A Time to Gather, A Time to be Home
Judah Kerbel ~ Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei/Ha-Chodesh 5780 ~ Queens Jewish Center

Just a couple of months ago, a number of us gathered at MetLife stadium for the 13th Siyyum Ha-Shas of the Daf Yomi program. Close to, if not literally, 100,000 people gathered together with a shared purpose of learning Torah. If there was any place to go to find confidence that there are more than just a few people love Torah, it was there. It was an electrifying experience to be surrounded by a myriad of people dedicated to such a noble cause. Going to any sort of Siyyum Ha-Shas can be meaningful, even inspiring. But this event is unforgettable, and the drive to do Daf Yomi has become increasingly contagious as the numbers at the siyyum grow. Yet, just two months after the Siyyum and the beginning of the new cycle where new seekers began to try out Daf Yomi, the novel coronavirus hit us in America. Rabbi Shmuel Silber in Baltimore described to a group of young rabbanim like myself how there were 140 people in his shul who started coming to Daf Yomi at the beginning of the new cycle – showing up, in person! How motivating it must be to show up at the first shiur and see 140 other people setting out on the same mission as you! And then the letdown that the shiur can no longer meet in person! Baruch Hashem, with technology, their shiur still takes place online, and over 100 people still see each other through the screen. But it is often the ability to gather and to be part of a gathering that propels us, that tells us that we “have” to engage with what the crowd is doing.

Inspiration is contagious. Judaism has long recognized this. “B’rov am hadrat melech” – “the King’s glory is in the multitude of people” (Mishlei 14:28). It is not necessarily that Hashem cares how many people are out to praise Him, but being part of a large crowd is a very powerful thing. Therefore, we strive to daven with a crowd. Although we may sometimes feel like a small, insignificant part of the universe, we can find our power in numbers. When we see ourselves as part of something larger, we feel the larger impact that it has on the world, thereby motivating us to participate. The more people involved, the more contagious the activity is. Still, much of what we do in Judaism does not technically require a crowd. Even an individual can pray and an individual can learn Daf Yomi.

Both gatherings and individual experiences are important in Judaism. We find both of these ideals in the keriot that are assigned for this week.

The very first word of our double parasha is Vayakhel. Moshe gathered B’nei Yisrael. There are many times that presumably Moshe talks to the nation at large – why is the rare usage of the word “Vayakhel” – he gathered – found here? There are two subjects spoke about at this point: the Mishkan and Shabbat (see Shemot 35:1-5). The reason why Moshe needed to gather B’nei Yisrael regarding the Mishkan, says ibn Ezra, was in order that they all hear the needs of the Mishkan from Moshe and will volunteer their talent and/or monetary contributions. Which is a more effective means for
fundraising: sending a solicitation by mail that can be easily ignored, or inviting potential participants to a beautiful dinner? If we assume that inspiration is contagious, more will give after attending a program where like-minded people are together sharing in the same mission. When someone gets an envelope in the mail, it is less likely they feel the same motivation to open their pockets. The other reason why Moshe gathered B’nei Yisrael was to remind them of Shabbat. When the Jewish people observes Shabbat, they are testifying to the fact that Hashem created the world and maintains sovereignty.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik notes that Moshe gathered specifically adat (עדת), the “community,” of B’nei Yisrael. The word adat (עדת) is similar to eid (עד), witness. “Moses assembled the entire nation to teach them that the Jew is charged to act as a witness through keeping Shabbos” (Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Sefer Shemos, p. 314). Each Jew who keeps Shabbat is making a kidush Hashem by recognizing Hashem’s dominion.

But here, too, perhaps inspiration is contagious. When you are working on a project as important and ennobling as the Mishkan, it’s hard to take a break. When we are driven by our work, when we have a lot on our plate, it is challenging to know when to stop. We would likely never stop for 24 hours on our own volition. When retreating on Shabbat places restrictions that limit our travel and to do things that we might otherwise enjoy, that is hard for one of us alone to pull off. But when the whole community does it, we realize how awesome Shabbat is. As others spiritually invest in Shabbat, it encourages us to invest, as well.

