בס"ד

Shluchim Sermons

Vayikra

The Communal Responsibilities of the Individual

What do we do when we feel like nothing we do matters—when we're tempted to walk away from it all?

Political Apathy

Every once in a while, you hear about people picking up and leaving—whether it's Americans moving abroad or Israelis relocating elsewhere. And they'll tell you why: "I've given up on politics. I've given up on this country." It's not just frustration—it's a deep sense of powerlessness, of being unheard, of feeling like their voice doesn't matter. So they disconnect. They check out.

But what does Judaism have to say about this kind of apathy?

In *Pirkei Avos* (2:4), the sage Hillel teaches, *"Do not separate yourself from the community."* In other words: don't pull away just because you think you're above the noise. Judaism teaches that when the community comes together for something—when people are invested and engaged—you don't get to opt out. You don't get to say, "I'm too smart for this," or "I'm fine on my own." That attitude may sound clever, but it's not Jewish.

We just celebrated Purim not long ago and read the Megillah. In that story, the entire Jewish nation is under threat. But Queen Esther? She's living in the palace, perfectly safe. Even if Haman's decree were carried out, she'd be untouched.

Still, Mordechai sends her a powerful message (Esther 4:13): *"Don't imagine that just because you're in the palace, you'll be spared from what's coming to the rest of us."* In other words, just because you're not feeling the heat doesn't mean you're free from responsibility. If your community is in danger, if your people are suffering, you don't get to stay on the sidelines. You have to care. You have to act.

The Wicked Son

As we approach the holiday of Passover, we come across one of the most well-known parts of the Haggadah: the section about the Four Sons—the wise one, the wicked one, the simple one, and the one who doesn't know how to ask.

Let's focus on the so-called "wicked" son. Why is he labeled a *rasha*—a sinner? What earns him that strong title? Did he commit some terrible crime? Did we catch him in the act or run a background check? Not at all. He's branded "wicked" for one reason: he distances himself from the community.

He asks, "What is this service *to you*?"—not "to us," but "to you," as if he's not part of it. That one word, *"to you,"* reveals everything. He's checked out. He sees Jewish life, tradition, and values as belonging to others, but not to him.

That's why the Haggadah responds so sharply: "Blunt his teeth"—a dramatic phrase to snap him out of it. The author of the Haggadah even adds, "Had he been in Egypt, he would not have been redeemed." That's harsh, but the message is clear: disconnecting from the community is spiritually dangerous. It's not about punishment—it's about reality. Redemption, in Judaism, is a communal experience. You have to see yourself as part of the people to merit being part of their journey.

This same idea shows up in Jewish prayer. Our tradition tells us that prayer said in a group is more powerful than praying alone. Why? Because the power of a community carries everyone with it.

The Talmud (Berachos 8a) teaches that when King David said, *"May my prayer come before You at a favorable time"* (Psalms 69:14), he was referring to the time when the community prays.

To put it in modern terms, think about "buying power" in America. When a group of people buys something together, they can negotiate a better deal than one person buying alone. The same is true with prayer: when we pray together, our collective voice carries more weight. Even if your own merits aren't enough, G-d might answer your prayer in the merit of someone else in the room.

That's why Jews try to pray with a minyan. It's not just about checking a box—it's about being part of something bigger than yourself. Because in Judaism, strength comes from community.

The Lesson from Moses

And who do we learn this lesson from—that one must stand with the community, no matter what? From Moshe Rabbeinu himself.

The Talmud tells us about the battle with Amalek. While the Jews were fighting, Moshe stood on a hilltop and raised his hands in prayer. As long as his hands were lifted toward Heaven, the people were inspired to turn their hearts to G-d—and they prevailed.

But the Talmud notes something fascinating: Moshe didn't sit in a chair. He didn't lean back and relax while the battle raged below. Instead, he chose to sit on a rock—a cold, hard stone. Why? Because when the people are suffering, a leader doesn't make himself comfortable. He feels their pain. He shares in their burden. That's how deeply one must connect with the community.

