

God, Torah and Community



Rabbi Dr. Devorah Schoenfeld

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According to the nineteenth-century French sociologist Émile Durkheim, religion is society worshipping itself. When a person has a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, something transcendent, something that existed long before they were born and will continue long after they die, they are perceiving something that is definitely, verifiably, absolutely true. They are perceiving that they are part of a community. People live their lives as part of a community that existed long before they were born and will continue to exist long after they die. It is larger than any one individual, and each life is a small part of it. It permeates every aspect of our lives, it shapes our values, and if we have a good community, if we are lucky, it supports us when we need help. It can even love us unconditionally and always have a place for us.

To be clear, in case anyone was worried at this point, I do believe in the reality of God. But I think Durkheim was correct in that the community of the Jewish people is one tool that God gave us to experience what God is like in the world. When we want to feel God's love for us, one place to feel it is in the embrace and care of a community. When we want to feel God's eternity, one way to connect to it is in the knowledge that the Jewish people has endured, and will endure.

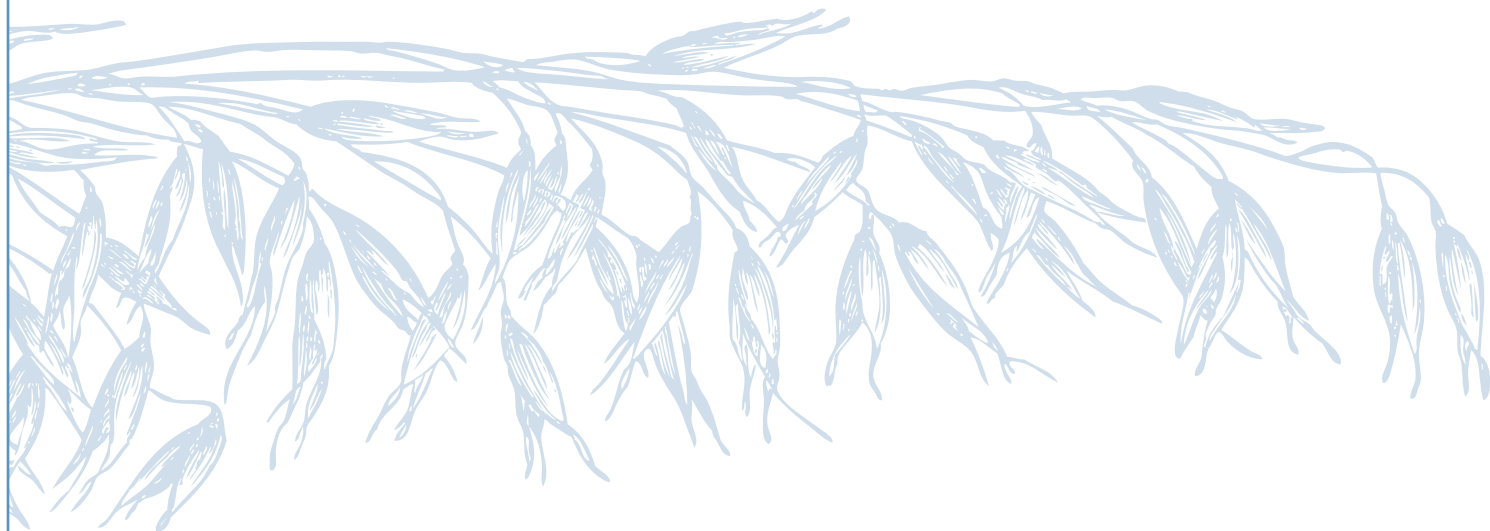
So what happens when the community is hard to find?

The author and activist Barbara Ehrenreich, in her book *Natural Causes*, writes a lengthy polemic against the obsessive pursuit of longevity, arguing that instead of trying to stay alive as long as possible, we also need to recognize the reality of death, and make our peace

with it. Death is inevitable for all people, so part of the work we need to do as living creatures is to find a way to live with the knowledge that our lives are a brief time in a long eternity. For her, like Durkheim, the way to do this is to see oneself as part of a system, as a part of something greater. Like our cells are part of our body, and when an individual cell dies the body survives, when we can see ourselves as part of a world, we can find peace in knowing that the world will endure even when we are gone.

For many people, this past year has been a time of isolation, in which Covid-19 precautions have made it difficult to connect to any community larger than my immediate family. This is disproportionately true for women, and for parents, as the pressures of supervising remote learning for children while working has become overwhelming. This is not a normal way to live. On the other hand, Orthodox women have some experience with being committed to a community that we cannot always find a way to be fully part of in all the ways we might like. In this, as with many things, coronavirus has pointed to realities that have always been there. Some of us have been struggling with isolation and with disconnection from the community for a very long time.

In this time of isolation, it is oddly comforting to read the end of the book of Deuteronomy and find in it Moses alone. The last conversation that Moses has with another human being is in the penultimate *parsha*, *Parashat Ha'azinu*. In the final *parsha* of the Torah, *V'Zot HaBerakha*, Moses does not speak with Israel; instead, he blesses them. He surveys each of the tribes, and when he blesses them, he looks into their future as



well as their past. Reuben is small, but will live. Levi is praised for acting against the rest of the people when Israel worshipped the Golden Calf, and also will have a priestly role in the future. Joseph will live in hilly land and also be a fisherman, and so on for the rest of the tribes. Moses also sees the land where his people will live, although he will never go there himself. At the time of his death, Moses is alone, but sees that his people will go on.

We read from the end of the book of Deuteronomy on Simchat Torah at the end of the cycle of three harvest festivals: Pesach, celebrating spring, Shavuot, celebrating the summer, and Sukkot, celebrating the fall. These three holidays also symbolize the three stages of life: Passover is youth and beginnings, when we read Song of Songs, and think about new life and falling in love. Shavuot is adulthood, when we receive the Torah, and along with Ruth we choose and willingly accept our adult responsibilities of Torah observance. On Sukkot, we come to terms with the fragility and frailty of life, like a *sukkah* that can blow away, and we read Ecclesiastes to remind us of the fragility and fleeting nature of life. And then we celebrate the Torah.

Like Moses, every Jew has the ability to see the future. We know that every Passover we will celebrate redemption, every Shavuot we will celebrate receiving the Torah, and every Sukkot we will dwell in a *sukkah*. And then on Simchat Torah, the Jewish people will begin reading the Torah, and will continue reading it until the next Simchat Torah, when we will begin it again. And that this will keep happening, year after year, towards eternity.

We have now completed a full cycle of holidays during the pandemic. After more than 500,000 coronavirus deaths in the US alone, and nearly three million globally, we have definitely experienced the fragility of life. After more than a year of isolation, many of us have been alone. But the Torah has always been with us. There were times this year when few synagogues were meeting in person anywhere in the world, but during all this time Torah study continued, including the study and teaching of Torah by women.

The community of the people who study Torah is a community that nothing can keep us from. It has been going on for thousands of years. If we take seriously the idea that the Torah existed prior to Creation, maybe in some sense it has been going on forever. And it will keep on going long after we are gone. Moses dies, but Israel continues. We are part of an eternal community, and through it, God is with us. When the Torah ends, we read the beginning. ❁

This is a revised version of a Dvar Torah given at the women's tefillah group of Anshe Shalom B'nai Israel Congregation in Chicago for Simchat Torah 5781, with statistics updated around Pesach 5781.