

Vayakhel-Pekudei

Over the course of this week, I got the impression that we are slowly, gradually putting COVID behind us. What an immensely trying period we have endured. Isolated from one another, we have congregated – as we do today – through Zoom. How will we feel when we are permitted to congregate again in person?

This week, we read a double parsha, Vayakhel-Pekudei. The first verse states,

וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־כָּל־עַמֶּת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יְקֹנֵק לַעֲשׂוֹת אֲתֶם:

"Moses then convoked the whole Israelite community..." (35:1).

The verb used for “convoke” is vayakhel – not incidentally the name of our parsha. Vayakhel’s root is koof-heh-lamed. This is the root for the word kehilla, which means congregation.

I hope we will learn to appreciate congregating in the Post-COVID period. We need to bring a definite intention to gatherings in the post-COVID era. That intention will be grounded in the painful experience of isolation that we have undergone. We will learn through that not to take the opportunity to gather for granted. In order to achieve that kind of consciousness, we need to prepare ourselves.

Interestingly, the root word koof-heh-lamed appeared in a parsha that we read just a few weeks ago but in a completely different context.

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן־הַהָר וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּמָה | עֲשֵׂה־לָנוּ

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron...” (32:1).

Here the kind of gathering that is described is a kind of mob. Israel descends upon Aaron in Moses's absence and demands that he build them an idol. The use of the same verb in these two contexts brings them into conversation with one another and tells us that the intention determines the worth of a gathering. Gathering is not a good in and of itself. The purpose of the gathering is what dictates whether the gathering is good or not.

When we return to in-person services, we will have to elevate our consciousness so that when we gather, we will cherish that gathering and recognize it as the gift that it is.

The kind of gathering in the first verse I cited is for the sake of worship. What is the mentality that we need to bring in order to properly engage in worship? I think the first quality that we must possess for the sake of worship is an appreciation of our finitude. The Sabbath teaches us that we are not just creators; we are also creatures. The experience of creating, which we engage in during the other six days of the week, can give us a sense of empowerment that can overflow, deceiving us into forgetting that fact. Our finitude is a fact that we cannot forget if we want to engage in proper and meaningful worship.

For me, the focus on my finitude, or to put it more starkly my mortality, places me in the mindset to acknowledge the existence of a Being that is infinite. When I relinquish the illusion of infinitude, I am more capable of recognizing He Who is, in fact, infinite.

The recognition of finitude is one key element of worship, but finitude alone may still leave us feeling insignificant. This is where the joint nature of worship becomes relevant. We can worship alone, but we choose to gather together, and when a number of finite persons gather together before an infinite Presence, then we can enlarge ourselves so that our finitude grows. We are not

encapsulated by our own individual life. By participating in worship with others, we join a collective, a collective that partakes in the same worship as our ancestors. This awareness takes us out of the finitude of our own time and space and brings us into a finitude of a collective, a collective that has undergone the changes of human history. That doesn't make Israel eternal, but it does allow us as persons to reach beyond our selves and associate with a group that has journeyed through the centuries.

What I've described helps us understand better what worship is and that can strengthen us as we gather to participate in it in the post-COVID era. The near death experience we have undergone during COVID should enhance both our sense of our own finitude and the power of being with other people.

As humans, however, our memories can be short. What if just months or a year after COVID has concluded, we forget what we have undergone and lose the importance of intention for the sake of gathering? That is why at this particularly fragile moment, as we stand on the precipice of the close of this painful time, we must re-double our efforts at memory. We need to turn around the frustration we all feel at not being able to gather and make it into appreciation in anticipation of what will soon be our reality.

That reality must be tinged with the appreciation that we cultivate now, during a moment when we can see light at the end of the tunnel but are still in the tunnel.

Together, this group we have formed will have forged a special bond that I hope we will take with us into the sanctuary when we start to gather there again next month. The sight of one another's faces brought us encouragement in the midst of despair. When we see one another in

the flesh, that sense of encouragement will only grow, and that sense of encouragement is what will give our gatherings the purpose they require to constitute meaningful and proper prayer.

Some members of the Jericho Jewish Center have not been with us during these Shabbat morning Zooms. This group *we* have formed will carry them when we return and incorporate them into the collective self that we have formed together.

At that point, we will be able to feel that familiar feeling of belonging and purpose that we lost around this time last year. That's not enough, though. We have to demonstrate that we learned something over the course of this year. The familiar feeling of belonging and purpose must be elevated and enhanced, and I promise you it will if we do the work in these remaining weeks of Zoom to channel our thoughts to appreciation.

Ultimately, what I hope we will achieve is the ability to see one another as being in the image of God. That goal is truly the purpose of worship. Let us prepare ourselves for the time after, the period following COVID, and let us cultivate the intention necessary to make our gathering one grounded in belonging and purpose.