**Communities Made Holy**

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I don’t know when I first realized it, but what I know now is that there is not a hint of doubt in my mind that my father’s profession almost entirely shaped who I am today. I don’t know what it is like to have a father who goes to work every day as a doctor, or as a carpenter, or as an engineer. Perhaps the children of those who work in such professions are greatly affected by that fact, however, I doubt that they can attest almost their entire life’s experiences and values to it like I have done for so long. I have no need for exaggeration when I claim that having a Rabbi as a father made me who I am today.

Sure, there is the inevitable humor that comes with it, such as when the first non-Jewish friends I made at a new school found out that my dad was a Rabbi and asked, “Are Rabbis allowed to have kids?” or the complaints that led my peers and myself to participate in “Clergy Kid Support Group” at summer camp, referencing the many times random members of the congregation seemed to know everything about our lives when we didn’t even know their names. But the most influential aspect of my father’s profession is that, because he is a rabbi, I have received a unique exposure to the Jewish world that has instilled a passion in me for the things that Judaism values most, and I am extremely grateful for this.

From the moment I was born, I was immersed into a house that celebrated Jewish holidays, followed many Jewish traditions, and taught me Jewish values under the pretense that they were, simply, values. I don’t ever remember being introduced to concepts such as *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world), or *Tzedakah* (selfless giving), or to love one’s neighbor as oneself. These values were the values that raised me, and even had I not found any meaning in my Jewish identity or the Jewish religion as I aged, these values would still be a part of me. I grew up saying the *Shema* with my parents before I slept each night, and it was a tradition that, little did I know at the time, allowed me to build a small daily connection not only to a Jewish faith, but also to a Jewish culture and heritage.

The foundational exposure to Jewish faith, immersion into Jewish culture, and connection to Jewish tradition that I received in my early youth were essential to my adolescence and my formation of a Jewish identity. However, when I think now of what being Jewish means to me, these things all take a back seat to the overarching theme of community that fills my mind when I think of my Jewish experiences throughout life so far. *Kehillah kedosha*, or holy community, is a Jewish value that falls in with the rest of those that I simply know, though I don’t know where I first learned the concept. Despite this, there are a few extremely distinct experiences throughout my life that have put this concept into practice for me and truly taught me what it means to be a part of a community so strong and important that one must call it holy.

One of the first of these communities that I experienced was a Jewish day school that I attended from first grade through fifth grade. The things that I learned there were no doubt extremely formative for both my Jewish identity and my identity as a whole, however, much of those specifics are no longer relevant, approximately eight years later. What continues on, though, is the community I found during the years I attended that Jewish day school. The teachers I had became more like family friends than merely a public figure of my childhood, and today I still see many of them occasionally, with the same sense of familiarity. My peers at this school were even more important. Graduating in a class of ten students, these people were truly my family. We grew and grew up together, not just as people, but as up and coming members of our greater Jewish community – so much so that nearly every single member of my graduating class stayed together through the next seven years through our involvement in Jewish Youth Group and other facets of our local Jewish community. The community that I found in my Jewish day school truly taught me what it meant to be a part of a community, and showed me how holy this community could be.

Once I knew what a *kehilah kedosha* was, I did not have to look far to find it in so many other parts of my life. It was there all along, in the Jewish summer camp I had been attending every single summer of my life. Camp was always one of my favorite places, both in the simplest, and the most deeply complex ways. It was here that I learned to love my family, here that I learned to love Judaism, to love nature, to love music, true friends, role models, and to create an identity for myself. Camp had, and still to this day has, the power to move me to tears at the thought of how much it has positively impacted my life.

I attended every summer that I could as a camper, and every consecutive summer so far as a staff member. Being a camper, I formed the strongest of bonds with my cabins, with older campers that I looked up to, with younger campers for whom I sought to be that role model, and especially with my counselors, who as young college students formed most of who I am today. As a counselor myself, I have learned the invaluable power of that role even more, and I continue to grow as I take on leadership within this community that means so much to me. The Jewish community at camp is a strong one, one that is melded together three times a day or more in song, where one can literally hear the connection between hundreds of people in one room. Those are the moments that stand out when assessing the communities of which I have had the honor to be a part.

One other such community that shaped my identity is NFTY – the North American Federation of Temple Youth. I was a member of this organization for six years throughout middle and high school, holding leadership positions in my local temple youth group, and acting as a Songleader and the Israel Chair for my NFTY region. The community I found in youth group taught me how to find the leader within myself, and how I could use it to enhance the communities of which I was a part. NFTY gave me a consistent community throughout some of the most important years of my life so far, and the people I met through this organization to this day remain as my personal network of inspirational youth leaders and friends.

Growing up as an active member of the greater Jewish community has provided me with innumerous smaller communities through which I have gained so much and upon which I can rely. When I reflect on what it means to me to be Jewish, it means access and an immediate connection to these communities. It means that my entire life, I have been blessed with meaningful traditions, people I love, and experiences of a lifetime. But the most special thing to me is that all of these experiences, all of these communities, are not just in the past. They are living communities that I am able to carry with me throughout my entire life. Though I have aged out of both Jewish day school and youth group, I often have the chance to interact with people from those communities at my home congregation and throughout the country whenever I happen to be traveling. Though ten months out of my year is spent away from camp, I am lucky to have many of my camp peers with me attending Indiana University; many of them are the reason I felt comfortable enough to attend this school, because I knew I already had a network of familiar people as I embarked on a new journey in my life. The infamous game of “Jewish Geography” is extremely potent in my life as well as others’, and I believe that this can be attested to the strong communities that many Jews like me are a part of. It is fitting that the closest word to “goodbye” in Hebrew – the language of the Jewish people – is “l’hitraot,” meaning “see you later.” I never seem to say a full goodbye to my Jewish communities; rather, they follow me throughout my life, impacting and making meaningful any situation in which I find myself, and that is something I believe I could not get without my Judaism.