promised to him. He struggled to find even ten righteous people, for whose sake the Almighty would spare both circles. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, a Hasidic rabbi and leader, criticized Abraham for his lack of imaginative argumentation. The Berditchever wrote, “If not a single righteous person had been found in Sodom, the Rebbe commented, he would have sojourned to live there in order to save it from annihilation.”

The choice to become “a single saint in Sodom,” seeking its salvation, is far from simple. The people of Sodom, like the people of Jerusalem before its fall, were stubborn in their ways. It is the same today in Jerusalem. Those who set the value of human life — Israeli or Palestinian — above the “purity of the sanctuary” are seen as traitors. Such “troublers of Israel” are forced to live in acrimony, even as they pray that Jerusalem will be spared coming destruction and might, instead, be honored as the place where the “King of Peace” resides.

Yakir Englander is head of the “Dialogue to Action” project at Kids4Peace International (k4p.org). He is a scholar at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, and author of *The Male Body in Jewish Lithuanian Ultra-Orthodoxy: Images from Musar Literature and Hagiography*. Englander currently lives in Jerusalem and he grew up in the Hasidic community of Bnei Brak.



Yoshi Fenton: Two thousand years ago, Hillel and the rabbis of the Mishnah, whose words fill the pages of *Pirkei Avot*, didn't pray together. They didn't all agree on the law. They didn't all agree on the best strategy for the future of the Jewish people or how to keep kosher. They argued, even fought, and the schools of Hillel and his colleague Shammai are famous for being at odds with one another. Ancient rabbinic

Judaism was anything but homogeneous.

The diversity within the Jewish community during the time of Hillel is arguably rivaled only by the diversity we find today. During the time Hillel and Shammai lived, you could affiliate with the Pharisees, Sadducees, or Essenes. You could be a Hellenist or a Zealot. The options were many, so what was Hillel talking about when he warned against separating oneself from the community? What community was he talking about?

The story of Hillel and Shammai offers some insight. Over the 300 years that the two schools dominated the rabbinic scene, Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai (the schools of Hillel and Shammai) had more than 350 disagreements over the law that were serious — even bloody. But we also learn from the Talmud that despite all of their disagreements, “Beit Hillel did not refrain from marrying the children of Beit Shammai and Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying the children of Beit Hillel.” (BT *Yevamot* 14a) The talmudic rabbis understood that the big tent of Judaism is just that — big. And when it comes to profound expressions of community, such as who marries whom, even fundamental differences are put aside.

Knowing when to engage, struggle, and fight to change one's community and when to step away and not look back is a question for prophets; it wasn't even clear to Abraham, as Yakir Englander suggests. Before Abraham pleaded on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, he left behind his family and the people of Haran. Before he was a saint, he ran away. Most of us aren't prophets, yet the deep truth of this Mishnah remains. Hillel reminds us that we are all *klal Yisrael*, one people — one big, crazy, dysfunctional, loving community. Now, we just have to act like it.

Rabbi **Joshua (Yoshi) Fenton** is the executive director of Studio 70 (studio-70.org), a Jewish Learning Laboratory focused on innovation in part-time Jewish education, and Edah, an immersive afterschool program. He lives in Berkeley, Calif.



Jordana Schuster Battis: Yakir Englander writes that Hillel's text demands that each of us be a social critic, sometimes standing as a “single saint in Sodom,” crying out a message of change from within a society hostile to our plea.

Another, perhaps more hopeful, way to understand the text is to strive to be teachers of empathy within our communities — guides who make our way through the wilderness together with other sinners on the path. None of us are saints; one of the Torah's first lessons is that all of us are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. When we bring this awareness to those we journey with, we have the chance to acknowledge the holy experiences and capacities each one brings to our endeavor. We hear each other's stories, recognize each other's pain, and acknowledge each other's questions and insights. Even though, as a guide, I may have studied the terrain of our journey extensively and I may have important directions to share, teaching that everyone is equally made in God's image reminds me not to believe only in my own expertise. I follow the caution at the end of Hillel's text: “Do not believe [only] in yourself until the day of your death.” This humility may help us all to find a new path forward, lit by the divine and humbled sparks in each of us.