There is a time to gather. Moshe gathers everyone together to inspire each individual through he or she seeing the other people around doing the same thing.

Yet, there are times when it is not time to gather as a nation. It is a time to be home. This is something we see in Parashat Ha-Chodesh, which would also be Leined today. On the tenth of the first month, before leaving Egypt, each household is commanded to find a lamb for itself.

דֶּבֶר אֶל־כָּל־עֲדַַּ֤ת יִשְרָּאֵל֙ לֵאמ ֹ֔ר בֶּעָּש ֹׂ֖ר לַּח ֹ֣דֶּשׁ הַּזֶֶּ֑ה וְּיִקְּחֹ֣וּ לָּהֶ֗ם אִִֽישׁ שֶֶּׂ֥ה לְּבֵית־אָּב ֹׂ֖ת ש ה לַּבֶָֽיִת׃

Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household (Shemot 12:3).

Eventually, this lamb is slaughtered and offered as the korban pesach, paschal offering, which is to be eaten at home. While there are some halachic differences between the korban pesach in Egypt versus the korban pesach for future generations, the mitzvah is still fulfilled at home. It is a bit strange! If there is any holiday that should be observed as a nation, as a community, it should be Pesach! It was our national liberation! Yet, Pesach is meant to be observed quietly, at home. Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, in Oznayim La-Torah, explains that Hashem wanted us to do this mitzvah at home in order to fulfill the mitzvah of vehigadeta l’vincha, passing the story on to our future generations. If we are all together, we get focused on the party. However, there is a very specific task to focus on, and that is the education of children. Even if one is not with any children, even if one is alone, the idea is to focus on the micro instead of the macro. It is a time for intimate reflection and study. As my mentor, Rabbi Robert Block,
wrote this week to his community, “The Torah is underscoring and emphasizing the home with the very first mitzva that the Jews are given as they become a people. That is, before the exodus from Egypt, and before the receiving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai and before the building of the Mishkan. Before anything can happen to the Jewish PEOPLE, we are given instructions about the Jewish FAMILY.”

There is a time to gather, but there is also a time to be home.

These two parshiyot serve as a microcosm for a dialectic we have in Judaism. We are very community oriented. We gather daily for tefillah. We gather as frequently as possible for Talmud Torah, the way Moshe gathered B’nei Yisrael to teach them. The name “Queens Jewish Center” is appropriately named in its aspiration to serve as a center for which people can find Yiddishkeit.

However, we are also reminded that ultimately, serving Hashem is not meant to be about a shul. We daven whether or not we have a minyan nearby. We learn even if we are in our own living room alone. Many mitzvot can and must be observed, even in the absence of community.

It gives me unbelievable sadness that due to the novel coronavirus, we are not able to gather for tefillah, for Talmud Torah, and for communal socializing. This cannot and will not be the new normal forever – as soon as we can, we will get back together, because inspiration is contagious. We are strong Jews when we are gathered together with other Jews who share our mission. And while Pesach is a “home” holiday, it gives me even greater sorrow that many people will not be able to celebrate with the family and friends they would like to due to social distancing measures. We are here for you during this time; please don’t hesitate to reach out to me if you have any emotional concerns that you would like to speak about as Pesach approaches.

At the same time, I think it is important for us to hold the value of Judaism as gathering and Judaism as individuals in both hands, respectively. Over the next few weeks, we can take a step back and appreciate what it means to be able to be gathered together and why that is so important for Judaism. And while we are distanced temporarily from one another, we have the incredible opportunity to think about our own service of God. We can think about what tefillah means to us, what Shabbat means to us, what Pesach means to us. May Hakadosh Baruch Hu give us the proper strength to be able to withstand the challenge and uphold the opportunity to have the rich, deep experience of focusing on ourselves and to reflect and redesign our relationship with Torah, mitzvot, and Hashem.