

Rabbi Deborah Goldberg
Congregation Rodeph Sholom
HHD 5783 Sermon

Becoming Kahal Kadosh

Sunday, May 5, 1929. A large group gathers on 83rd street, several hundred feet from where we sit today. They gathered for a ceremony to lay the cornerstone of this very building. As rain fell, the crowd heard from the Honorable James J. Walker, the Mayor of New York City; from Mr. Charles B. Meyers, the architect of the building; and from Henry M. Goldfogle, the president of Congregation Rodeph Sholom in 1929.

The laying of this cornerstone was a joyous occasion. It symbolized a new era for Congregation Rodeph Sholom, one in which there would be a main sanctuary with seating for 1300 people on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. They built this building to be a tangible symbol of the contribution of Jewish Americans to 20th century America, as well as a monument to the success of Jewish immigrants who had arrived only a few generations earlier. The American Hebrew, a Jewish magazine, reported: “No time, effort, or expense has been spared to make this a work of artistic beauty and lasting magnificence, its cost being approximately \$2,000,000.”¹

The cornerstone itself was relatively simple—take a look at it on your way out of the building today. Our name is etched in Hebrew and in English. The stone includes the date of our founding, 1842/5603 and the date the stone itself was laid, 1929/5689.

On the first row of lettering, there are two Hebrew letters that are left untranslated in the English: Kuf Kuf. This is an acronym for *Kahal Kadosh*, meaning “holy community.” According to our cornerstone, we are Kahal Kadosh Rodeph Sholom—the sacred community of peace-pursuers.

What do we make of this namesake? What is its legacy for us today? We speak often of being Rodeph Sholom, pursuers of peace, but our full name also includes another aspiration for what type of community we are supposed to be.

The story of the Israelites’ journey in the desert is obsessed with numbers and with counting, with community and with gathering. We know the story: the Israelites left Egypt and wandered in the desert for forty years before entering the Promised Land.

Two episodes in particular stand out when we think about our ancestors building holy community in the desert.

¹ The American Hebrew. CRS Archives.

The first is the Golden Calf. In Exodus, we read *vayakhel ha'am*, the people gathered themselves together (Ex. 32:1). The people gathered to demand that Aaron make them a God they could see because Moses delayed in coming down Mt. Sinai. In their fear and distress, our ancestors built an idol.

A few chapters later in Exodus, we read another story of a communal gathering: *Vayakhel Moshe el kol adat b'nai Yisrael*, Moses gathered all the people Israel together (Ex. 35:1). And then Moses gives them instructions: everyone who is so moved shall bring gifts to Adonai and these gifts will build the Mishkan, the moveable sanctuary that will house the Ten Commandments.

Why does the Torah use the same verb, *vayakhel*, to describe two seemingly opposite stories of the Israelite wandering, one dishonorable and one admirable? Perhaps because the motivations behind their actions were the same—to be together in community.

Our ancestors who built the Golden Calf made the dishonorable choice by building an idol, but their impulses towards communal gathering and for ritual in moments of distress were admirable. This story teaches us that fear—fear of not seeing God, fear of the future being unlike the past, fear of the unknown—is not enough of a motivating factor to build something permanent. Fear, though real, cannot and will not sustain a building project that will last.

Cultivating sacred connections and constructing sacred time, however, can sustain a building project.

Not all assemblies are holy, but all gatherings have the potential to become holy.

How do we make our gatherings holy? How do we become *kahal kadosh*, a holy community?

This question has been at the heart of Jewish life for centuries.

Here at Congregation Rodeph Sholom, in our small corner of the Jewish world, we have been trying to answer that question as well.

Several years ago, we started an initiative called Minyan. Hundreds of people have since participated in our small-group programming. The name Minyan comes from the Hebrew word for quorum, the word we use to describe the minimum number of people needed for a prayer group - ten. While our Minyans are not prayer-focused, we believe deeply in the

idea that meaningful gathering requires a group. Abba Kovner, a famous Polish Israeli poet and partisan leader in the Vilna Ghetto, wrote about his first week in Israel and standing at the Western Wall for the afternoon prayers. He said: “Perhaps this is the most significant thing in Judaism. To know that the nine needs the tenth, and the one needs the nine.”² To participate in a Minyan is to know that we need each other.