Rabbi **Jordana Schuster Battis** is the director of K-12 curriculum at Temple Beth Shalom in Needham, Mass. (tbsmayim.org), where the faculty members she coaches are referred to as “Jewish Learning Guides” and are charged with bringing depth of relationship and depth of content to their students.

Jewish sensibilities are approaches to living and learning that permeate Jewish culture. The ideas, values, emotions, and behaviors they express, emanating from Jewish history, stories, and sources, provide inspiration and guidance that help us to respond creatively and thoughtfully to life's challenges and opportunities. Sensibilities are culturally informed senses or memes. In anticipation of the presidential election, *Sh'ma* examines the many meanings of the line from *Pirkei Avot*, "Al tifrosh min hatzibur..." "Do not separate yourself from the community." Next month, we will explore the notion of *tochecha*, or rebuke.

Election Pivot: Can We Find Common Ground?

Stosh Cotler

I look forward to presidential elections, not for the horserace atmosphere that tends to be the obsession of the press, but because an election offers opportunities when the nation as a whole can debate big ideas and consider the direction in which the country should head. Sometimes, elections strengthen how the country sees itself as a community. Sad to say, 2016 is not one of those years. Rather, this election cycle has seen the notion of national community fragmenting. Instead of debating disparate policy proposals that speak in a language of shared values and commitments, we are debating those fundamental values and commitments. While American political life has always had its xenophobic and racist elements, we are experiencing a new level of terrifying rhetoric, with explicit and implicit calls from the top of the ticket for violence toward and arrest of political opponents. Given this deeply unsettling

moment, what notions of community might be helpful to those of us looking to rebuild a sense of togetherness?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has pointed out three terms in classical Hebrew for community: *tzibur*, *kehillah*, and *edah*. *Edah* comes from the Hebrew root *ayin-dalet*, meaning "witness," which implies that a community is a group of people who have all witnessed something. An *edah* is a community that has a shared experience and a shared way of witnessing or viewing the world. For example, Jews function as a community, an *edah*, when we recall our collective exodus from Egypt.

Tzibur comes from the Hebrew root *tzadi-bet-resh*, meaning to "pile-up." It refers simply to a group of people who happen to be in close physical proximity. A densely populated city (or a congressional district) might include people with no collective experience of the world or shared sense of identity, but when they are collected together, they create some semblance of community. For example, the

person leading prayers for a quorum — who may or may not know one another — is called a "*shaliach tzibur*," or an "emissary of the community."

Finally, *kehillah* comes from the root *kuf-hei-lamed*, meaning "to assemble, or gather." It is also related to the word for voice, *kol*, as in a group that had been "called together" for a specific collective purpose. A synagogue is often referred to as "*kehillah kedoshah*," or "holy community."

While the architects of American democracy had limited views of citizenship (white, male, landholders), they recognized specific dangers that could result from a democratic system based on simple majority rule. Creating a democracy with winners and losers could break down the sense of shared community and could lead to what John Adams and Alexis de Tocqueville called a "tyranny of the majority." The solution embedded in the Bill of Rights was to establish a clear set of rights that were not subject to majority approval — and the ability of later generations to expand those rights beyond the initial elite class is among its key strengths. While both conservative and communitarian critics argue that American culture's focus on individual rights can have the effect of eroding a collective sense of community, others, including philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and sociologist C. Wright Mills, argue that it is those very notions of and commitments to individual rights that give such a diverse nation a collective sense of identity.

In normal election years, we could say that political debates between the right and left revolve around competing definitions of and concerns about community. Some conservatives are concerned that a diversifying country and a commitment to multiculturalism will erode the national sense of community as expressed in that *edah*, that common historical story. Some progressives argue that a common historical story is less important than building a *kehillah* — a nation with a clear sense of collective purpose. And some independents and pragmatists simply are interested in what could be the best outcome for the *tzibur* — a group of people who happen to live in physical proximity.



"Mahane Yehuda Market, a Meeting Place," by Dorit Jordan Dotan
I took this photograph to show the diversity in community found in places such as a market. The picture uses a "cube" to isolate some of the public, showing that community boundaries are illusive." Dorit Jordan Dotan, Jerusalem

But in this election season, as our collective conversation breaks down, my hope is that we can pivot to find common cause with all people who are committed to a vision of a country that works to transform communities for the better, rather than remain stymied in a perpetual state of siege and division. Our collective dignity, safety, and prosperity depend on it.

