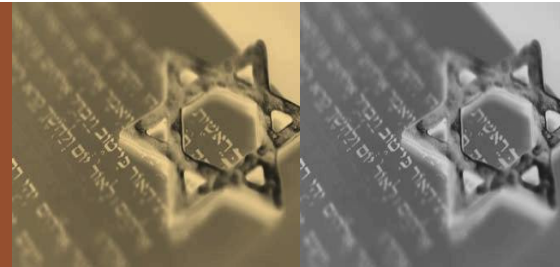


# CHAPTER FIVE

## PART TWO: THE DYNAMICS OF JEWISH COMMUNITY LOOKING FOR A PLACE TO PARK OUR WEARY BONES: THE PLACE AND ROLE OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN TIME AND SPACE



### INTRODUCTION

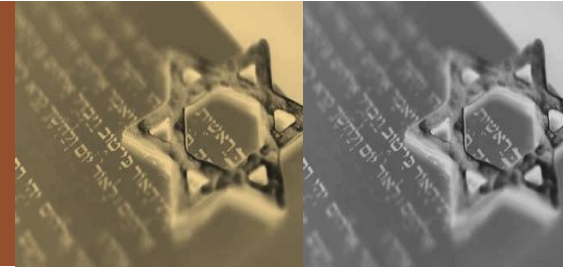
We have now examined the basic Jewish historical framework over the last three chapters. In that examination we have emphasized the place of Jewish community in the historical story, looking especially at the rise and fall of different communities at different times and places. In the next few chapters we change direction. We will be looking at themes connected with the idea and the practice of Jewish community within the historical framework that we have already established. There is a danger in setting things up this way and it is worth putting it up front at this point as we move into this section. Although we are trying to isolate themes in the Jewish community, inevitably we will be referring to different historical periods and locations and there is always a danger of repeating things of which we have already talked. Bear in mind that now the context is different and we hope that the fact that a framework of history has already been established will help you to place and contextualize the specific phenomena that we will now talk about. In these next chapters we will base ourselves around a series of questions. Let us start looking at the questions and suggesting some answers.

It is impossible to examine the story of the Jews without the subject of the community coming up all the time. The development of the Jewish community is an inseparable part of that story. The question that we are going to examine in this chapter is 'why?' Why was the Jewish community such an important part of the historical story? What was it in the Jewish community that made it so central in Jewish history?

In order to examine this, there are other major questions that we will try and answer. In what way was the role of the community affected by the fact that the Jewish story is largely a Diaspora story – occurring, as it did very largely outside of the land of Israel? Was the centrality of Jewish community influenced by the Rabbinic ideology that was so dominant in the whole of the pre-modern Diaspora? What were the needs of the members of the community from their community structure? All of these are issues that we will attempt to deal with in this chapter.



## THE JEWISH STORY THE SAME AS EVERYONE ELSE'S?



It is tempting to dismiss all questions concerning the importance and centrality of the Jewish community, by saying that the answers are obvious: people need community and all peoples have lived in communities of one kind or other. From one point of view this is true. All human beings have tended to live in some kind of community or other, unless, for ideological reasons, (usually religious), some have decided to separate themselves from the rest of their group and to live their lives in isolation from others. Apparently, to live with others is a human need. People tend to fear isolation. We need the company of others, both in order to feel physically safe, in order to create a reasonable way of life in economic and social terms and because of an emotional and psychological need due to which we have to be with other people. All these answers are clearly true and all of them are universal. But here we want to suggest that the Jewish story, while reflecting those universal truths, is also a specific story, different from others, where the community has played a central role, not just because of the reasons given here, but for a host of extra reasons as well. It is these specific, different needs that we will examine here. The rest we take for granted.

