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Rabbi Steve Segar
Kol HaLev – Cleveland's Reconstructionist Community

In the Liberal Judaism of twenty-first century America, holidays like Hanukkah and Passover are among the most widely celebrated by Jews across the board regardless of denominational affiliation or spiritual orientation. This is not surprising given the themes of freedom and opposition to human oppression that lie at the heart of both observances. However, in Jewish tradition, it has always been assumed that the liberation of Passover should always be understood as a prelude to and pre-requisite for the assumption of new responsibilities to a Divine rather than a human authority which is symbolized by the story of the giving of the Torah commemorated on Shavuot.

This balancing of individual autonomy with external authority is one with which every kind of Judaism in the modern period has had to grapple. The Classical Reform movement tended to emphasize autonomy while the Conservative and Modern Orthodox approaches have more strongly embraced the importance of the community submitting itself to external authority, either that of the tradition or God or the two in combination. Reconstructionism has tried to steer a middle path between the two ends of this spectrum. On one hand, we recognize the truth that in our era, every single Jewish person has the option to choose to affiliate with the broader Jewish community or not. On the other hand, we maintain a conviction that our ability to cultivate a sacred community is directly tied to our individual members' willingness to voluntarily cede some part of their individual autonomy to the shared wisdom and needs of a larger collective.

There are many thinkers within contemporary America who have pointed out the corrosive effects of radical individualism and materialism run amok on all aspects of life in our society and we, within the Reconstructionist movement, have made the claim over and over again that one of our central goals as a movement is to mitigate that social and spiritual corrosion and provide an alternative model of how to live a fulfilling life; one in which the value of community is given a prominent place in the decisions we make and the actions we take.

I believe this vision is intuitively very compelling to many of us who are drawn to Reconstructionism in general and to Kol HaLev in particular. The challenge we face however is that our social and spiritual habits are ones that were developed for the most part outside of such a communal framework, and so learning to behave as a member of a community is akin to exercising muscles that are weak from disuse.

To give just one example of how this dynamic operates within Kol HaLev. We describe ourselves in many places in our official literature as being a caring and intimate community. And in many ways, we are more representative of those ideals than many other options that exist in this area. And yet, when it comes to offering one another caring and support during times of challenge, such as illness or suffering the loss of a loved one, many of us remain caught in the non-communal paradigm which encourages us to offer support to those whom we consider our friends, but which makes us feel uncomfortable offering such to those who do not fall into that category for us.

Aspiring to live as part of a sacred community means using our birthright of freedom (Passover) to make the choice of taking on the responsibility (Shavuot) of being there for one another. This is a commitment that ideally extends beyond friendship and is closely related to how neighborhoods used to function, but which has sadly become the exception rather than the rule in our day and age. Showing up at a Shiva minyan, or volunteering to make part of a meal for someone, are actions that in our community at its best, would not be limited to those who feel closely connected to the person who is in need.

Interestingly, I think we are often more comfortable being there for one another during moments of joy and celebration than we are during times of challenge. Our openness to share in celebrations that transcend circles of friendship is a strength of our community that we can build on. One way to do so is to draw upon the message of Shavuot; to recognize that part of what attracts us to living in community is the sense of mutual obligation into which we enter by deciding to link our own and our families' lives to something larger. And to see that sometimes we need this sense of obligation to push us a little beyond our comfort zone into action that is healthy and holy, but not necessarily easy.

Rabbi Steve