

Living Better Together
Sermon for Beth-El, Fort Worth
Rabbi Ralph Mecklenburger
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We were walking down the street in New York one Friday night this summer after a Kabbalat Shabbat service and dinner, and my wife, Ann, thought we ought to get a newspaper to check what was happening in town over the weekend. We stopped at a newsstand, but they were out of the New York Times, then at a convenience store—also out. We tried a couple more places. Late in the day it should not be surprising if one or another outlet had run out of the morning paper; but everyone had been cleaned out! “They’re sold out because Michael Jackson died yesterday,” said Ann. “That’s ridiculous,” I responded, and tried another place, also sold out! “Why doesn’t anyone have any papers?!” I asked. “Because of Michael Jackson,” I was told. She was right, of course. But so was I. It *is* ridiculous!

As I was getting this sermon together I thought I’d check online to be sure I had the day right. So I went to my Yahoo search engine and typed in “Michael Jackson.” It was, indeed, a Friday. But, far more interesting than that, the Yahoo screen gave me the first 10 of 1,280,000,000 sites where Michael Jackson was mentioned! I typed in Moses, and got 91 million. Barack Obama had 441 million. This is fun; you can try it yourself with other names when you get home! Is anyone else half as important in our popular culture as Michael Jackson? “I’ve got it,” I thought, and typed in “Jesus Christ.” 179 million. Nowhere near half as many as 1 1/4 trillion! That was actually six weeks ago; this morning Jackson had faded to a mere 818 million mentions.

I mean no disrespect to Michael Jackson. Any given day “Today’s Top Searches” in the corner of my computer home-page will mention other celebrities—singers, actors, sports figures, scandal-plagued politicians. Nothing inherently wrong, I suppose, in people being interested in the lives of those whom the media bring into their homes each day. It is not hard to think of others whose lives—or deaths—attracted comparable attention: OJ, Princess Di, people whose lives have remarkably little direct bearing on your well-being or mine, but who become household words. What is going on here?!

The phenomenon has something to do with the power of the media, and the insatiable need to fill the pages and screens with something. If there is nothing important to portray, they have to use something less important. But it goes deeper than that. If the public had not kept buying all those newspapers and magazines, watching all those shows, clamoring for every scrap of information about funeral plans and coroners’ reports, the media would have moved on to something else. Why do we care so much about a pop singer, soap opera stars, American Idol contestants, or a professional golfer’s wife’s breast cancer?

A few days after our fruitless search for a Friday newspaper I was reading *Liars, Lovers, and Heroes*, a book by a pair of southern California neuroscientists about how the way our brains evolved prepares us, sometimes well and sometimes not so well, to function in modern societies. And there was an answer to all this celebrity craziness! We are social creatures. Most of us like some alone-time now and then, but we punish a child with a “time-out,” and punish rebellious convicts with solitary confinement. We evolved to live in extended families and small

communities. We *need* other people. Social isolation and loneliness have become a bigger and bigger problems as extended families have given way to nuclear families. In American cities most of us scarcely know our next-door neighbors, much less the whole neighborhood. We rely—and over-rely!—on spouses, not families and groups, for companionship, and on children who grow up and leave home in this incredibly mobile society. With high divorce rates, and people being widowed, more and more of us—especially seniors, but younger people, too--live alone.

The old saw is that Jews are like everyone else, only more so. We have always stressed living in community. No gurus living alone on mountain tops in our tradition. A full worship service requires a *minyan*. Our covenant with God is not between me and God, and you and God, but between us, the people Israel, and God. Anthropologist Mark Zborowski captured the Jewish value perfectly when he titled his book on Jewish life in the *shtetl*, *Life is with People*.

Life is with people—or should be. The brain comes pre-programmed to be happy in modest-size groups. In modern times, ironically, even as masses of people have moved to larger and larger cities, we have found ourselves interacting with smaller and smaller families and groups. We live surrounded by thousands, or tens of thousands, of people. But the research of a British anthropologist named Robin Dunbar suggests that we do best in groups no larger than 150. (p. 265) That is how many people most of us can know reasonably well, remembering their names, and their likes and dislikes, talents and quirks. How many people do most modern urbanites really interact with on an ongoing basis? A few at home; some at work; maybe some more in the weekly bridge game or bowling league ... or the Temple! I do not choose those

examples randomly, for a by-now famous study called *Bowling Alone* showed fewer and fewer modern Americans joining bowling leagues and bridge clubs, or attending churches and synagogues regularly. We may still play the games, or musical instruments, but alone or in small groups. Even participation in churches and synagogues, and unions and political parties, is down in recent decades. We evolved to be happy in modest size groups—“Goldilocks groups,” you might say: not too big and not too small; so our huge cities, and our small social circles, leave us lonely.

