The Individual and the Community, Not One at the Expense of the Other

By David Kraemer

Most of us probably think of "community" as a matter of sociological concern. Community is one of the ways we define or construct society. People "locate" themselves (psychologically) in communities, reside in communities, find support and comfort in communities. They also define themselves as individuals over and against communities; it is not unusual, for example, to speak of the (often conflicting) needs of the individual and the needs of the community. Thus it comes as no surprise that those who study the ways humans organize themselves in society devote considerable attention to "community" and its meanings.

But Jewish tradition has taught that "community" is also a theological concern. As evidence, consider the following: Mishnah Berakhot, chapter seven, outlines regulations concerning the opening "invitation" ritual (zimmun) of birkhat hamazon (the blessing after meals). The third mishnah of that chapter instructs that the formula of invitation should change depending upon how many people have participated in the meal. If fewer than three people have eaten, there is no invitation to bless at all. If three or more, but fewer than ten, have eaten, then the person leading the blessing declares simply "let us bless." If there are ten, he says instead "let us bless our God." If one hundred, he proclaims "let us bless the Lord, our God." If one thousand, he says "let us bless the Lord, our God, God of Israel." And if ten thousand, he says "let us bless the Lord, our God, God of Israel, God of hosts, who sits [above?] the cherubim, for the food we have eaten." "Community" in this Mishnah starts at three people. But as it becomes larger, it becomes more significant, and that significance is mirrored in the larger and more significant formula with which the blessing begins. The mere fact of a larger community of Jews demands a more elaborate God language. This means that the larger community must somehow evoke a more expansive divine presence.

One manifestation of the theological power of community is the "fact," insisted upon by the rabbis, that communal prayer is more powerful than individual prayer. This is perhaps because when we stand alone, we have only ourselves to speak on our behalf, whereas in community, the collective voice of Israel speaks for us. In recognition of the greater power of community, the rabbis urged Jews to pray with their communities, particularly on the High Holidays, when we are, each of us individually, to be judged (or so the rabbis believed). Standing before God

as individuals, we would each have little to argue on our behalf. But the collective good works of Israel constitute a powerful argument that we should be judged mercifully. All of us together build God's world. Judge one of us harshly, remove one of us from the project of tikkun, and the repercussions could prove disastrous.

Yet, despite its celebration of the theological power of the community, Rabbinic Judaism did not overlook the extraordinary value of the individual, even when that value came into conflict with values of the community. The most important-and best known-place this is expressed is in laws of the Sabbath, when saving the life of an individual takes priority over protecting the sanctity of the day. If, to save a life, it is necessary to perform an act otherwise prohibited on the Sabbath, that act is to be performed and the life is to be saved. The individual life is so precious-so sacred-that it is to be preserved even at the expense of compromising the day that defines and binds the community of Jews. Though a covenantal sign, an expression of the commitment of God and the community of Israel one to another, the Sabbath is to yield before the urgent needs of the individual Jew. This is a remarkable expression of the value of the individual in a system where the community is a construct of theological significance.

In fact, the extraordinary nature of the rabbis' decision to favor the life of the individual when it comes into conflict with the collective sacred institution has rarely been fully appreciated because it has been taken for granted. But we should not take this priority for granted. In fact, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, commonly known as the Damascus Covenant, records the opinion of a community of Jews who declared that the individual life is secondary to the sacredness of the Sabbath. In their law, if, to save a life, it would be necessary to commit a prohibited act, the Sabbath should be preserved and the life let to pass. For them, apparently, an individual is merely an individual, and what is the value of an individual next to the sacredness of the community and its institutions? But the rabbis judged differently. For them, the individual would be saved even when doing so would require the community and its institutions to compromise. For a group of theologians who so valued the community, this enactment on behalf of the individual was a statement of unparalleled import.

Many movements, standing for a principle or a cause, have judged that individuals must come second to the collective purpose. How many movements, even in modernity, have valued the individual so little that they have committed multiple murders in the name of the cause? But Judaism has taught differently. Even two millennia ago, the rabbis taught that there are competing principles, and though the community might be sacred, so too is the individual. Crucially, these principles would forever stand in dialectical tension for, as far as the rabbis were concerned, this was a dialectic that could admit no resolution.