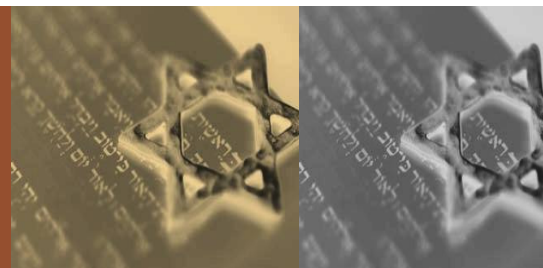
The major difference between the idea of community as it developed for the Jews and as it has tended to develop for other peoples is connected with the peculiar historical circumstances in which Jews have lived for most of their history.

In almost all peoples a community is a basic unit of national society. Above it there is some kind of a hierarchical structure which represents the authorities who rule the area of which the community is a part. At the top of this pyramid has traditionally been the monarch. In more modern times the monarch or emperor has been replaced almost everywhere by the state or the government. Whatever the nature of the unit at the top of the pyramid, the essential thing to understand is that the individual community forms part of the basis of the national structure. In times when central control is weak (civil war, revolution, anarchy etc.) the community might be left to its own devices without a structure on top of it, but from the time that a state structure is in place, whenever that structure is working and is properly administered, the individual community is part of something bigger and stands at the bottom of a pyramid of power. That is exactly what was meant to happen to the Jews.

When the Jews were based in their own land, the story of their community and the way that it ran was fairly similar to everyone else's story. Slowly over time instead of a decentralized tribal society, we see a strong centralized nation state beginning to emerge with a monarch at the top of a strong central administration. We referred to that in the second chapter in our discussion of Solomon's state. There were naturally tensions in this process, but there was nothing distinct in this tension. In one way or other it was part of the other stories too.



## WHERE THE STORY CHANGES: DESTRUCTION AND EXILE



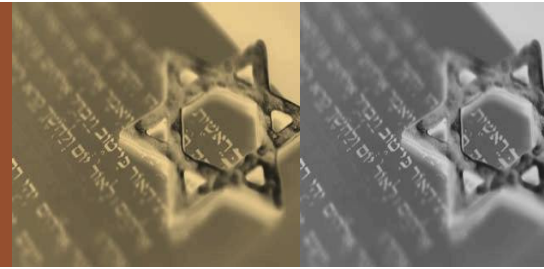
Where the Jewish story diverges, of course, from everyone else's is that the process was stopped when the people was conquered, the state was destroyed and the people went, voluntarily or not, into exile. This happened twice. It happened once at the time of the destruction of the first Temple, but that was only for a short time and indeed, as far as we know, in Babylon, for the few decades of exile, the exiled king was seen as the head of the Jewish semi-autonomic group, by the Babylonians. They related to him as the Jewish king and he had some kind of status or authority and responsibility for the Jewish community.

After some fifty years, the Jews (or those who wanted) were restored to their land and the old system redeveloped apart from the fact that at the top of the pyramid for most of the second temple period, there sat a foreign king. This happened because the Jews in Judah were part of somebody else's empire for the majority of the time. Even that was normal. Most peoples and states at that time sat on their own land but were part of somebody else's empire. Some kind of autonomy was given to the conquered peoples and they would have some form of leadership which would be responsible to the empire that had conquered them.

But the second destruction was different. After the destruction of the second Temple by the Romans, the situation begins to change radically. This was not a normal destruction. Even before the Roman destruction there were more Jews living outside Eretz Israel than were living inside it. Now, following the destruction, over the course of a couple of centuries, the vast majority of Jews who were still in the country, left and lived in Diaspora. After the period of the Mishnah, the land remained an emotional centre, but the real physical centre of the Jewish people moved elsewhere, initially to Babylon and subsequently to Spain, North Africa, Ashkenaz, Eastern Europe, Turkey and other places. By the time this happens, the old model is broken forever. A new situation has arisen. The nation is in exile. The nation on its own land, is effectively a thing of the past.



## THE EMERGENCE OF THE CLASSIC COMMUNITY A DIASPORA STORY



This is precisely when the classic Jewish community starts to emerge. The extraordinary thing about the Jewish nation is that its communities emerged at their strongest precisely when there was no overall national structure to hold them together.

