

Paul Mendes-Flohr elaborates: “Having a common center to which they are devoted, the members of the community are, to varying degrees, freed from the shackles of self-centered interest, rendering them more alert to the existence and presence of the other.”¹

In the 100-year old, small (75-family) congregation I serve, one challenge is to remain cautious of a tendency to let one person’s deep involvement in and leadership of the community grant that individual permission to become the perceived definer of a common center.

When we draw more people into a collaborative relationship to responsibility and leadership, and help an individual step back from what amounts to overwork on our behalf, we open ourselves to a healthy and much needed conversation about what constitutes our common center.

—Anne Heath

Rabbi Toba Spitzer explicates nicely a core challenge of contemporary Judaism: to clearly state the objectives and advantages of belonging to a Jewish community. We desperately need to communicate a message that is purposeful and intentional.

While Jewish learning, *chesed*, and *tzedek* must underlie the actions and practices of a Jewish community, each

community needs to carefully consider what binds its “radii” to its “center.” Some people who enter Jewish houses of worship are struck by the heartfelt character of prayer and view the community through that experience. Others may enter through an educational portal and become attached to community through learning. For others, social action may be the “center” that binds them to the other “radii.”

Successful communities will recognize the

multiple entryways in which individuals develop connections to the larger community and work to foster relationships that deepen, strengthen, and cross those lines.

—Eric Cohen

“The real beginning of community is when its members have a common relation to the center overriding all other relations: the circle is described by the radii, not by the points along its circumference.”

—Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia*

If asked what they most appreciate about our congregation, many congregants would respond, “the community.” In a society that exalts the individual and makes meaningful communal life a challenge, there is indeed something precious about the connections and support that a synagogue can provide. But what gives our congregation (or any successful synagogue or Jewish communal organization) its strength is a core vision and mission that binds our members together.

A Jewish community has to have a *raison d’être* at its center if it is to be vital. “Continuity” and “survival” are not sufficient to engage American Jews in Jewish life. The Jewish people, beginning with the Exodus narrative of the Torah, has at its center a mission to make godliness manifest in this world. We need to know what we are doing and why we are doing it in order to build strong Jewish communal structures. Not all Jews will agree on what that guiding vision must be. At my synagogue, our members engage in Jewish learning in order to live out values of *tzedek* and *chesed*, justice and lovingkindness, in relation to one another and the society around us. True to Buber’s teaching, I have learned that the “points along the circumference” will develop deep and lasting ties to one another in direct proportion to the strength of the radii that attach those points to the “center.”

—Toba Spitzer

When I tried to reflect on Buber’s line about a community’s radii and center, I realized I needed to sketch a picture of a circle with points along the circumference and its radii. The result was an abstract drawing of a group of people dancing in a circle around something in the center. My immediate association was people dancing on Simchat Torah around the Torah or dancing at a wedding around a bride and groom. If 20 random people were asked to do a circle dance, there would be no energy and no community creation. If, however, 20 people danced around a Torah or around a bride and groom, even if they have never met, a sacred community coalesces in a most powerful way around the “center.” Every Friday night in our synagogue, we dance during *Lecha Dodi*. The “center” is a mixture of Shabbat, *tefilah* (prayer), and the collective joy and success of the entire community that week all rolled into one “center” that serves as the focus of our spiritual growth as a community.

While I agree that communities need a *raison d’être* at their center, I do not believe that grand missions and visions are necessary. Subcommunities within a larger synagogue or community can and should join around smaller goals and visions. Instead of communities thinking about one mission statement to serve as its “center” or core, we might be better off thinking of 15 to 20 “centers” that have many interweaving circles of dance.

—Nissan Antine

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¹ From “The Desert Within and Social Renewal: Martin Buber’s Vision of Utopia,” in *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*, edited by Michael Zank (p.227), referencing Buber’s *I and Thou* pp. 96-100.