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Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility.
Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving.

The Spirit of Community

Vayakhel

What do you do when your people have just made a Golden Calf, run riot, and lost their sense of ethical and spiritual direction? How do you restore moral order – not just then in the days of Moses, but even now? The answer lies in the first word of today's parsha: *Vayakhel*. But to understand this, we have to retrace two journeys that were among the most fateful in the modern world.

The story begins in the year 1831 when two young men, both in their twenties - one from England, the other from France - set out on voyages of discovery that would change both of them, and eventually our collective understanding of the world. The Englishman was Charles Darwin. The Frenchman was Alexis de Tocqueville. Darwin's journey aboard the *Beagle* took him eventually to the Galapagos Islands where he began to think about the origin and evolution of species. Tocqueville's journey was to investigate a phenomenon that became the title of his book: *Democracy in America*.

Although the two men were studying completely different things, the one zoology and biology, the other politics and sociology, as we will see, they came to strikingly similar conclusions – the same conclusion God taught Moses after the episode of the Golden Calf.

Darwin, as we know, made a series of discoveries that led him to the theory known as natural selection. Species compete for scarce resources and only the best-adapted survive. The same, he believed, was true of humans. But this left him with serious problem: If evolution is the struggle to survive, if the strong win and the weak go to the wall, then all ruthlessness should prevail. But this is not the case. All societies value altruism. People esteem those who make sacrifices for the sake of others. This, in Darwinian terms, doesn't seem to make sense at all, and he knew it.

The bravest, most sacrificial people, he wrote in *The Descent of Man*, "would on average perish in larger number than other men." A noble man "would often leave no offspring to inherit his noble nature." It seems scarcely possible, he wrote, that virtue "could be increased through natural selection, that is, by survival of the fittest."¹

It was Darwin's greatness that he saw the answer, even though it contradicted his general thesis. Natural selection operates at the level of the individual. It is as individual men and women that we pass on our genes to the next generation. But civilisation works at the level of the group. As he put it:

¹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, Princeton University Press, 1981, pp. 158-84.

A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to give aid to each other and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection."

How to get from the individual to the group was, he said, "at present much too difficult to be solved."² The conclusion was clear even though biologists to this day still argue about the mechanisms involved.³ We survive as groups. One person versus one lion: lion wins. Ten people against one lion: the lion may lose. *Homo sapiens*, in terms of strength and speed, is a poor player when ranked against the outliers in the animal kingdom. But human beings have unique skills when it comes to creating and sustaining groups. We have language: we can communicate. We have culture: we can pass on our discoveries to future generations. Humans form larger and more flexible groups than any other species, while at the same time leaving room for individuality. We are not ants in a colony or bees in a hive. Humans are the community-creating animal.

Meanwhile in America, Alexis de Tocqueville, like Darwin, faced a major intellectual problem he felt driven to solve. His problem, as a Frenchman, was to try to understand the role of religion in democratic America. He knew that the United States had voted to separate religion from power by way of the First Amendment, the separation of church and state. So religion in America had no power. He assumed that it had no influence either. What he discovered was precisely the opposite:

"There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America."⁴

**"Humans are the
community-
creating animal."**

This did not make any sense to him at all, and he asked various Americans to explain it to him. They all gave him essentially the same answer. Religion in America (we are speaking of the early 1830s, remember) does not get involved in politics. He asked clergymen why not. Again they were unanimous in their answer. Politics is divisive. Therefore if religion were to become involved in politics, it too would be divisive. That is why religion stayed away from party political issues.

Tocqueville paid close attention to what religion actually did in America, and he came to some fascinating conclusions. It strengthened marriage, and he believed that strong marriages were essential to free societies. He wrote:

"As long as family feeling is kept alive, the opponent of oppression is never alone."⁵

It also led people to form communities around places of worship. It encouraged people in those communities to act together for the sake of the common good. The great danger in a democracy, said Tocqueville, is individualism. People come to care about themselves, not about others. As for the others, the danger is that people will leave their welfare to the government, a process that ends in the loss of liberty as the State takes on more and more of the responsibility for society as a whole.

What protects Americans against these twin dangers, he said, is the fact that, encouraged by their religious convictions, they form associations, charities, voluntary organisations, what in Judaism we call *chevrot*. At first bewildered, and then charmed, Tocqueville noted how quickly Americans formed local groups to deal with the problems in their lives. He called this the "art of association," and said about it that it was "the apprenticeship of liberty."

² Ibid., p. 166.

³ This is the argument between E. O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins. See Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, New York: Liveright, 2012. And the review by Richard Dawkins in *Prospect Magazine*, June 2012.

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, abridged with an introduction by Thomas Bender, (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), I:314.

⁵ Ibid., I:340.

All of this was the opposite of what he knew of France, where religion in the form of the Catholic Church had much power but little influence. In France, he said:

“I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.”⁶

So religion safeguarded the “habits of the heart” essential to maintaining democratic freedom. It sanctified marriage and the home. It guarded public morals. It led people to work together in localities to solve problems themselves rather than leave it to the government. If Darwin discovered that man is the community-creating animal, Tocqueville discovered that religion in America is the community-building institution.