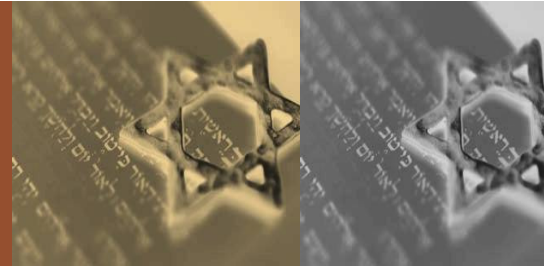
There are times in the lives of many nations, when there are "hiccups" in national control of the communities. Civil war or revolution can create a situation where the overall national government loses control of at least some of its communities. But these situations are temporary. When the war, the revolution is over, central control is restored. When national control has not been restored, often at a time of conquest for example, in time almost always one of two things has happened. Either a new structure has risen or the people has disappeared. Hundreds of ancient peoples ultimately disappeared from history after they lost a central structure, usually after defeat in war. Where for example are the Philistines or the Canaanites that we hear about in the Biblical record, today?

The unique thing about the Jews is that neither of the two usual things happened. They continued to see themselves as a nation over thousands of years despite the fact that they had no national structure! There is no parallel in human history of a group which has continued to think of itself as a nation despite the fact that it has no national territorial centre and its people are scattered in separate communities over dozens of different states. And make no mistake. There might have been – and there were - individual Jews who left the different communities and became part of another people. But the Jews as a whole for thousands of years continued to see themselves as part of the Jewish nation in exile. A Jewish family could live for many centuries in Babylon, Spain or Poland or anywhere else without thinking of themselves as Babylonian, Spanish or Polish.

Let us ask a couple of Jews in some of the great Jewish centres in Diaspora history, how they see themselves.



## MEETING JEWS. TWO CLASSIC JEWS FROM CLASSIC JEWISH COMMUNITIES.



This is Judah Ibn Tibbon, a famous translator of classic Jewish works from the Arabic in which they were written, into Hebrew. Ibn Tibbon, an important Spanish Jewish intellectual born around 1120, in the Spanish Moslem state of Granada, was forced by persecution to move to the town of Lunel in southern France when he was about thirty years old. He lived there for the rest of his life.

*"It's hard living among the Christians after thirty years of living in Granada. It's not as though there were no problems in Granada. It's a fact that I had to flee to a different country and start life all over again. Nevertheless, life on the whole was pretty good under the Moslems. And what an educated people! I spent large parts of my life learning from them. And then I came here to Lunel, and what do I find here? Ignorant people. Apart from the Jews there is almost no-one that you can have a proper conversation with. Maybe I could talk to the local priest. At least he knows how to read and write which is more than you can say for anyone else here. But why would I want to talk to a priest? They hate us!*

*Anyway, I understand that you want to find out how I define myself. You use a new word with which I'm not familiar – identity. It interests me. I am a man who lives by words. I do not know this word but I understand that it means something to do with the inner being, the inner substance of a person. And what is my 'inner being'? Why, that is so simple. I'm surprised you have to ask. It's almost an insult to me to think that you don't see it clearly when you look at me. I'm a Jew, a proud Jew. What do you take me for? One of these ignorant Frenchmen? Not likely! Even when I lived in Granada among the Moslems that I so respected, what do you think I was? A Moslem? A Granadan, whatever that really means? No sir, I'm a Jew. I live as a Jew, I was persecuted as a Jew, and I will die as a Jew! What a funny question. And what a funny word – identity."*

You might think that someone who has split his life into two different countries and therefore perhaps cannot be expected to identify with either, represents an atypical case. So let us ask Gluckel of Hameln, the woman who made her mark on history by writing a memoir and a chronicle of her life after her husband's death. Born in Hamburg, Germany in 1645, she stayed in the German lands throughout her life till her death in 1724.

