

The Makings of a Community

Which individuals comprise a community? In Judaism, there are a couple different definitions of this. One is from Moses speaking to Pharaoh and proclaiming *בנערנו ובזקננו נלך*, we will leave Egypt with both our young and our old.¹ In other words, everyone is part of the Israelite community and should go out together from Egypt. Another definition is more exclusive. In explaining the phrase *שלש פעמים בשנה יראה כל זכורך*, three times a year all males shall be seen before G-d (in Jerusalem)², Talmud Tractate Hagigah begins *הכל חייבין בראייה חוץ מחרש שוטה וקטן וטומטום ואנדרוגינוס ונשים ועבדים שאינם משוחררים, החיגר והסומא*³ “all are obligated to be seen at the Temple-that is except for a deaf-mute,⁴ an imbecile, a minor, one with neither or with both genitalia, women, unfreed slaves, one who is limp, blind, sick or elderly and one who cannot walk on his own (or ride on his father’s shoulders.)

¹ Exodus 13:9

² Exodus 23:17

³ Mishnah Hagigah 1:1

⁴ If you were deaf you couldn’t communicate and thus were also mute. Now of course the two are not intertwined.

As celebrating the holidays is so essential a component for every Jew, why were so many people excluded in Temple times? Aren't we supposed to protect the vulnerable rather than exclude them from our most festive times of the year?

In order to understand why this is the case, we need to look back at what society was like in Ancient Israel. We examine a time with no cars, where journeys to Jerusalem could take as much as two weeks of walking and sleeping outside. Someone who was limp, sick or blind would not be able to make that journey. Further, those who went on the journey would be vulnerable to the elements, whether the hot sun before and after Shavuot or the chilly nights before and after Sukkot (never mind the snow ☺). You needed to be in peak physical condition in order to make it. In addition, as the verse says males (women were excluded from positive, time-bound commandments),⁵ anyone who was not easily identifiable as a male was excluded.

⁵ Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 29a

This is different from other commandments such as Hakhel where G-d told Moses ⁶ וְטָרַף אֶת הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְנָשִׁים וְטָרַף or Sinai where all of Israel was present. There however all of Israel was in one location whereas now they are scattered.

Nowadays that we are no longer required to gather in Jerusalem for pilgrimage festivals as there is no Temple, has the meaning of community changed? I would argue that it has. While Israel remains scattered, we each form our own unique community like we have at the Jericho Jewish Center. As these are local, all members of the community can join and congregate together during holidays. Furthermore, the distance separating people has shrunk because of transportation advancements, such as airplanes and trains. In addition, technological advancements make it possible for people who at one time were unable to fully participate in rituals to now become full participants. I had a blind neighbor in rabbinical school who is now becoming a rabbi in her own right. There is a rabbinical school for the deaf and there are

⁶ Deuteronomy 31:10

programs to help those who have any variety of challenges. This enables everyone to fully participate in our community.

As we celebrate the Passover holiday, one in which many have been reunited with family members they might not have seen for quite some time, let us strive to make each community we are part of as inclusive as possible. May we truly feel free when our community is one which is completely welcoming to others, accepting them as they are.