And we see this again, even earlier, the very first time G-d speaks to Moshe.

Everyone knows the story of the Burning Bush. But here's the question: why a bush? Why didn't G-d simply speak to Moshe the way He did later—directly, without any theatrics? And if He *did* want to use some kind of plant or tree to grab Moshe's attention, why a lowly, thorny bush?

Rashi gives us the answer. G-d chose the bush to send a message: *"I am with them in their pain."* The Jewish people were suffering in Egypt, enslaved and beaten down. So G-d appeared in the humblest, harshest of shrubs—not a tall cedar, not a blossoming flower—to show that He, too, was in exile. That the Divine Presence was suffering right alongside them.

Ruth's Story

Jewish history doesn't just teach us the value of joining with the community—it also shows us the consequences of those who chose not to.

Take the story of Ruth, for example—one of the most beloved figures in the Torah, the great convert and ancestor of King David. But how does her story begin?

It starts in the era of the Judges, with a man named Elimelech. He was wealthy, respected, a leader of his generation. And then came a famine. According to the Midrash, Elimelech saw the writing on the wall: *"Everyone's coming to me for help,"* he thought. *"They're lining*

up at my door with their tzedakah boxes!" So what did he do? Instead of supporting his people in their time of need, he ran. He packed up his family and fled to Moav, hoping to protect his wealth—even if it meant abandoning the community.

But what happened next? Tragedy struck. Elimelech and his sons died in Moav. G-d helped the Jewish people—the famine passed—and his widow, Naomi, returned to Beis Lechem alone, penniless, relying on the very community her husband had abandoned.

And this isn't a one-time story.

Right after the destruction of the Second Temple, when Jewish life was in upheaval, the spiritual center shifted from Jerusalem to Yavneh, where Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai led the rebuilding of Torah life. Among his top students was Rabbi Elazar ben Arach—brilliant, sharp, a true giant of Torah.

But instead of settling in Yavneh with his colleagues, Rabbi Elazar took his wife's advice and moved elsewhere—to a place of luxury and comfort, something like Miami Beach. His wife reassured him: *"You're such a great scholar, they'll all come running to be near you!"* But they didn't. They stayed with the community. And over time, isolated and far from the vibrant world of Torah, Rabbi Elazar ben Arach forgot everything he knew.

The Communal Sacrifices

We find this same powerful theme in this week's Torah portion.

This week, we begin the book of *Vayikra*—Leviticus—the book that deals heavily with sacrifices. Now, there are many types of offerings discussed: burnt offerings, thanksgiving offerings, and more. Many of them are voluntary—brought at specific times, for specific reasons.

But there's one category that stands out: the *communal sacrifice*. Every single day—morning and afternoon—a sacrifice was brought in the Beis HaMikdash on behalf of the *entire* Jewish people. Not just the righteous. Not just the wealthy. Everyone.

And here's the key: it wasn't funded by a few generous donors or by the kohanim. The funds came from every Jew, rich or poor. Each person was obligated to give a half-shekel to the communal fund.

The Rambam writes at the beginning of *Hilchos Shekalim* that even someone who was completely dependent on charity had to contribute.

If he didn’t have it, he had to borrow. If he couldn’t borrow, he had to sell the shirt off his back. That’s how serious this was. Everyone had to be part of the community offering. No exceptions.

The message is crystal clear: in Judaism, there is no such thing as, “It’s not my problem.” We don’t get to say, “I’ll take care of myself and let others fend for themselves.” That’s not our way. Judaism teaches that we are all part of something bigger, and sometimes we even compel a person to join—because the health of the whole depends on the involvement of each individual.

Why is this so important? Because unity is the secret of Jewish survival. Our strength has never been in numbers or power—it’s in our connection to one another. When we feel responsible for Jews halfway across the world—whether in Russia, Israel, or Argentina—when we send help, care, and support, we awaken that same care from Above. When we think about others, G-d thinks about us. When we look out for each other, He looks out for us.

That’s the power of community.