



## Jewish "Community" -- Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say

**By David Nelson**

We Jews have a long-standing concern for the precise meaning of words. The Talmud is filled with legal debates that pivot on the exact meaning of a particular word, and such discussions abound as well in works of biblical commentary. As a group I suspect that we were, perhaps, less troubled than most by the discussion during last year's presidential impeachment debate about "what the meaning of 'is' is." Words are sacred. They can create or destroy worlds. They must be used with great precision and care.

These observations lead me to take issue with the vast overuse, which I think constitutes abuse, of the word "community" when modified by the adjective "Jewish." We speak all the time about "the New York Jewish community," or "the American Jewish community," when in fact what we really mean is not "community" at all but rather geographically defined regions of Jewish population, that is, "the Jews who live in New York/America/wherever."

Is this silly hair-splitting? Not at all. For by indiscriminately using the word "community" to connote any group of people living in a defined region, we eviscerate the sacred term. "Community" is a word that should be used to describe a group of people who live their lives in relationship with one another in one or more significant ways. They ought, for example, to care about one another, or trust one another, or be able to depend on one another, or feel responsible to or for one another. They ought to imagine that they are somehow involved in one another's lives in important ways.

In the second half of the twentieth century, we American Jews accomplished an enormous number of spectacular things vis-à-vis the world around us. We were instrumental in championing the cause of the powerless and the oppressed, fighting anti-Semitism, and insuring our status in the United States as economic, social and political equals. In the past decade, however, we have begun to direct a larger portion of our energies inward, trying to create a true sense of "community" within synagogues, JCC's, schools, and a host of other formal and informal settings. When we succeed in this task, the success is obvious to all. "Community" may be hard to define, elusive and fuzzy, but, in the words of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when discussing the hard-to-define nature of pornography, "I know it when I see it."