Stosh Cotler is the CEO for Bend the Arc: A Jewish Partnership for Justice (bendthearc.us), as well as Bend the Arc Jewish Action. She first joined Bend the Arc in 2003 to develop and direct the Selah Leadership Program, which has trained more than 300 influential progressive change-makers. Since 2013, as CEO, she has raised the organization's public profile and launched Bend the Arc Jewish Action PAC, the only Jewish PAC exclusively focused on a domestic, progressive agenda. The *Forward* featured Cotler in its "14 Jewish Women To Watch in 2014" list and again in the annual "Forward 50" list of Jews who have had the most impact on the national conversation. In 2015, the Center for American Progress named her as one of its "15 Faith Leaders to Watch." She has represented Bend the Arc on MSNBC and NBC, and in the *Washington Post*, *Politico*, and the *New York Times*.

'Jewish Community': Who's In, Who's Out?

Lex Rofes

The Jewish community.

Over and over again, many in the Jewish world use a definite article — "the" — in discussing the landscape of contemporary American Judaism. While we might not give it a second thought, this "the" is not trivial. Specifically, it is utilized to delineate two distinct sets of Jewish people: those who are involved in or affiliated with American Jewish institutions, and those who are not. Honing in on this subtle phrase, along with the ways in which many of us frequently use it, helps to illuminate some of the most important tensions that are manifest in contemporary Judaism.

Consider one of the more prominent political debates of our time — Israel-Palestine. Few individuals immersed in this issue

would deny that American Jewry is divided on this subject. And when I scroll through my Facebook newsfeed, I see this diversity on a daily basis. On some friends' timelines, AIPAC statements predominate, and for others, *Haaretz* op-eds and IfNotNow events are a fixture. Both groups include a healthy percentage of Jews who are deeply involved in Jewish communal institutions and others who are not.

And yet, I have been told on numerous occasions that my views — leaning toward the left on Israel — separate me from *the* Jewish community. I've been asked to mute my political thoughts when building an adult education program or teaching children — a suggestion that these views are 'less Jewish' and unwelcome.

My anecdotal experiences are mirrored in the communal infrastructure when some federations or community relations councils, for example, assert that a smaller spectrum of beliefs about Israel constitutes "American Jewish opinion." And even though a recent Pew Research Center poll indicates that American Jews hold a wide variety of opinions about Israel, only a narrow span of "pro-Israel" viewpoints are acceptable. In other words, many institutions differentiate between the viewpoints held by individual American Jews and those held by *the* Jewish community. This paradigm puts certain Jews outside *the* community.

This leads us to a broader question. If there is such a thing as *the* Jewish community, who is part of it? Who is not? Who defines the narrative? Do particular communal institutions define the boundaries of acceptable Jewish belief and practice, or should "Jewish opinion" be understood as a broader spectrum of all Jewish opinion?

Historically, many of our most powerful evolutions and revolutions were driven by individuals whose perspectives were outside the spectrum of acceptable opinion for their time. Figures ranging from Mordecai Kaplan to Baruch Spinoza were deemed heretical in their respective eras. Now, their teachings are discussed at some of our most established rabbinic seminars. From the founders of rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Temple to the

maskilim (leaders of the "Jewish enlightenment") a few hundred years ago, to the leaders of Jewish Renewal over the past few decades, change has been cultivated and nurtured by radical movements that were initially understood to be 'fringe' elements outside of, or separate from, the community.

As I study to become a rabbi, I hope our Jewish communities will be imbued with tradition and invention, where Jewish individuals will not feel pushed out of the community or compelled to exit it and distance themselves. Rather than privileging centralized Jewish institutions, let's give a wider swath of Jews the privilege to shape Judaism themselves, drawing on the full corpus of Jewish wisdom.

Lex Rofes serves as strategic initiatives coordinator for the Institute for the Next Jewish Future and as co-host of its podcast, "Judaism Unbound" (JudaismUnbound.com). He is a second-year rabbinic student through ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal's rabbinic program.