*"It is a pleasure to meet you. I have a very busy life, carrying on the family business now that my husband, Chaim, is no longer with us. But in the evenings, it can be a little hard. I get lonely sometimes and I console myself by writing down the story of my life. It passes the time. In any case, I am always glad for company, so thank you for coming here and asking to meet me. I don't know exactly what it is that you want to hear. We try and live a quiet life here in Hamburg. We try not to draw attention*



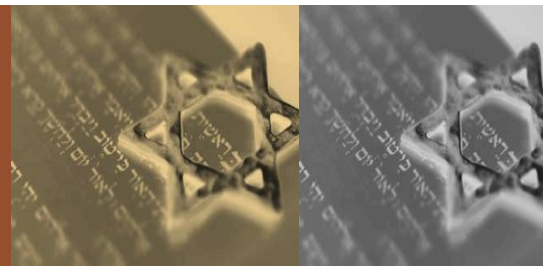
*to ourselves, since that invariably causes trouble. This has not been an easy place to live for Jews. In our generations it is a little better. We have not had major trouble for some time.*

*Anyway, you want to hear how I see myself? It is simple. I see myself as a Jew, living in German lands among people, some of whom I get on with well and some of whom I fear and draw myself away from. I have lived in the area all my life and I will probably die here – unless the Messiah comes and takes us all away to our own country. That would be wonderful but I am more than a little sceptical. When I was in my early twenties, we had a whole story – not just here but throughout much of the Jewish world. We thought the Messiah had indeed arrived. He was a Turkish Jew called Shabbetai Zevi. I won't tell the story now. You probably know it. It has been told many times. We around here don't talk about it very much because it is a source of sadness and shame. We acted foolishly. We sold our houses and waited to be taken to Eretz Israel. Some of us sat on the roof of the synagogue and waited to fly! It sounds so ridiculous now but that's really what happened. We learned our lesson – and a very hard one at that. But we were so keen to go and to see our own land. Germany is not our land. We Jews will never belong."*

Both of our guests confirm what we know so well. The vast majority of Jews saw the lands in which they lived as temporary. Even when deeply attached to their countries, as Judah Ibn Tibbon was to Granada, for example, they never saw themselves as belonging to the outer society unless they converted and left the Jewish collective. Plenty did that, but for those that stayed, the Jewish community was their country. They had no state framework defining them as Jews as had the Jews that had lived in Eretz Israel. These were Jews of Diaspora, of Exile, who saw the Jewish community as the substitute for the homeland that they had lost.



## LIVING YOUR NATION THROUGH YOUR COMMUNITY THE JEWISH MODEL



It was as if the Jewish community, the physical place where the Jews lived, provided a substitute for the state that they had lost. They saw themselves as exiled Jews, living temporarily in different countries. Even those who were more enthusiastic and attached to the places where they lived, understood that when the Messiah came they would go home. In the meantime the community was their home, their nation, their substitute for the real national life they no longer possessed. They lived their nationhood through their involvement in the Jewish community.

This whole attitude towards community – the idea of the community as the substitute nation – was very much encouraged by the Rabbinic ideology which underpinned all Jewish life in the Diaspora in the pre-modern period. The Rabbis were the group who emerged in the aftermath of the second destruction as the leaders of the nation, as we saw in chapter three. It took a while until their authority was fully recognized but it was their outlook and ideology and literature that became the dominant stream. Once they were in leadership their role was almost completely unchallenged till modernity changed the whole of the story.

In order to understand the role of community in the Jewish story, we have to understand the Rabbis. It was the Rabbis - drawing on earlier traditions - who developed and strengthened this idea that the community was the framework in which the people must live their Jewish life until messianic redemption. It was they who encouraged the people to see themselves as living among the nations, conscious of the fact that they were in a situation of exile and that their real home was in Eretz Israel. The Rabbis drew on an earlier idea that had developed at the time of the first Temple's destruction and the exile to Babylon.

In a correspondence recorded in Chapter 29 of Jeremiah, who was the leading prophet of the pre-destruction era in Jerusalem, the exiles turn to the old prophet and ask for advice: How should they conduct themselves in their exiled lands of Babylon? The advice Jeremiah gives is significant. He tells them to wait in Babylon, living normal lives “building houses and planting gardens”, until God decides to bring them back. Thus the decision is in God’s hands. It was God who had been responsible for their exile and it would be God who would bring them back. God is quoted as saying *“I will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile”*, (verse 14). In saying this to the exiles, Jeremiah is acting according to the prophetic idea that states that God is behind everything that happens to Israel, and that exile must be regarded as divine punishment. In line with this idea, return to the land will come after a period of punishment when Israel’s



behaviour has persuaded God that true repentance for past sin, has taken place.