Al tifrosh min hatzibur, said Hillel in Pirke Avot, “Do not separate yourself from the community.” Jewish culture and identity are designed to be realized in community—in groups not too big or too small. Sure you can pray at home. We come together for prayer not because God is unavailable outside these walls, but for human warmth and friendship, mutual help and solidarity. Especially to say *kaddish* the tradition requires a minyan, a quorum of 10. Does God need that? I doubt it very much. But we need others most when we are hurting. Judaism, I suggest, has long had an intuitive feel for how people best thrive—not in isolation or even small nuclear families, but in small groups. —Which is not to say, psychologically, that the only way to be happy is here (though I will tell you in a moment why this is a better option than many a secular one), but is to say that the vague sense of discontent that so many feel is a direct outgrowth of a mismatch between the size groups we evolved to be happy in and the way most modern Americans live.

What are most Americans doing instead of interacting with their neighbors and participating regularly in religious institutions and soccer leagues? Professors Steven Quartz and

Terrence Sejnowski of the California Institute of Technology, UC San Diego, and the Salk Institute write:

It is difficult to say whether TV viewing is a cause or a consequence of social fragmentation. It is most likely that TV viewing and the social changes we sketched ... feed off each other, together creating the drop in public life. Television fare is a substitute for the bonds that the modern way of life makes difficult to maintain. . . . (T)he structure of social life in many parts of the world today is highly impoverished, hindering our natural biological tendency to seek one another's company in long-term reciprocal relationships. (*Liars, Lovers and Heroes*, pp. 262-3)

Modern society scatters our families to the winds, and then we return home each evening tired from work, or looking forward to a quiet weekend, and we plop down in front of the box and veg out. As long as the images are moving on the screen our attention is held; it is pleasant. And then we wonder where the week went, or where the year went, and why we are somehow not as fulfilled as we would like to be?

What has all this to do with Michael Jackson and celebrities in general? These are the people whom TV-addicted masses, whose minds crave interaction with others, know! They are in our living rooms, and family rooms, and cars and ipods, on a regular basis. We instinctively want to relate to others, and with a paucity of real people, real community, in our lives, we rejoice and grieve with the disembodied specters on our screens and in our ears. They are the people we—sort

of-know! So, as we were designed to relate to people, we worry about them, grieve for them, rejoice with them.

It is not only TV. Computers isolate us even as they give us a sense, sometimes, of being part of a community. Virtual community is *not* community. You are still alone. Spiritually we need, and even physically our minds crave, other people—not too few, and not too many. Our minds need mutually caring communities.

My message tonight is not simply, “turn it off.” The message, rather, is an ancient one—Jewish, Greek, Confucian—you can find it in every culture: everything in moderation. Relaxation and entertainment are fine, including television. But they are not enough. Add books and magazines, and you are still alone; a golf or tennis game and you are at least with a others, though not many. All these pastimes and plenty more are fine, but we each, also, need community.

This community, Beth-El, is not the only one that might fill or partially fill that need. But it is a key one. In most of the other places we go we interact with a narrow band of similar people—fellow architects or insurance agents, or those who enjoy the same sport we do. Here the bond is more fundamental but at the same time less exclusive: as Jews we share a history and a faith, and concerns and fears and aspirations: richer and poorer, of many occupations and all ages. Even an occasional drop-in will likely recognize a few people. And, I like to say, the Oneg is as important as the service. We need, and ought to desire, to get to know one another. Those who come more often ... get to know the others who come more often (this isn't rocket science; here as

most every place in life, the more you put in, the more you get out). And it is not just services. Men of Reform Judaism, Women of Reform Judaism, youth groups, this committee, that committee, classes, films...: we become a community, and gain the benefits of community, by our involvement. What is there to lose? –A couple of nights in front of reality TV or the latest doctor show. Not that a Committee meeting is necessarily more interesting, God knows. Even a sermon, or the talents of the cantor or choir, might leave us unmoved on any given night. But along with whatever else is going on, it is about the people, about community and belonging.

In mass, anonymous, modern society, no less and possibly more than ever before, we need one another. Community: if you don't get it here, get it elsewhere. But do not isolate yourself with a few family and friends, and electronic diversions, when your mind and spirit crave scores of people—not celebrities to know vicariously, but real people in all our fascinating and occasionally aggravating variety, people to know, and laugh and cry and grow with, together.

Keyn y'hi ratzon. Amen.