

Vayakhel 5780
How We Gather
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How strange, at a time of physical separation, to be reading this week about *gathering*! In *Parashat Vayakhel*, Moshe notes the people's enthusiasm over building the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), and he gathers them together to remind them that keeping Shabbat is more important than their building project. They must cease creating, bask in the natural world created by God, and rest in holiness with the *Ein Sof*, the Eternal Unfolding of Being.

Moshe gathers his people to make sure the community will keep Shabbat. And here we are this week, separated on Shabbat, on the very day when we love to come together as a *kahal* to worship, celebrate, and deepen our relationships in shared physical presence. As such, I would like to share with you some of my thinking so that you can understand the "Living Torah" we are enacting at Beth Israel Center.

The most important question is: What does our *kahal* need? I believe that first and foremost, we need connection--but not just *any* connection. We need to connect as a *kahal* in ways that reflect our mission:

To be a vibrant, caring spiritual home where we explore and nurture our unique Jewish identities. Together, we create a *kehillah* (community) that is traditional, egalitarian and alive with celebration, learning, prayer and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). At Beth Israel Center, Conservative Judaism resonates with our contemporary lives, while our tradition grounds us meaningfully in the present moment.

In consultation with our Board of Directors, the BIC staff and I laid out a plan that included twice-daily gathering to pray, study Torah, sing, and share our experiences; staying connected through phone calls; and address specific needs that might arise. I am deeply grateful to those of you who stepped up to help us make all of our initial plans a reality while you were also adjusting your own work and home lives to the present reality. People are reciting Kaddish in a legitimate minyan. We are finding solace in our tradition and in one another.

With 2 spirited minyanim every day, engaging many of our members both near and far, online events pre-and-post-Shabbat, materials provided for the day of Shabbat, and more online programming rolling out this week, our combined efforts have allowed us to remain vibrant and alive with celebration (as appropriate), explore a variety of Jewish experiences, and ground ourselves meaningfully throughout each day. We remain committed to caring for one another through a phone calling system and an online needs form that allow us to stay in touch with each other and help each other, and keeps me aware of pressing pastoral needs. Additionally, our Social Justice committee and I are engaged in finding various ways to support the broader community.

Although some synagogues live-stream their Shabbat services, that has not been our practice. Before COVID-19, our Ritual Committee decided to begin studying the issues involved. The outbreak and spread of The Virus forced me to make more immediate decisions about how we can “gather” like our Biblical ancestors did--in ways consistent with who we are as a kahal.

We are an *halachic* shul, which means that our practices are grounded in and in adherence with Jewish law. As a “traditional,” Conservative shul, this means that I determine what practices are “in” or “out” for us, based on my understanding of *Halacha* and the demands of our lives as we are living them, right now. Our tradition is rich in responsiveness to moments of crisis and uncertainty, so there is no fear of being “stuck in the past.” However, what keeps us strong is our rootedness in a particular approach to making decisions, an approach that is methodical, thoughtful, and reasoned.

We come together for community. Those of us who really come first and foremost to daven also daven on their own, at home when necessary. Even if I thought we were ready to start live-streaming, that would not meet our pressing need for community. I don’t believe anyone really wants to sit for 3 ½ hours and watch me drone on, alone, in our empty sanctuary. But we do want to pray and sing together, to hear and learn a bit of Torah, and people want to be able to recite Kaddish in the presence of a minyan.

I drew upon the evolution of answers to the questions we face in order to develop an appropriate response. In 2001, the Conservative rabbinate approved of Jews joining into an existing, in-person minyan. If, for example, you were traveling, or home sick, you could call into an existing minyan and participate. That position, written by Rabbi Avram Reisner and overwhelmingly approved by the Law Committee, bases itself on sources from the *Shulkhan Aruch*. The dispensation to join in remotely was based mostly on *Orakh Hayim* 55 and 589, where we learn that a person may join an existing minyan if

they can see and be seen from a window, and a person may join an existing minyan if the individual can hear the minyan.

Rabbi Reisner's work makes clear that our tradition wants to privilege gathering together over praying privately, and that physical proximity matters. He brings credible support for the idea that being there "virtually" cannot be constituted as being present "actually."

That was my starting point. Then, I invoked two principles, in order: *Pikuach Nefesh* (saving of life), and *Sh'at Hadekhak* (a crisis situation that legitimates a change in standard practice). Since we have prohibited our members from coming to BIC or gathering together in order to preserve life, based on medical advice, we have a clear case of exemption from fulfilling whatever mitzvot we might have fulfilled by gathering together physically. And, while *Pikuach Nefesh* alone does not permit us to convene a virtual minyan without its own legitimate reason, it changes the setting for the decision to one in which it is impossible to convene a minyan of 10 who are together, substantively, in the same room.

That is where I employed *Sh'at Hadekhak*. We have a need not only to daven, and not only to recite *Kaddish*, but to combat the social isolation we know to be a significant cause and exacerbator of unwellness. Modern science is clear on that point. There is an urgency about being together so that we can support one another at this time of crisis, whose far-reaching implications weigh heavily on our members. And, while we could find ways to be together outside of minyan, there is no more fitting way for members of a *kahal* to come together than in prayer.

Key to my understanding of our minyan being "real" is the importance of our being able to see and hear each other. That is why we are Zooming rather than LiveStreaming.

I learned later in the week that Rabbi Yitzhak Zilberstein in Hashukei Hemed provides additional support for my position in his elucidation of *Talmud Bavli Berakhot* 21b, which deals with a case of people who are scattered in a field and cannot see each other. As he explains, those people can constitute a minyan for reciting the Mourners Kaddish. Rabbi Haim Ovadia, in Israel, has used that source to support convening a virtual, real-time minyan. Our experience of the past week has shown that being able to recite *Kaddish* in a *minyan*, and being able to support one another in doing so, has been profoundly helpful in easing our sense of isolation and grounding us in the hope and strength that we need.

After I and every other rabbi I know of made our respective decisions about minyan and began implementing new practices (or not), the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative Movement produced a statement in which they held to their earlier position requiring an in loco minyan of ten. Yet they also allowed for *minyanim* such as we are convening on Zoom, based on *Sh'at Hadekhak*. They state: "In this crisis situation in an area in which civil and/or medical authorities decree that it is unsafe for people gather in person and recommend or order the closure of houses of worship, it is permitted to constitute a *minyan* whose constitutive participants (ten adult Jews) are not located in one physical place." However, they note that only "a few" of those who issued their statement hold that we may actually recite the prayers that require a *minyan* in a virtual gathering. Further, those who hold that it is permissible to do so stipulate that "the participants be able to see and hear each other through virtual means and be able to respond "amen" and other liturgical replies to the prayer leader," like we have been doing in our Zoom minyanim.

There is a rabbinic principle that rabbis must "look and see what your people are doing." We do not make law in a vacuum. I would expand that to say "look and see what your people are needing." I am pleased that other Conservative and Orthodox congregations have looked to see what we, at BIC are doing, and then made similar decisions.

Knowing who we are and what we need must go hand in hand. Let's wind back to *Parashat Vayahkel*, where Moshe adjures his people that they must take a break and rest on Shabbat. No matter how pressing the building of the Tabernacle may be, Shabbat is more important. What was true for our ancestors could not be more true for us, too.

We need Shabbat this week more than ever. May it bring us peace, comfort, and rest from the tumult of news and the demand to do something productive. People in our community are counting on our help. Our strength will be tested. And so, now, we need to rest.

Shabbat shalom um'vorach. May this Shabbat bring peace and blessing to us all.