Minyans are forming right now for the coming year. Groups are sparked by a leader with a particular interest or goal, but everyone is responsible for the success of the Minyan. All Minyans gather like-minded people with similar interests or needs. There’s a Mafia Movie Mavens Minyan and a Jazz Jam Minyan. There are two Minyans for healthcare professionals, gathering to be in community with people whose lives and work have been drastically affected by the pandemic.

Not everyone belongs to every Minyan, but everyone deserves to have their own place of belonging. That is the core purpose of our Minyans here at CRS.

Tribe, our Jewish community for 20s and 30s, has the same ethos. At Tribe, we believe that Jewish 20s and 30s deserve opportunities for community building and meaningful engagement with Jewish life. Some of those 20s and 30s will become families with young children and might find themselves in other parts of our synagogue like Sholom Sprouts or Adventures & Discoveries. And some of them won’t. The premise of Tribe is that young adult Jews crave belonging and community regardless of their future plans and that they bring enormous value to our Jewish communities whether or not they ever have children.

In the coming year, Tribe will celebrate Shabbat once a month, gather for Sukkot, Hanukkah, and Passover, and meet in coffee shops on Sunday mornings for Jewish learning and pastries with friends.

Hillel, one of our great sages, teaches: “Do not separate yourself from the community.”³ The converse of this, therefore, must also be true: We must not create barriers to participating in community for anyone. Tribe is one way we lower the barrier to participation in Jewish life and invites young adults to be co-creators of the community we want.

Participating in Minyan, in Tribe, or in any of the myriad ways we gather here at CRS requires at least some vulnerability. To show up in those spaces is to say: I’m here, I’m willing, and I’d like to part of a community.

That can be a scary prospect, but the reward—being seen and known by people, being responsible for others, finding people with whom you share values and aspirations—is tremendous.

² Abba Kovner, One of the Minyan

³ Pirkei Avot 2:4

Priya Parker, author of *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*, advises us to think about the purpose of each gathering, as well as how to end a gathering. We've all been at a conference where a speaker offered an inspiring final speech, and then an organizer took the microphone and made some banal announcement about where to find the buses.

All of us sitting here have participated in a gathering today. Our purpose is to pray, to connect to the Divine and each other, and to bring in a new year with intention and meaning.

So, before I dazzle you with my final paragraphs, a few words on logistics:

We want Rodeph Sholom to be a place of sacred gathering.

Whether you are looking for prayer or for learning; for a group to see shows with; for people who jog or run or bike or some other physical activity.

Whether you are looking to celebrate the arrival of new life or love in your family or you are grieving a loss and don't want to be alone.

Or something else entirely.

If you are waiting for an invitation to join us at Minyan, at Tribe, at Sprouts, at Rodeph Sholom School, at CRS Outings, with CRS Social Justice work, at Torah study, at services, or at something I've forgotten, this is your invitation. Please join us. Your presence is needed in order to make our community truly sacred. You can find information on our website for any of these initiatives and I know I speak for all of our clergy and staff when I say that we would be delighted to talk to you about new ideas for what you would like to see us build next.

When our predecessors stood in the rain nearly 100 years ago and laid the cornerstone of this building, they didn't know that they were only months away from the stock market crash that would set off the Great Depression. They didn't know that the world as they knew it was about to be upended. Perhaps we can empathize with them more than ever before having lived through the last several years of upheaval and turmoil.

In his remarks that Sunday in 1929, congregational president Henry Goldfogle said, “This temple is inspired by faith and devotion to Jewish ideals [...] It is animated by the same zeal and earnest desire that characterized our fathers and mothers in their religious observances, but above all it invokes the guidance and blessing of the Infinite Ruler of the Universe. Rodeph Sholom moves forward to complete the edifice which shall stand as another sacred contribution to the humanitarian cause of American Israel.”⁴

Like our ancestors in the desert, and like our forebears in this congregation, we are inspired by faith and devotion to Jewish ideals.
We are animated by zeal and earnest desire to build something that will outlast us.
We invoke the guidance and blessing of the Holy One to give us strength and fortitude for the path ahead.
We too must move forward and offer sacred contributions.

Our ancestors built.
First in the desert: they built a Mishkan fitting for a nomadic people.
Then here: a building that staked their claim to the landscape of American life and that would house their descendants for generations.

So too must we build.
We’ve built a Mishkan.
We’ve built a beautiful building.

What will we build next?
Let us live up to our cornerstone and strive now to build within and beyond this building a *kahal kadosh*, a holy community.

⁴ New York Times, May 6, 1929, “Mayor Lays Stone of Rodeph Sholom.” CRS Archives.