Thus, the return of the nation Israel, just like its defeat and exile, are removed from the realm of this-worldly politics and are placed firmly in a theological context of dependence on divine decision-making. In this theological scheme of things, the only initiative that the Jewish people are entitled to take, is one of prayer and repentance in order to prepare the way for God's ultimate decision. This theological construct was decisive for the future unfolding of the Jewish narrative regarding the return to the Land of Israel. It is important to remember, of course, that the issue for us in understanding Jewish behavior is not whether God really was behind the destruction or even whether there is a real God working in the world. The issue is one of belief. The people believed and chose to interpret the destruction as a Divine punishment. As such, they took God into account when they decided how to act.

Strictly speaking, there was no discouragement against individual Jews acting on the strength of their feelings and going to live out their life in "Zion." The problem, from a theological point of view, was viewed in collective terms. The community as a whole, it was taught, was forbidden to take collective steps to return. To do so would be to rebel against God, whose sole decision it was to decide on the date of the deliverance and the return. There were a number of ways that the "prohibition" against the return was explained. The most popular seems to be that invoked by the three oaths which Israel was said to have been involved in when they accepted the punishment of exile. The details (and the text most popularly brought to explain this) are from the Babylonian Talmud. It is worth quoting it here.

*What are these three oaths? One, that Israel not "ascend the wall" [Rashi: together, by force]: one that the Holy One, Blessed be He, adjured Israel not to rebel against the nations of the world: and one that the Holy One, Blessed be He, adjured the nations of the world not to oppress Israel overmuch.*

*Bab. Talmud Ketubbot 111a.*

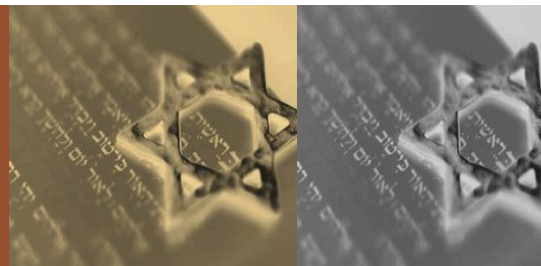
These oaths appear to have been invoked whenever there were large groups of Jews who were interested in leaving the lands of the Exile and settling in Eretz Israel. Although they never appear to have had the force of halacha they were clearly felt to have considerable moral force. Jews who went in large numbers were typically considered as having "ascended the wall," and therefore to have performed an act of rebellion against God – going against the oath that they had given God. But there were those who disagreed.

The great medieval Jewish scholar the Ramban, or Nachmanides, certainly took a different line arguing in a commentary that "It is incumbent upon every individual to go up to live [in Israel]" and that this was no less than "a positive commandment incumbent upon every individual in every generation". He himself was one of a very large group of Jews who went up to the Land in the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, despite the moral authority of the Ramban and other Olim (immigrants to Israel), the majority appears to have felt very differently.





## THE MEANING OF EXILE LIVING IN THE WRONG PLACE



The Rabbis took this idea and developed it further. Among other things they surrounded the life of the individual Jew, with a series of daily reminders, through prayer, ritual and ceremony. The Jews were in exile. They must pray to go back. Their land awaits them but the time is not right. At some point the Divine decision will change, the punishment will be lifted and they will be enabled to go back to their own land. Meanwhile they must wait. We heard a certain amount of this from Gluckel of Hameln. Let us hear another witness.

