

## What Makes a House a Home? A Building a Shul?

Anyone who has moved home will know quite how hard it is. I had, before we made our recent move from London to Manchester, assumed it would be easy. I was moving home to be with family, and this community, my home community. We were moving towards more space, a less frenetic lifestyle and a friendly Northern atmosphere. Packing up was relatively easy. We had packers who, within a few hours, had placed everything into boxes and driven them off in their lorries. I thought to myself, 'why does everyone say moving is so hard?! This is easy!'

Over the next few days as we were faced with all of those boxes, in a house we had yet to live in, I began to realise that the journey had only just begun. To be at home it takes more than just calling a place home and changing addresses. It's now 2 months since we moved and I've been asking myself, what is it that makes a house a home? For me, it has everything to do with people – having family and friends around to visit, feeding people and showing them around. It's about sharing the experience of moving with others. It's about entering into a relationship with the house, the surroundings, the neighbours... Simply buying furniture only goes some way to making a house a home – it takes something more to feel *at home*.

The same discussion about 'what makes a house a home' can be applied to us here at Jackson's Row – 'what makes a building a synagogue? What makes a collection of people a community?' And at Rosh Hashanah, which has three names, on being *yom ha-din*, the day of judgment, we have an opportunity to examine ourselves both personally and collectively. So, 'what makes a building a synagogue? What makes a collection of people a community?' Of course, part of the answer is shared experiences. Not only do we share an ancient history, from Abraham to us here today, but most of us will have personal experiences with this building and community – b'nei mitzvah, weddings, festivals, cheder, the choir, the Ladies Guild and so on. And these shared experiences are crucial to our collective identity and it is important we remember them – in line with the second name for Rosh Hashanah, *yom ha-zikaron* – day of remembrance. But there is more to being part of a community than our past experiences, and a building. Indeed, the Jewish people started off, all those years ago, as a ragged group of people marching across the wilderness with only temporary shelters to hand, and we welcomed in many people along the way.

Being Jewish is much more than being part of a religion – we are a people – *am yisrael*. We are a family – a big family, sometimes a dysfunctional family, but a family nonetheless! Perhaps this can be understood best through a snapshot of some of the conversations I've been having over the past couple of months within the wider Jewish community. I'll have said, 'I've just moved from London'. What will then follow is a mini interrogation – 'where did you live?' 'Do you know so-and-so?' 'My father's-cousin's-neighbour's-son used to live there'. We've all had conversations like these as we each try to find a connection with the other across our large, sprawling Jewish family. When I was younger I used to find these kinds of conversations difficult.

I often felt sad that I didn't know so-and-so and felt slightly excluded. I was frustrated at the small world mentality – you're Jewish so you must know so-and-so. But – I now realise how wrong I was and I've learnt to love these mini-interrogations as I think they go some way to explaining what it is to be Jewish. Let me explain.

Through these conversations and questions we are striving for a connection. We begin with the assumption that we know each other, that we're connected, that we're part of the same family, no matter when or how we got in! And we'll do our utmost to prove that we are connected, albeit in some tangential way. What a wonderful way to begin a conversation. Imagine if every conversation we had began with the understanding that we are connected, have something in common and we then work from that place to find what that connection is. Judaism is built upon these relationships of connectivity. As Martin Buber, the Austrian born Jewish philosopher, said, 'in the beginning is the relationship.'

Judaism primarily functions as a community – as a web of relationships. Our liturgy demands that we pray together – we need 10 people for a full service and, on yom kippur we even confess our collective sins, the sins of those sitting next to us. Our calendar demands that we keep coming together – Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Succot, Simchat Torah and so on. Our rituals mean that we are together during the most important life cycles – when a baby is born, when our children begin growing up, weddings, deaths, yahrzeits.

It is these coming-togethers that make a shul a *kehillah kedoshah* - a holy community. And, as we know from Torah, we are enjoined by God to remember that we are a holy people.

I think, for me, a *kehillah kedoshah*, a holy community is one which strives to connect and be part of something bigger than itself. We are not interested only in ourselves. We care about and are in relationship with those around us. On a more cosmic, divine level, in the words of Rabbi Howard Cooper, we realise 'how the divine sparks in our soul are part of an eternal light'.

Being part of something – belonging – is so important. As Ron Wolfson says, 'in a world of hyper-connectivity' – facebook, Instagram, twitter, snapchat, email, smartphones, smart tvs – 'we are shockingly alone.'

Yet synagogues too can miss the mark. Ron Wolfson, in his book *Relational Judaism*, relayed a story he heard from a rabbi – 'A woman who was a member of my synagogue for twenty years resigned. I was shocked because she showed up to all of our programs. So, I called her to ask why she was leaving. You know what she said? "I came to everything, and I never met anybody."'

How can we ensure this doesn't happen? How can we, this Rosh Hashanah, on *yom t'ruah*, using its third name, the day for calling ourselves to action, how can we ensure this type of loneliness does not take place? We must recognise the importance of these familial ties and our relationships. We must invest in these relationships and start from a point of reaching out for a connection. And each of us has to assess our relationship to this community? What are we asking of our community? If we understand the synagogue only as a building we ask, 'what's in it for me?' – a question which is based on the assumption that it's all about give and take and the self – that you bear no responsibility to the other. In a *kehillah kedoshah*, a holy community, we ask – how will my life be different by engaging with this community? We recognise that we are part of something bigger and we have something to learn from it. It means that we are there for each other during the hard times and the good.

Much like football (which in my household is like another religion) you go to match after match, in rain, snow, sleet, hail, losing match after match, travelling mile upon mile, to be with the club and the supporters. In some ways, the winning means very little – it is all about being part of something bigger through all of life's struggles.

And as a community we've had our fair share of struggle – our original building in Park Place was bombed during the blitz, we've lived through the time of the Shoah, we stand in the city centre which has been bombed in 1996, and heinously attacked this year. As a wider community we've struggled too -with terrorist attacks on our doorsteps.

On a personal level, we've lost family members and friends. Yet, a community we stay together throughout this all. Jackson's Row is a constant. Yes, the building may change, but we know our community is much more than that.

In a world where it can appear that we value transactions above relationships, Judaism and our community can offer us something unique and priceless. Yet to sustain a *kehillah kedoshah*, a holy community, it requires work and investment in those relationships. It requires an engagement, in whatever way works for you.

As I begin my post here alongside Rabbi Silverman, the Council and you all, I am committed to investing in our relationships, in building connections.

I hope you will walk this path with us as we begin to have conversations about Jackson's Row and we think about how to engage with this community and ensure that this house and this building is a home for all and a kehillah kedoshah/holy community beginning with ourselves and reaching outwards and upwards.

May this New Year, of 5778, be one of strengthening relationships, of renewal, of seeking connections and exploring how our Judaism impacts on us and those around us. Ken Yehi Ratzon – May this be God's will. Amen.

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*Rosh Hashanah, 5778*