

## Three Types of Community

“In classical Hebrew there are three different words for community: **edah**, **tsibbur**, and **kehillah**, and they signify different kinds of association.” Read below for Sacks’s description on each type of community.

Source: Vayakhel-Pekudei (5773) - Three Types of Community. (2016, April 04).

1

**Edah** comes from the word *ed*, meaning “witness.” The verb *ya’ad* carries the meaning of “to appoint, fix, assign, destine, set apart, designate or determine.” The modern Hebrew noun *te’udah* means “certificate, document, attestation, aim, object, purpose or mission.” The people who constitute an *edah* have a strong sense of collective identity. They have witnessed the same things. They are bent on the same purpose. The Jewish people become an *edah* only on receiving the first command:

“Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household” (Shemot 12:3)

An *edah* can be a gathering for bad as well as good. The Israelites, on hearing the report of the spies, lose heart and say they want to return to Egypt. Throughout, they are referred to as the *edah* (as in “How long will this wicked community grumble against Me?” Bemidbar 14: 27). The people agitated by Korach in his rebellion against Moses and Aaron’s authority is likewise called an *edah* (“If one man sins, will You be angry with the whole community? Bemidbar 16: 22). Nowadays the word is generally used for an ethnic or religious subgroup. An *edah* is a community of the like-minded. The word emphasizes strong identity. It is a group whose members have much in common.

2

By contrast the word **tsibbur** – it belongs to Mishnaic rather than biblical Hebrew – comes from the root *tz-b-r* meaning “to heap” or “pile up”. (Bereishith 41:49) To understand the concept of *tsibbur*, think of a group of people praying at the Kotel. They may not know each other. They may never meet again. But for the moment, they happen to be ten people in the same place at the same time, and thus constitute a quorum for prayer. A *tsibbur* is a community in the minimalist sense, a mere aggregate, formed by numbers rather than any sense of identity. A *tsibbur* is a group whose members may have nothing in common except that, at a certain point, they find themselves together and thus constitute a “public” for prayer or any other command which requires a *minyan*.

A **kehillah** is different from the other two kinds of community. Its members are different from one another. In that sense it is like a tsibbur. But they are orchestrated together for a collective undertaking – one that involves in making a distinctive contribution. The danger of a kehillah is that it can become a mass, a rabble, a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase in which Moses, descending the mountain, sees the people dancing around the calf:

Moses saw that the people were running wild, and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughing-stock to their enemies. (32: 25)

The beauty of a kehillah, however, is that when it is driven by constructive purpose, it gathers together the distinct and separate contributions of many individuals, so that each can say, “I helped to make this.” That is why, assembling the people on this occasion, Moses emphasizes that each has something different to give: Take from what you have, an offering to G-d.

Everyone who is willing to bring to G-d an offering of gold, silver and bronze . . . All you who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the Lord has commanded . . .

The greatness of the Tabernacle was that it was a collective achievement – one in which not everyone did the same thing. Each gave a different thing. Each contribution was valued – and therefore each participant felt valued. Vayakhel – Moses’ ability to forge out of the dissolution of the people a new and genuine kehillah – was one of his greatest achievements.

To preserve the diversity of a tsibbur with the unity of purpose of an edah – that is the challenge of kehillah - formation, community-building, itself the greatest task of a great leader.

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### Questions to consider:

- ? What defines an Edah and a Tsibbur? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each one?
- ? Can you think of communities you have been a part of – or are currently a part of – that were either an Edah or a Tsibbur? Which are you more drawn to?
- ? Are we ultimately striving for a Kehillah? If so, what enables a community to become a Kehillah and not just be an Edah or a Tsibbur?
- ? What role does a leader play in forming a Kehillah possible?