



Beyond Osmosis -- Creating Intentional Communities

By David Kraemer

Once upon a time, the residential communities in which Jews lived were predominantly-and sometimes even overwhelmingly-Jewish residential communities. Of course, in some times and places, the Jewishness of the community was decreed by law: Jews must live here and nowhere else! More usually, the Jewish identity of the community was a product of preference; quite simply, Jews felt more comfortable and secure living with one another (for the same variety of reasons that members of groups have preferred to live in proximity to one another throughout history).

How different are conditions today! To be sure, Jews--being white, educated and mostly economically successful--tend to live more in certain neighborhoods and communities and less in others, thus leading to "clusters" of Jews even in our mobile and pluralistic society. But as American society has become more accepting of Jews-and Jews more accepting of America and all it stands for-Jews have found themselves residing in communities virtually everywhere. There are fewer Jewish neighborhoods and fewer Jewish neighbors. Residential communities are diverse, and Jews must seek out other Jews if their communities are going to be "Jewish" as well "upper middle class."

Truth be told, even in the "good old days" (which, of course, were often not so good!) Jews lived together with non-Jews. They thus could not take the Jewishness of their communities for granted; they also had to make connections with other Jewish neighbors in more active ways. Consider the following ancient rabbinic text (composed in the late 2nd century):

If someone [=a Jew] lives in a courtyard with a non-Jew or with someone [=a Jew] who does not recognize the law of eruv, such a person restricts him.

(Mishnah Eruvin 6:1)

The immediate question addressed by this Mishnah pertains to the prohibition of carrying from one's personal domain to a public domain on the Sabbath. According to this Mishnah, if one lives with a non-Jew or with a Jew who does not observe the Sabbath law, one may not create a collective "private" domain with one's other neighbors by means of an eruv. In other words, in the opinion of this Mishnah, a proper residential community includes only other Jews who observe the law. But the Talmud modifies the Mishnah's law. It permits one to "rent" the "offending" party's share in the public space from him and thus create a collective private domain with only those one chooses. Most of the week, you may live together with the "other," but on Shabbat, you should symbolically

create special connections with other Jews, excluding, for these purposes, your other neighbors.

Crucially, the eruv was a particular kind of symbol: a dish of food that belonged to everyone joining the collective community. Food said "we want to eat together, to be intimate in this celebratory way." It perfectly represented the desire to be not only neighbors but also personal friends.

If we are to create Jewish communities dedicated, if only occasionally, to our Jewishness, must find similarly meaningful ways to declare our commonality-our "togetherness." Though we will continue to live with many others, often very different from ourselves, we must forge occasional but regular connections with those in our special community, our Jewish community. Like the eruv, these connections must be intentional and meaningful. They might be dedicated (not coincidental) gatherings at the JCC. They might be scheduled meetings of Jewish neighborhood "buddy-lists" on the internet. They might be Saturday (=Shabbat) afternoon soccer games (co-ed, please!) at the local school field.

Above all, they must be something, because Jewish community will not happen naturally, all by itself. Belonging to a Jewish community is an affirmation-an act of will. This was true in earlier ages, but it is more true in our world today. So create your "eruv"-mix it up with your Jewish neighbors. Only this way will there be Jewish communities amidst the vast sea of larger, more diverse communities where we find ourselves day-to-day.

