

COMMUNITY BUILDING

A commentary on Parashat Vayakhel

By Leonie Lewis

The key word in *Parashat Vayakhel*, is the word *Vayakhel*. Its causative form indicates that people were being assembled. In this instance, “*Moses gathered or caused to assemble*” the Children of Israel. And this opening verse of the *Parasha* alerts us to the nature of community in Judaism. The root of the verb *Vayakhel* is *Kahal* which means community.

A *kehillah* or *kahal* is a group of people assembled for a given purpose.

Moses assembled the people at this time in order for them to become a community of purpose and industry. He wanted them to build the portable sanctuary and for them to be driven by this common purpose which would shape them into a community.

Community building can thus be positive and constructive but can also cause rebel rousing and be negative and sometimes sadly destructive.

In classical Hebrew there are three different words for community: *edah*, *tzibbur* and *kehillah*; and they signify different kinds of association. A *kehillah* is different from the other two kinds of community. Its members are different from one another.

When and if members of a *kehillah* are to be brought together for a collective undertaking—one that involves making a distinctive contribution, then we feel and see the beauty of a *kehillah*, a community driven by constructive purpose.

The people who constitute an *edah* also have a strong sense of collective identity (*ed* is a witness in modern Hebrew). 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.

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“By contrast, the word *tzibbur* - comes from the root *tz-b-r*, meaning “to heap” or “pile up.” 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” (Rabbi Sacks).

A *kehillah* gathers together the distinct and separate contributions of many individuals, so that each can say, “I helped to make this.”

There is therefore a necessary balance here between two concepts which exist in an inevitable tension: our sense of the independent value of each individual and the vital importance to our lives of meaningful community. “Each person is to bring the gift of her or his own ability and willingness, and all must be woven into a coherent whole. A building is not well-built without careful plans, and a community does not thrive without individuals willing to bring their gifts as they are needed – and not just when the individual feels like it.

Every individual has something to offer and contribute to community and wider society. Those who offer their time for the well-being of society are to be commended but in turn recognise that their volunteering input is reciprocal and that the collective community is the beneficiary.

The teaching of the word *Vayakhel*, is in the detail that the people here are not primarily individuals, but individuals who have become a meaningful collective. *Kehillah* refers primarily to what it means to gather for the purpose of creating sacred space, and, through that act, to create a sense of Place” (Rabbi Sacks).