The Myth of a Cohesive, United, American Jewish Community

Matthew Boxer

When my students ask me about the American Jewish community, I have to remember that they're asking about multiple constructs — various types of smaller communities defined by denomination, interest, region, or other factors. These students know their own communities, defined by certain touchstones — where they grew up, where they studied, where they live now, where they choose to attend services, who was in their youth group, who rode on their Birthright Israel bus, who runs in similar activist circles, and so on. But they often must be reminded that *their* experience may not be typical, that "the American Jewish community" is not a single entity, but a conglomeration of disparate entities with sometimes cooperative and sometimes competing goals.

The last time American Jewry operated as a cohesive, united community may have been when a small group of Jewish refugees

alighted in New Amsterdam in search of refuge from the Inquisition. A wide swath of sociological literature — much of it derived from sociologist Louis Wirth's observations of Jewish immigrants in the 1930s — demonstrates that as a single group grows too large for all members to know each other deeply and as the group increasingly comes into contact with other groups, each group will begin to differentiate into subcultures based on shared norms, values, interests, and the degree to which its members wish to incorporate themselves into or isolate themselves from a wider culture. More heterogeneous populations often foster a greater number of subcultures, each with its own institutions and organizations serving similar functions, but dedicated to serving the specific needs of its constituency. And identifying with a particular subculture inherently prioritizes connections with those who share that subculture's orientation. Reflecting American society more generally, American Jewry has become ideologically polarized around issues of religion and secularity, support for and opposition to both the State of Israel and its policies, last summer's debate over the Iran nuclear deal, and more.

The notion of a generally cohesive community is little more than a myth. Although the community has united in common cause on several occasions — most notably to obtain reparations for Holocaust survivors and demand a full reckoning of the perpetrators' crimes, celebrating the renewal of Jewish sovereignty and supporting the fledgling State of Israel, and rescuing threatened Jewish communities in Ethiopia and the Soviet Union — these are unusual examples of the American Jewish community at its united best.

As Jews living in North America, we do not have consensus on several issues — notably, whether children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers are counted as Jews, whether conversions supervised by non-Orthodox (and even some Orthodox) rabbis are valid, and whether one can be simultaneously a loyal supporter of Israel and a critic of its treatment of the Palestinians. Is that consensus important? Necessary?

We are simultaneously strengthened and challenged by our ability as a community to accept more than one interpretation of what it means to be Jewish. We can participate in communal affairs through religious observance and/or ethnic or cultural pride; by both remembering our own history of persecution and working to protect others from a similar fate; and by celebrating Israel and also criticizing it. Jewish tradition requires that we debate opposing views in order to sharpen our own thinking and build bridges between different segments of our community. If we believe our own rhetoric about Jewish continuity, we — particularly our leaders — must follow this tradition and not condemn or alienate those who oppose the status quo. If, as social psychologist George Herbert Mead said, "society is unity in diversity," it is the diversity of our many American Jewish communities that gives us the strength to unite when it matters most.

Matthew Boxer is an assistant research professor at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, where he teaches in the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program. He is currently writing a book about the effects of Jewish community size on Jewish identity.

How We Gather: Millennials Creating Caring Communities

Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston

Most people acknowledge that Millennials (people born between 1981 and 1997) are less religiously affiliated than people born longer ago in the past. Nearly one-third of American Millennials do not belong to a faith community and only 10 percent are looking for one. Though many are atheists or agnostics, the majority are less able to articulate their sense of spirituality, with many falling back on the label "spiritual but not religious." Sociologists label this group the "Nones" — those who, when offered a choice of religious affiliation, choose "none of the above."

Rather than a move toward secularization, we seem to be witnessing a paradigmatic

Who defines community?

*What happens when
our tzibur holds a set of
assumptions and beliefs
that we no longer hold?*

shift from an institutional to a personal understanding of spirituality. As sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell explain, unaffiliated Americans "reject conventional religious affiliation, while not entirely giving up their religious feelings."

During the course of our research into how Millennials build communities of meaning and belonging (published in the reports "How We Gather" and "Something More"), we found that while Millennials are disinclined to join faith communities that have a religious creed as the threshold, they are looking for spirituality and community in combination — qualities they deem essential for a meaningful life.

Young people long for a sense of communal belonging. Feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression continue to increase — with suicide the third-leading cause of death among the young. While traditional religion struggles to attract young people, this age cohort is looking elsewhere with increasing urgency.