*"Shalom to you. I say Shalom to you, but you should really say Shalom to me! That is my name. My whole name is Rabbi Shalom Shabazzi, and this is my home in the town of Taizz in the south of Yemen. It is here that I do my writing. Actually I am a weaver by trade but you have not heard of my weaving, you have perhaps heard of my writing. So I present myself to you as Shalom Shabazzi who writes poetry.*

*What do I write about? What should a Jew write about while living in the depths of the lands of exile? I write about the Messiah and about our hope for redemption. I write about our dreams and our yearnings. I write about the bitterness of our exile and our sadness of living without God's forgiveness for our sins.*

*Do you know the meaning of Galut, the real meaning? Do you know what it means to live your life out in the knowledge that you are living in the wrong place but that the right place is closed to you. Exile is the opposite of home. Home is where you belong. Exile is where you wither. Home is where you are accepted. Exile is where you are rejected. Home is where you are blessed. Exile is where you are cursed. Excuse me for waxing a trifle poetic, but that is the way that I tend to think. But exile really **is** bitter for us Jews. We live, huddled up in our small communities and try and create small sparks of life in the darkness of the world in which we live. This is a dark and bitter world, and our task is to create light out of that darkness. Ultimately when there is enough light, we will return home. The sparks will come and light the candle that the Messiah will hold to light our way home. It will happen and may it happen soon, but ours is not to question the way of God. We will wait to go home; we have been waiting already for a long time. Some seventeen hundred years have already passed and we are still waiting but, please God, it will be worth waiting for."*

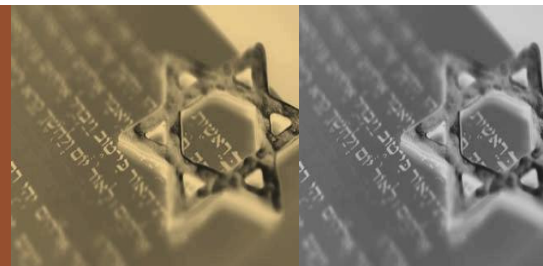
Thus the Rabbis developed and strengthened the idea that the Jews in Diaspora should see themselves as existing in a temporary situation of Galut, in which their community life was the framework for their national feeling and existence.



In general, the Rabbinic system praised the idea of community. They saw it in the highest terms. We will see this idea in more detail in the next chapter but for the moment we will limit ourselves to the following observation. If the Rabbis, as we have suggested, saw the community as the central framework for Jewish life in the absence of sovereignty (which would be regained by the action of the Messiah), we must ask ourselves, what were the central values that the Rabbis associated with Jewish life? If we can understand how the Rabbis saw the priorities for Jews in life, and we acknowledge that the community was the vehicle for the living of Jewish life, then we will be able to examine to what extent the Rabbinic agenda was reflected in the institutions of community life.



## WHAT DID THE RABBIS WANT? THE MISHNA'S 'TAKE'



The best way to understand this is to talk with one of the leading characters of Rabbinic Judaism. We have already met R. Yehudah HaNasi in chapter two. He was the compiler of the Mishnah, the first great Rabbinic work, in the second century. He lived in Eretz Israel, in the Galilee, and it was there that he worked to finalise his Mishnah (based on earlier traditions), as the first book of the Rabbinic tradition, that would set the standard for Jewish life all over the world.

It was R. Yehudah, in his overseeing of the work and the bringing it to its final version, through his masterful editing, that provided generations to come with the definitive blueprint for subsequent Rabbinic ideology. It was on the basis of the Mishnah that the later versions of the Talmud were compiled and we are entitled to see in the Mishnah the premier document of the Rabbinic mind. If we were to ask R. Yehuda how he saw the central Rabbinic values, what would he say?

