

**The Art of Gathering**  
**Vayakhel-Pekudei 5781**  
**March 13, 2021**

I vividly remember a conversation that I had with a colleague and friend of mine a year ago in February. He and I live in different states, but we study together each week, and of course we always start by catching up on each other's lives. Before we had even really said hello, he said, "I'd like to read you an email that I just wrote." He had addressed the email to the Rabbinical Assembly, our movement's rabbinic organization, and he was asking for support. He had just met with an epidemiologist who was a member of his congregation. At this point, Covid 19 had just reached the US, and we knew it was only a matter of time before it hit our own communities. His congregant had described for him what we might expect in the near future, and my friend was processing what he had heard. Here is just a small sample of his questions, from an email that he sent on February 26, 2020: "How do we keep track of people if we're all in quarantine? What does home schooling a whole community look like? Is there a halakhic emergency plan for minyans? Can we pray by zoom chat in this kind of case—can this count as a minyan? Are we prepared to offer

zoom classes, long distance education, opportunities for people to do things socially and spiritually and intellectually while in quarantine?”

Remember, at the time, we were living our lives as we always had, and this was the first clear portrait I had heard of what this virus might mean for our lives. I looked at him -- we were on google hangouts at the time -- and I suggested that this sounded like a worst-case scenario, and that as bad as this virus might be, it seemed unlikely that the outcomes he was imagining would fully come to pass. And if they did, I said, we would figure it out, there was no need to get too worked up about it yet.

Of course, we know now that my colleague was right to be concerned, and to ask how we, as a Jewish community, could support each other through the dramatically changed times that we have now experienced together.

The truth was, I just couldn't wrap my mind around the possibility that the world as I knew it would be transformed so completely and quickly, even while I was, to a certain extent, clear-eyed about the fact that this virus was indeed going to reach us, and even as I followed the stories

about how devastating the virus had been in China. It just was too big a change to fully comprehend.

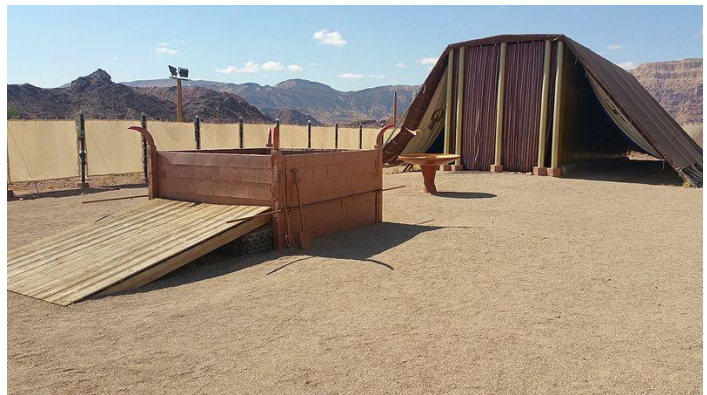
Just a couple of weeks after my conversation with my colleague, our world changed more than most of us could have imagined. Many of us have suffered losses during this time, losses which we will commemorate as a community on April 4, when we gather for Yizkor and hear reflections from community members about losing loved ones during a pandemic. This year has also changed what it has meant to come together with others. One year ago today, on Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei, Shabbat haHodesh, we gathered online for our very first Temple Emunah Shabbat morning Zoom service. Ever since then, many of us have accustomed ourselves to having the majority of our interactions through the medium of computer screens.

Right now, this moment is full of questions about what it means to come together as a community. Some of us can't wait to go back to the way it used to be, while others have expressed that they would always like to be able to Zoom in to services and community events. What does it mean that

we have changed the way we gather? What have we lost -- and what have we gained? What will our gatherings look like in the future?

Gathering is a key way that we as Jews express our Judaism and find meaning through our tradition. Judaism isn't meant to be practiced alone-- without community, or at least someone to share it with, it can be quite challenging to practice Judaism alone over a long period of time.

The theme of gathering pervades this week's Parashah. Its name, Vayakhel, literally means "He gathered together." We read how Moses gathered



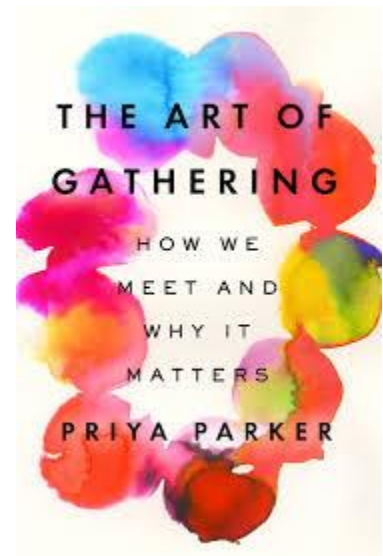
the people together to learn the laws of Shabbat, and to hear the instructions about building the tabernacle which would be a spiritual center for them during their time in the desert. Why does the text specify that Moses gathered the people together? Countless times in the Torah, Moses gives instructions to the people -- so what is special about this moment?