We are finding unlikely centers of community springing up across the country. For example, the more than 15,000 CrossFit gyms, with their famously tough workouts, serve not only as the locus for physical transformation, but also as places in which to build strong social ties that can be called on for support in times of trial. The evangelical-like enthusiasm of CrossFit members is paired with an accountability that works to hold participants to a higher standard of living. Elsewhere, co-living and co-working startups offer places for Millennials to explore their creativity and purpose. Through weekend-long "hackathons" where individuals come together to solve a shared

software-development problem, to after-work art classes, young people are creating their own spaces of meaning and belonging.

Though technology facilitates connection, these communities grow organically, largely through word of mouth. Often, the founders of these new communities were themselves looking for a space in which to belong and thrive, and they didn't find what they were looking for. The entrepreneurial spirit is deeply embedded in this landscape of innovation.

Overwhelmingly, the organizations we've been researching use secular language while mirroring many of the functions fulfilled by religious community. We've identified six themes that are strikingly consistent: personal transformation, social transformation, purpose finding, creativity, accountability, and, of course, community. Clearly, these themes are not at all new — religious traditions have been seeking to offer them for centuries — but the ways in which they are finding expression are new. Innovative communities, such as the candlelit spin class SoulCycle and the cross-country train journey the Millennial Trains Project are echoing religious practices of pilgrimage, worship, a liturgical cycle, confession, and textual learning with a modern twist. And innovative Jewish communities, such as Mishkan Chicago or Gather the Jews in Washington, D.C. are more aligned with these secular counterparts than they are with traditional synagogues, as

they depend less on a house of worship and more on a network of creative and constantly changing participants who co-create their own experiences.

On the leadership front, increasingly, innovative community leaders are encouraging an ethos of care for self and others and a mindset of abundance. They argue, explicitly or implicitly, that each person is a change maker with the opportunity — if not the responsibility — to make change for the better. And making change means making connections, both broadly in the world and deeply at home.

For religious institutions and leaders, these trends often seem bewildering and frustrating. Yet we see enormous opportunities to engage with the rising communities. Acknowledging that communities are sometimes built in unusual spaces, leaders could encourage friendship, promote neighborhood welfare, and nurture creativity in venues that we often overlook. They might yet contribute to the wellbeing and spiritual growth of the rising generation.

Casper ter Kuile and **Angie Thurston** are Ministry Innovation Fellows at the Harvard Divinity School. Their reports, "How We Gather," on secular communities, and "Something More," on religiously affiliated communities, are available at howwegather.org.

Editor-in-Chief
Susan Berrin

Founding Editor
Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, z"l

Design
Emily Rich

Contact
info@shma.com

For editorial inquiries, contact
sberrin@shma.com

Advisory Board
Rachel Brodie
Richard Hirsh
Jill Jacobs
Ari Y. Kelman
Shaul Magid
Lee Moore
Danya Ruttenberg
Robert J. Saferstein
Jon Woocher

Sh'ma and *Sh'ma Now* are trademarks of the Sh'ma Institute, an independent nonprofit supported by Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah.

Consider & Converse

A Guide to “*Al Tifrosh min Hatzibur*”
“Do Not Separate Yourself from the
Community”

Introduction

Sh'ma Now curates conversations on a single theme rooted in Jewish tradition and the contemporary moment. At the heart of this issue of *Sh'ma Now* is the theme of “*Al tifrosh min hatzibur* — Do not separate yourself from the community.” The perspectives shared in these pages are meant to be expansive — to inspire reflections on Judaism and possibility in ways you may not have considered before. They aim to hold discord. We hope that the richness and diversity of these essays will show you new perspectives that are personally meaningful and edifying.

Sh'ma Now has never viewed learning or “meaning-making” as solely an individual activity. That’s why we have included this guide, which is specifically designed to help you consider the idea of going forth independently or with others, formally and informally.

How to Begin

This guide offers a variety of suggestions, including activities and conversation prompts for individual contemplation and informal or more structured conversations. We suggest that you use this guide to share reflections and thoughts over a Shabbat meal, or, for those who are more adventurous, to lead a planned, structured conversation, inviting a small group of friends and family to your home or to a coffee shop. If you would like more information about ways in which this journal might be used, please contact Susan Berrin, *Sh'ma Now* editor-in-chief, at SBerrin@shma.com. You can also print out a PDF of the entire issue at <http://forward.com/shma-now/>.

