

Healing Communities

Ellyse Borghi, Yom Kippur 5777

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Gmar Chatima Tova.

Rambam writes in his Hilchot Teshuva that an essential component of repentance is Vidui – confession. It is in this spirit that I confess to you all that on Rosh HaShanah I really doubted this whole enterprise. If the purpose of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is to reflect on your previous year, make amends for your wrongs and to improve yourself – what on earth are we doing in this room? Surely we would be better off meditating alone on a mountain? Or perhaps it would be a more productive exercise if we spent the day in therapy, analysing ourselves, and resolving to be better people?

But instead, here we are. In a room with a few hundred other people saying out loud how we have done wrong. Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi. We have sinned. Lots of “we” and “us” but what about the “I” and “me” - where is today’s focus on self-improvement, self-development and self-actualisation?

This exact time last year I gave a dvar torah based on my new experiences as a criminal lawyer. This time around I have also recently started new work – as a children’s lawyer. In preparation to start working with some of the most vulnerable Victorians I was recommended a book – it’s called “the Boy who was Raised as a Dog” by Dr Bruce Perry. In this book Dr Perry uses case studies to illustrate important lessons about child development, trauma and healing.

There are many concepts in this book that were revolutionary for me but there is one idea in particular that I want to share today.

There is a concept in social theory about poverty. We normally think of poverty as a lack of money, but there is also social poverty which is known as social exclusion. Often these two issues overlap but they don’t always. Social poverty is when a person’s relationships, social interactions and community

connections are low. For example, social poverty may exist when a person has a poor connection with their family of origin, they may be unemployed, not engaged in education and not participating in group activities such as a sports club, charities, ethnic or faith-based organisations. These are the people who don't have somebody to talk to when they have had a hard day, or who don't have anybody to help when they are moving house. These are the people who have babies but nobody brings them food, these are the people who mourn and grieve alone.

It turns out that social poverty is much harder to overcome than economic poverty. This is seen in Australia in the different experiences of low income migrant populations compared to intergenerational welfare dependent communities. Low income migrants may still be socially wealthy. With the use of their values, social connections and communities each generation is more prosperous and flourishing than the next. Although they may have arrived here with nothing they all work together to rebuild their lives and their communities. Social richness is a pathway out of economic poverty. Conversely, social poverty only serves to entrench economic disadvantage and exclusion.

Community is not only a pathway out of poverty but it is also a key to longevity. There are some places in the world where people consistently live to one hundred years. These places are sometimes called the "blue zones". The Blue Zones are all over the world, in Italy, Greece, Japan Costa Rica and a Seventh Day Adventist area in the US.

There are quite a few things that the people in these places have in common, such as diet and physical activity. But importantly all these places have a strong emphasis on family and community involvement. Human beings are at their best when they are valued and contributing members of their communities.

Rambam in his Hilchot Teshuva lists the people who do not have a place in the world to come. In addition to heretics and apostates he lists "haporsin medarchei hatzibbur" – those who separate themselves from the community. He writes that even though these people have not committed any sins and they have kept the mitzvot because they have broken away from the

community and do not share joy or suffering with them, they are excluded from the world to come.

Similarly Rambam writes that on Yom Kippur it is not only us as individuals who are judged but also whole countries and indeed the world as a single unit. In other words today is a day of reckoning not only for ourselves but also for our communities as a whole.

In his book Dr Perry writes about the therapeutic value of community. He calls it a healing community. As part of his therapy with children who have experienced trauma and neglect he places them within healing communities. These communities are within their schools or social networks. In these spaces the children learn that they are loved and accepted. They experience kindness and patience and forgiveness and in the same way they learn how to treat others with kindness and affection. He writes that treatment with a professional can only go so far if we are not given the opportunity to actually live out our ideal selves with other people. We can meditate on a mountain and set intentions to be compassionate but we are only compassionate when we actually encounter others and are able to put those intentions into action.

Dr Perry writes that “relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love. We need social engagement to reach our full human potential.” He writes further that “you cannot love yourself unless you have been loved and are loved. The capacity to love cannot be developed in isolation.”

In this way I have come to understand what we are all doing here. This room here is social wealth. We have here the tools to be our best selves. I can't become a better person on my own. I need all of your help. We come together to participate in a healing community. We come together to support each other in the practice of self-reflection and in setting intentions for this coming year. But then from tomorrow we still need each other to fulfil these intentions. We need this communal engagement to reach our fullest potential. And in order for us to continue to be our best selves we need to contribute and be part of community. We do this when we are aware of the needs of others and seek to assist. Very seriously ask yourselves if you could take on

responsibilities for visiting people who are ill, for assisting new parents and in comforting mourners. In helping others we become our best selves.

May it be your will Adonai, our god and the god of our forefathers and foremothers that you bless this community with the wisdom and strength to contribute with all of our abilities, to look after each other, to heal and be healed. Amen.