Well, in parashat Vayakhel Moses isn't just imparting law. He's describing two ways in which the people experience sanctity: Sanctity in space, in the form of the tabernacle, and sanctity in time, in the form of Shabbat. Moses is asking people to perform activities that help them to have experiences of holiness, and in order to do that, they must come together. Gathering, in this case, is a key component of how the people find holiness.

This is true for us as well. One of the things that many of us have missed over this past year is sharing Shabbat and holiday meals with each other. Having them with our families or even by ourselves can be lovely, and for some eating together over Zoom is also special, but there's something unique about having, or being, guests at a Shabbat table, or gathering around the table with one's extended family or friends for seder. Something sacred has the potential to happen in those moments when we come together.

Recently, I attended a lecture by Priya Parker at the Rabbinical Assembly's annual convention. Priya Parker is the author of a book called *The Art of Gathering*, and she now has a New York Times Podcast called

“Together Apart.” Her interest has always been in how to create effective, meaningful gatherings, and she learns a lot about this from traditions, like Judaism, that put community at the center. At this lecture, she spoke about what makes for an effective gathering, and shared lessons that hold true regardless of whether the gathering is in person or online.



According to Parker, great gatherings know who and what they are for. They are specific and unique. This does not necessarily mean that they are limited to a particular religion or ethnicity or culture-- a gathering could be specific by being targeted to people who live in a particular place, or who have a particular job, or any number of characteristics that might bring people together. Parker explains that in many cases, what we need are new ways to make our gatherings specific and meaningful, even as we benefit from having a greater variety of perspectives and individuals present.

Anyone who has planned or hosted any sort of event, from a dinner party to a wedding or anything else, knows that it can be easy to spend a lot of time planning what Parker calls the “form” of the event-- we may start thinking that the event will be perfect if we have the best food, the best decorations, the best best entertainment. But people who create powerful experiences know WHY they’re gathering without a preconceived notion of what it will look like-- the form comes later.

Parker suggests that for any gathering, we should ask ourselves the questions: What is a need in your life that you might address by bringing together this specific group of people? Then, we should give the gathering a name, and give it a rule. That can provide the framework for a gathering that accomplishes a specific purpose, and can thereby create meaning for the people who participate. She gave an example of a conversation she had with a reporter, who asked her for help in planning a dinner party. The reporter was stymied at first when Parker asked her why she was having the party -- the real answer was that her editor assigned it to her -- but when pushed,



she decided to make the dinner party for overworked moms to help them relax, and she gave the event a title that reflected that. Her rule was, “Don’t talk about your kids, and if you do, take a shot.” That was it -- but it completely shaped the party, and opened up the opportunity for the people there to connect with each other in a very different way.

In the past year, as our gatherings have mostly moved online, we have lost a lot of the infrastructure we used to have that gave our gatherings context. We have lost the journey to get to a place, the doorways, the chairs, the coffee. On the one hand, we have lost some of our favorite parts of gatherings gf-- the sharing of food, the informal conversations when you catch someone on the way out.

On the other hand, there are things that we’ve gained. Zoom has enabled many more people to participate in our gatherings. It has been wonderful for many who had trouble hearing or seeing what was going on in person, and for those with mobility challenges. It has made it easier, in some respects, to fit certain experiences into our schedules. We have seen here at Emunah





increased minyan attendance, and more people coming to a number of programs and events than ever before. And furthermore, without the extra distractions and elements of in-person gathering, coming online pushes us to be even more focused on why we are there, and designing ways to make sure that our gathering accomplishes that goal. When we have succeeded in capturing the power of doing things that we can only do when we're together, I think many of us have found ourselves quite moved.

The Torah is very succinct when it comes to the purpose of the gathering that the people will do as they build, and worship, in the mishkan. We read this purpose several weeks ago in parashat Terumah: **וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ** ושכנתי בתוכם. The people should build me a sanctuary, and then I will dwell among them. The purpose of the mishkan is so that the people will be able to experience God in their midst. The Torah doesn't say "I will dwell in it"-- it says "I will dwell in them." The purpose of the mishkan isn't the building itself, it's the type of gathering that happens in and around it, and the ways that it facilitates the people having an experience of God's presence.

Just as Parker encourages gatherings to have a rule, so too there was a rule for the gathering that Moses convened, when the people received the instructions for building the mishkan:

קָחוּ מֵאִתְּכֶם תְּרוּמָה לַיהוָה כֹּל נָדִיב לְבָבוֹ יְבִיאֶהָ אֶת תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה

“Take from among you gifts to the LORD; everyone whose heart so moves him shall bring them.”

When people willingly choose to contribute to join in a shared endeavor, that activity binds them together, to each other as well as to the space -- whether physical or not -- that they are creating. The people's desire to build and worship in the mishkan is an essential part of what helps them to accomplish the goal of coming together to create a community that God will dwell among.

Throughout the past year, we have experienced physical distancing, but we have worked hard to achieve social proximity. As we begin to return to a way of life that will include more gathering in person, let's reaffirm our commitment to that goal. Let us not forget what we have learned about coming together. Let's not forget that in the past year, we became more inclusive in many ways, and we stayed focused on why we were coming

together. As we move forward let's continue to strive to remain a loving, caring community with God in the center.

Shabbat Shalom.