Guidelines for Discussion

If you wish to hold a structured conversation, the following guidelines may help you to create a space that allows for honest personal exploration through sharing:

- Create a sense of shared purpose that can foster the kind of internal reflection that happens through group conversation.
- Remind participants of simple ground rules for conversations. For example: Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other’s comments. Make room for everyone to speak. Step into or away from the conversation appropriately. No one participant should dominate the conversation. Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts.
- For each of the questions below, we recommend that you print out the article in question, or provide the link to it, and we ask that you to take a moment to read it in print or on screen, before the conversation begins.
- Allow people a few minutes to absorb the article, perhaps even to read it a second time, before moving into the discussion.

Consider & Converse

A Guide to “*Al Tifrosh min Hatzibur*”
“Do Not Separate Yourself from the
Community”

Interpretive Questions

can focus the reader on the ideas in the articles.

- Rabbi [Aaron Potek](#) [page 1] shares several notions of community that Hillel the elder made famous: “*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*.” Do not separate yourself from the community.” Potek outlines three ways of understanding this verse: as an individual, interpersonally, and as part of the whole of Israel, *klal Yisrael* — sometimes referred to as Jewish peoplehood. Are we, as Jews, defined by our religion — or through a lens of nationhood, or by a common ethical foundation? What do we hold in common with other Jews — that makes for a sense of abiding community?
- [Stosh Cotler](#) [page 3] explores three interpretations of the word “community” in Hebrew: “*edah*,” “*tzibur*,” and “*kehillah*.” Against this backdrop, she considers the foundation of American democracy: “While some political philosophers believe American culture’s focus on individual rights has the effect of eroding a collective sense of community, others believe that it is those very notions of and commitments to individual rights that give such a diverse nation a collective sense of identity.” What, then, does it mean to be part of a community that elects its leaders? And what does it mean to be faithful to a community — one that is greater and larger than one’s own imaginings — during an election season?
- [Matthew Boxer](#) [page 4] looks at whether the idea of a cohesive Jewish community is a myth. How do Jews, with the breadth of experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs, cohere as a people? Is it only in times of crisis that we come together, putting aside our differences? How do you — as an American Jew — respond to the acclamations of others speaking on your behalf? Can you imagine any conditions that would make it a good thing to separate yourself from the community? What would those conditions be?

Reflective Questions

can help integrate the ideas in these articles with one’s own sense of self.

- [Lex Rofes](#) [page 4] writes about feeling estranged from Jewish community — especially in conversations about Israel/Palestine. He has experienced moments, both as an individual and as a teacher, when his opinions were not welcomed in Jewish discourse. Have you felt pushed away from community? If so, when, and what happened? Did you seek out alternate communities where you would feel more welcomed? What helped you to re-engage with community?
- [Casper ter Kuile](#) and [Angie Thurston](#) [page 5] [see <http://forward.com/shma-now/>] explore the dynamics of community through the eyes of Millennials (born between 1981 and 1997). They write that young people “long for a sense of communal belonging” and that they are finding “centers of community springing up across the country” in unlikely places. The authors identify six themes that consistently resonate with Millennials: “personal transformation, social transformation, purpose finding, creativity, accountability, and community.” How might Jewish leaders today creatively invite young people into communities based on these six engaging principles? What is the relationship between “making change” and “making connection”?

Consider & Converse

A Guide to “*Al Tifrosh min Hatzibur*”
“Do Not Separate Yourself from the
Community”

- In *NiSh'ma*, [page 2] three writers explore the verse from Hillel in *Pirkei Avot*: “*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*” — “Do not separate yourself from community.” To illustrate the importance of living in community, one of the commentators, [Rabbi Yoshi Fenton](#), draws upon a talmudic verse with a core — and notable — teaching: “Beit Hillel did not refrain from marrying the children of Beit Shammai and Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying the children of Beit Hillel.” (*BT Yevamot* 14a) How do you understand this teaching? What do we draw from it in terms of how we are to resolve — or put aside — fundamental differences?