It still is. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam became famous in the 1990s for his discovery that more Americans than ever are going ten-pin bowling, but fewer are joining bowling clubs and leagues. He took this as a metaphor for a society that has become individualistic rather than community-minded. He called it *Bowling Alone*.⁷ It was a phrase that summed up the loss of “social capital,” that is, the extent of social networks through which people help one another.

Years later, after extensive research, Putnam revised his thesis. A powerful store of social capital still exists and it is to be found in places of worship. Survey data showed that frequent church- or synagogue-goers are more likely to give money to charity, regardless of whether the charity is religious or secular. They are also more likely to do voluntary work for a charity, give money to a homeless person, spend time with someone who is feeling depressed, offer a seat to a stranger, or help someone find a job. On almost every measure, they are demonstrably more altruistic than non-worshippers.

Their altruism goes beyond this. Frequent worshippers are also significantly more active citizens. They are more likely to belong to community organisations, neighbourhood and civic groups, and professional associations. They get involved, turn up, and lead. The margin of difference between them and the more secular is large.

Tested on attitudes, religiosity as measured by church or synagogue attendance is the best predictor of altruism and empathy: better than education, age, income, gender, or race. Perhaps the most interesting of Putnam’s findings was that these attributes were related not to people’s religious *beliefs* but to the frequency with which they attend a place of worship.⁸

Religion creates community, community creates altruism, and altruism turns us away from self and toward the common good. Putnam goes so far as to speculate that an atheist who went regularly to synagogue (perhaps because of a spouse) would be more likely to volunteer or give to charity than a religious believer who prays alone. There is something about the tenor of relationships within a community that makes it the best tutorial in citizenship and good neighbourliness.

“Altruism turns us away from self and toward the common good.”

What Moses had to do after the Golden Calf was *Vayakhel* - turn the Israelites into a *kehillah*, a community. He did this in the obvious sense of restoring order. When Moses came down the mountain and saw the Calf, the Torah says the people were *pru’ah*, meaning “wild,” “disorderly,” “chaotic,” “unruly,” “tumultuous.” He “saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies” (Ex. 32:25). They were not a community but a crowd. He did it in a more fundamental sense as we see in the rest of the parsha. He began by reminding the people of the laws of Shabbat. Then he instructed them to build the *Mishkan*, the Sanctuary, as a symbolic home for God.

⁶ Ibid., I:319.

⁷ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

⁸ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

Why these two commands rather than any others? Because Shabbat and the *Mishkan* are the two most powerful ways of building community. The best way of turning a diverse, disconnected group into a team is to get them to build something together.⁹ Hence the *Mishkan*. The best way of strengthening relationships is to set aside dedicated time when we focus not on the pursuit of individual self-interest but on the things we share, by praying together, studying Torah together, and celebrating together - in other words, Shabbat. Shabbat and the *Mishkan* were the two great community-building experiences of the Israelites in the desert.

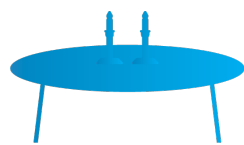
More than this: in Judaism, community is essential to the spiritual life. Our holiest prayers require a *minyan*. When we celebrate or mourn we do so as a community. Even when we confess, we do so together. Maimonides rules:

One who separates himself from the community, even if he does not commit a transgression but merely holds himself aloof from the congregation of Israel, does not fulfil the commandments together with his people, shows himself indifferent to their distress and does not observe their fast days but goes on his own way like one of the nations who does not belong to the Jewish people - such a person has no share in the World to Come.¹⁰

That is not how religion has always been seen. Plotinus called the religious quest, "the flight of the alone to the Alone".¹¹ Dean Inge said religion is what an individual does with his solitude. Jean-Paul Sartre notoriously said: hell is other people. In Judaism, it is *as a community* that we come before God. For us the key relationship is not I-Thou, but We-Thou.

Vayakhel is thus no ordinary episode in the history of Israel. It marks the essential insight to emerge from the crisis of the Golden Calf. We find God in community. We develop virtue, strength of character, and a commitment to the common good in community. Community is local. It is society with a human face. It is not government. It is not the people we pay to look after the welfare of others. It is the work we do ourselves, together.

Community is the antidote to individualism on the one hand and over-reliance on the state on the other. Darwin understood its importance to human flourishing. Tocqueville saw its role in protecting democratic freedom. Robert Putnam has documented its value in sustaining social capital and the common good. And it began in our parsha, when Moses turned an unruly mob into a *kehillah*, a community.



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What can we learn about community-building from Charles Darwin and Alex de Tocqueville?
2. How are Shabbat and the *Mishkan* the antidote for the chaos of the Golden Calf episode?
3. In the absence of a *Mishkan* (or the Temple), how can we find this same antidote in our communities today?



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⁹ See Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together*, (London: Continuum), 2007

¹⁰ Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:11.

¹¹ Andrew Louth, trans., *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 50.