



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI • ויקהל-פקודי

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צז

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel. "I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks zt"l in 5773 (2012–2013). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

Three Types of Community

A long drama had taken place. Moses had led the people from slavery to the beginning of the road to freedom. The people themselves had witnessed God at Mount Sinai, the only time in all history when an entire people became the recipients of revelation. Then came the disappearance of Moses for his long sojourn at the top of the mountain, an absence which led to the Israelites' greatest collective sin, the making of the Golden Calf. Moses returned to the mountain to plead for forgiveness, which was granted.

Its symbol was the second set of Tablets. Now life must begin again. A shattered people must be rebuilt. How does Moses proceed? The verse with which the sedra begins contains the clue:

Moses assembled all the community of Israel and said to them: "These are the

things God has commanded you to do."

Shemot 35:1

The verb *vayakhel* – which gives the sedra its name – is crucial to an understanding of the task in which Moses is engaged. At its simplest level it serves as a motiv-word, recalling a previous verse. In this case the verse is obvious:

When the people saw that Moses was long delayed in coming down the mountain, they assembled around Aaron and said to him, "Get up, make us gods to go before us."

Shemot 32:1

Moses' act is what the kabbalists called a *tikkun*: a restoration, a making-good-again, the redemption of a past misdemeanour. Just as the sin was committed by the people acting as a *kahal* or *kehillah*, so atonement was to be

achieved by their again acting as a *kehillah*, this time by making a home for the Divine presence as they earlier sought to make a substitute for it. Moses orchestrates the people for good, as they had once been assembled for bad (The difference lies not only in the purpose but in the form of the verb, from passive in the case of the Calf to active in the case of Moses. Passivity allows bad things to happen – “Wherever it says ‘and it came to pass’ it is a sign of impending tragedy”). (Megillah 10b) Proactivity is the defeat of tragedy:

“Wherever it says, ‘And there will be’ is a sign of impending joy.”

Bamidbar Rabbah 13

At a deeper level, though, the opening verse of the sedra alerts us to the nature of community in Judaism.

In classical Hebrew there are three different words for community: *edah*, *tzibbur*, and *kehillah*, and they signify different kinds of association.

Edah comes from the word *ed*, meaning “witness.” The verb *ya’ad* carries the meaning of “to appoint, fix, assign, destine, set apart, designate or determine.” The modern Hebrew noun *te’udah* means “certificate, document, attestation, aim, object, purpose, or mission.” The people who constitute an *edah* have a strong sense of collective identity. They have witnessed the same things. They are bent on the same purpose. The Jewish people become

an *edah* – a community of shared faith – only on receiving the first command:

““Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household”.

Shemot 12:3

An *edah* can be a gathering for bad as well as good. The Israelites, on hearing the report of the spies, lose heart and say they want to return to Egypt. Throughout, they are referred to as the *edah* (as in “How long will this wicked community grumble against Me?” Bamidbar 14:27). The people agitated by Korach in his rebellion against Moses and Aaron’s authority is likewise called an *edah* (“If one man sins, will You be angry with the whole community? Bamidbar 16:22). Nowadays the word is generally used for an ethnic or religious subgroup. An *edah* is a community of the like-minded. The word emphasises strong identity. It is a group whose members have much in common.

By contrast the word *tzibbur* – it belongs to Mishnaic rather than biblical Hebrew – comes from the root *tz-b-r* meaning “to heap” or “pile up”. (Bereishit 41:49) To understand the concept of *tzibbur*, think of a group of people praying at the Kotel. They may not know each other. They may never meet again. But for the moment, they happen to be ten people in the same place at the same time, and thus constitute a quorum for prayer. A *tzibbur* is a community in the

minimalist sense, a mere aggregate, formed by numbers rather than any sense of identity. A *tzibbur* is a group whose members may have nothing in common except that, at a certain point, they find themselves together and thus constitute a “public” for prayer or any other command which requires a *minyan*.

A *kehillah* is different from the other two kinds of community. Its members are different from one another. In that sense it is like a *tzibbur*. But they are orchestrated together for a collective undertaking – one that involves making a distinctive contribution. The danger of a *kehillah* is that it can become a mass, a rabble, a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase in which Moses, descending the mountain, sees the people dancing around the Calf:

Moses saw that the people were running wild, for Aaron had let them run out of control and become a laughingstock to their enemies.

Shemot 32:25

The beauty of a *kehillah*, however, is that when it is driven by constructive purpose, it gathers together the distinct and separate contributions of many individuals, so that each can say, “I helped to make this.” That is why, assembling the people on this occasion, Moses emphasises that each has something different to give:

Bring of what is yours an offering to the Lord. Let everyone who is willing bring an offering to the Lord: gold, silver, and bronze . . . And let all among you who are skilled come and make the things that the Lord has commanded.

Shemot 35:5-10

Moses was able to turn the *kehillah* with its diversity into an *edah* with its singleness of purpose, while preserving the diversity of the gifts they brought to God:

So all the community of Israel left Moses’ presence. And they came, everyone whose heart inspired him and whose spirit moved him, and brought an offering for the Lord, to be used for the Tent of Meeting and all its service, and for the sacred vestments. All whose hearts moved them – the men with the women – brought brooches, earrings, signet rings and pendants, all kinds of gold ornaments . . . Everyone who had sky-blue, purple, or scarlet wool . . . Whoever could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it . . . Every skilled woman spun with her own hands, and brought what she had spun . . . All the women whose hearts inspired them used their skill . . . The leaders brought rock crystal stones and other precious stones . . . So the Israelites – all the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work that the Lord, through Moses, had commanded –

brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord.

Shemot 35:20-29

The greatness of the Tabernacle was that it was a collective achievement – one in which not everyone did the same thing. Each gave a different thing. Each contribution was valued – and therefore each participant felt valued. *Vayakhel* – Moses’ ability to forge out of the dissolution of the people a new and genuine *kehillah* – was one of his greatest achievements.

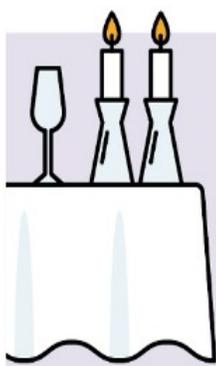
Many years later, Moses, according to the Sages, returned to the theme. Knowing that his career as a leader was drawing to an end, he prayed to God to appoint a successor: “May God, Lord of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a person over the community.” (Bamidbar 27:16) Rashi, following the Sages, explains the unusual

phrase “Lord of the spirits of all flesh” as follows:

He said to Him: Lord of the universe, the character of each person is revealed and known to You – and You know that each is different. Therefore appoint for them a leader who is able to bear with each person as his or her temperament requires.

Rashi on Bamidbar 27:16

To preserve the diversity of a *tzibbur* with the unity of purpose of an *edah* – that is the challenge of *kehillah*-formation, community-building, itself the greatest task of a great leader.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Think about the groups you belong to. Which feel like an *edah*, which are a *tzibbur*, and which are a *kehillah*?
2. Why is it sometimes harder to be part of a *kehillah* than an *edah*?
3. Moshe’s great task was to lead people with different temperaments. What is the key to making a diverse group work well together?

● These questions come from this week’s **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks’ Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/vayakhel/three-types-of-community/>