The Need to Belong

By Steven Greenberg

I have been musing lately about community, what makes it work, and why it so often doesn't. So many people feel that they have not found a Jewish community they like. Often they mean by this that they haven't found the synagogue that suits them. They may attend this one or that one, but they complain that they just don't feel they belong in those places, or worse, since they have not found a place to which to belong, they have dropped off the map of Jewish affiliation altogether. The rather commonplace dissatisfaction people seem to express with these various expressions of Jewish (non-)belonging makes me wonder: What does belonging mean? What is it that people want when they say that they wish they had a community? Is there a difference between a good synagogue and a good community?

Such questions were brought home to me six weeks ago by expressions of dissatisfaction that came to the fore in one of my own "communities." This community consists of a group of gay Jews that meet monthly at an organization called GLYDSA. The acronym stands for Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva Day School Alumnae. At the annual GLYDSA Chanukah party, over a hundred and fifty people showed up to shmooze, eat latkes and light Chanukah candles. The music mavens had insisted upon shmaltzy Jewish tunes before the candle lighting and upon trendy disco music afterwards, but nobody was in the mood to dance. It was a pleasant enough evening, but in conversations after the event people shared with me their disappointments. "I really don't feel that I belong to the group," said one. "Oh, I'm past that crowd these days," said another. These same people continue to attend the high-profile annual events, but they don't really feel like the crowd is "their crowd."

Why is it that so many of us so often feel this way about communities built around an ostensibly shared identity? My Jewish single friends complain bitterly about any event that is marketed to "Jewish singles." "Such losers come to those events," is a common complaint. A friend told me that events like that make him "want to give up the Jewish thing altogether." Hearing this, I was reminded of the Groucho Marx line about not wanting to belong to any group that would have him for a member.

Of course, this portrayal of belonging as self-defeating is only half of the picture. There are lots of folks who love identity groups, bowling leagues, chess clubs and the like. When the GLYDSA group began a number of years ago, the support it offered was a profound comfort. Those of us who attended the monthly meetings to share our various woes around traditional Judaism and sexuality enjoyed the feeling of "being understood."

In thinking about community, I am reminded that my own adoption of Orthodox practice and faith was the product of a strong and positive sense of Jewish communal belonging. I grew up in a liberal Jewish household in Columbus, Ohio, but by a quirk of fate I ended up as a member of a small Orthodox synagogue. At the age of fifteen I met a rabbi from Gateshead, England, Rabbi Joseph Vilenski. He offered to study with me weekly and soon I brought three of my friends to our study sessions. He warmly ushered us all into his synagogue community and changed our lives.

While it was the Talmud study that hooked us on traditional Judaism, it was the shabby congregation on Broad Street that actually transformed us into members of something. We were needed to help "make" the morning *minyan* and soon became regulars, taking readily to the breakfasts of herring and schnapps that replaced the familiar cereal and milk. Who knows what our homeroom teachers were thinking when we showed up with Jack Daniels on our breath.

One morning I arrived at *shul* for *Shabbos davenning* to find Rabbi Vilenski standing at the door. He told me that I must go to the local funeral home immediately. The tradition requires that a body not be left alone from death until burial. Mrs. Kaplan mother had died and there was no one in her family able on Shabbat to walk the distance.

A few months later, we helped the members to build the *sukkah* and then ate and sang in it. Later that year, we helped to clean the *shul* the day before Pesach and learned in the Rabbi's study till late into the night on Shavuot. In short, over the course of that year, we became members of a community, not by seeking a shared comfort in sameness but by committing to serve God with a motley crew of individuals with whom we shared little more than that very service. While some of the members were quite observant, many were not. Some were intelligent, some were warm, and most were neither. The rabbi was surely passionate, but the quiet smiles of the old women and the backslapping camaraderie of the old men were wonderful in different ways. This was a community that worked.

Community is always based upon a shared identity of some sort, but oddly enough, it is not always entirely clear just what it is that is shared. Surely the unity of the *shul* community did not come from the rabbi. He was beloved by the teenagers, but the adults found him severe and pedantic, and merely tolerated him. Nor was the congregation united by a common faith or level of observance. The *shul* included professors of Jewish Studies, retired wealthy businessmen, the non-religious children of the retired businessmen, a handful of newly religious professionals, day school teachers and widows. Their levels of knowledge and observance ranged across a wide spectrum. What everyone shared, however, was the sense that the meaning of their presence at *shul* -- and the answer to the question of whether to show up or not on a given day – had almost nothing to do with their transitory preferences or individual desires. They came because that is what one does on *Shabbos*. They came for the familiar faces, for the comfort of the repetition, for the hope of a good sermon and for the satisfaction of doing what they were supposed to do.

What kept the members of Rabbi Vilenski's *shul* together was not so much a shared need as a shared sense of duty. For some, that duty was felt as a vague nostalgic pull, and for others it was a book-learned "thou shalt," but everyone came not merely because they wanted to, but because they *had to*. And in time, though the members had little "in common" with each other, they became intertwined in different sorts of friendships that made the duty taste sweet. This is what happens when, as Emmanuel Levinas would say, doing precedes choosing.

As the Chanukah party demonstrates, the GLDSA group has changed. Most of the original members no longer need the support the group once provided. Most of them have come out of the closet, found partners, or gotten on with life in one way or another and do not need the supportive sharing any more. They have a partner, or at least friends with whom to share, and the drama by now is -- well, old. It turns out that the shared identity markers of being Jewish and gay, or even being Orthodox, Jewish and gay, are not enough in themselves to create or sustain a sense of community. Which may in turn indicate that communities can only take root through something that goes beyond the "common properties" of the members.

Not surprisingly, the group is still very helpful for those new members who are facing the challenge of coming out to parents and other social and psychological challenges associated with coming out. Consequently, one finds that only two sorts of people regularly attend the group's monthly meetings: those who are in crisis and need support, and those caring folk who have committed themselves to helping others in the process of finding social and self-acceptance.

So, if you're looking for your crowd, for your niche, for the place where everybody knows your name -- for a community, in short -- it may help to remember that what matters most in life is not being loved, but loving. Could it be that we keep missing the true nature of community by regarding it as a consumer good or lifestyle accessory, as if the crucial question were what we can get from it and not who we might become through what we give to it? Perhaps our "need" for community is primarily not a need to have our needs met, but a "need" for a place where we can be of service to others and where we can share the joys of mutuality with others who have come together not on the basis of some pre-existing common identity or affinity, but on the basis of a shared commitment to a common round of activities which imparts a warm feeling of connectedness among the members that binds them to one another despite their irreducible individual differences.