*"Shalom to all of you. I understand that you are on a quest to understand the Rabbinic mind. I have been asked to tell you how I see the issue of the values that we Rabbis believe must underlie the Jewish way of life. This is a very complex question and time does not allow me to give you a full explanation of where I stand on this. Even if I had time I would not tell you too much. We Rabbis are dedicated to the idea that it is important for the individual seeker to search out the truth from the sacred texts. We need to seek out meaning – we use the word lidrosh - לדרוש - from the texts. If I gave you the answers, would you ever think for yourselves? I am not sure. Education should be a process of seeking out the truth, not learning things like a parrot. Nevertheless, I do not want you to leave my study house with empty hands, therefore I will give you a clue to my thoughts.*

*You know the Mishnah, I hope. You know that 99% of it is about doing, about all sorts of aspects of doing. The essential questions that my Mishnah comes to answer are the following: What is a Jew meant to do in life? What does God want the Jew to do? We tried to answer that question by going systematically through all aspects of life and examining God's demands. What is a Jew meant to do when he or she gets up in the morning? And at night? And in business life? And in ritual life? We went through all the aspects of human life that need an answer, and we tried to explain how we think God wants each of us to act. Our book is all about doing. It is not like the Torah. It does not contain stories. It contains lists of suggested actions. This is what you do in the morning. This is what you do at night. These are your obligations. We tried to make things clear. We often brought different opinions and that is natural because we are not privy to God's secrets. We do not know exactly what God wants of us. But when we brought several opinions, we tried to make it clear where most of us Rabbis stand on the issue at hand.*



*So, I repeat, it is a book about doing. Completely. Apart from one small section, the section that in many ways is closest to my heart, the section that we call Avot or Pirkei Avot, as some call it. This section is different from all the others. We have allowed ourselves to deviate from the general plan in this one section. This section contains Rabbinic wisdom – all sorts of important ideas and thoughts that we did not want to lose. To use your modern word which I keep on hearing, this is the ideological heart of our book. It is here that you get our ideas, and the ideas of our illustrious predecessors regarding what you would call our 'values'.*

*I love this part of the Mishnah and I worked long and hard on it. Some sections had been prepared in earlier generations but I was the one who put it in its final order. Now, let me ask you a question. An author who wants to get a certain message across, where would he put it? If you were looking for the "message" of a particular book, where would you search? You don't know? Well, I will tell you what I think. I think that an author must take great pains with his opening statements and his closing ones. It is as if he wants you to see his work through the prism of his opening statement and as for his closing statement, it is like the final pounding on the table to make sure you understand his idea. That, at least is what guided me, in my treatment of Avot.*

*Let us now look and see what happens at the beginning and end of Avot. At the beginning, I put the statement of authority. I stated that we are the heirs of a long line of teachings which ultimately stretch back to Moses. I had to start there, to give our collective credentials, to explain why this work should be taken seriously. But once I had done that, I put in my first statement of content and I thought long and hard about what I wanted to say. I wanted to take a statement from an old authority – the whole first part is arranged in that way – and I finally decided on a statement in the name of the great Shimon the Tzaddik who lived about five hundred years before my time. He said something very simple and very beautiful and I took it for my opening statement after I had explained the question of authority.*

*This is what he said. "The world stands on, or by virtue of, three things – the Torah, service of God and deeds of loving kindness". You have probably heard this phrase. It is, as you would say, 'catchy'. It will be well remembered. That was the beginning of the book. At the end, I put a saying which I like very much from my colleague, Hanania ben Akashya. He too said something beautiful. "The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give a reward to Israel. Therefore he multiplied for them Torah and Mitzvoth".*

*Take those two statements, they serve as the bookends to our ideological work of Avot and they serve as the bookends to our ideology itself. Torah, mitzvoth, the service of God and deeds of lovingkindness. You have to think how to do those things. How for example do you serve God? Once it was through sacrifice, now it is many things, but first and foremost I would suggest that we have to know what God wants. We have to study. Serve God by studying and study in order to know how to*

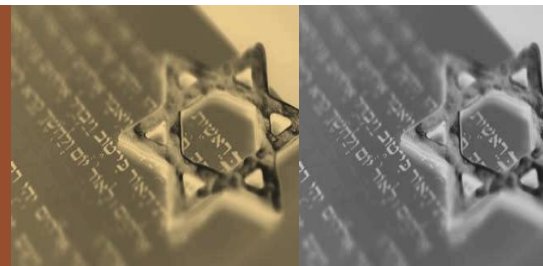


*serve God best. Take these ideas as a statement of what you call 'Rabbinic values' and I promise, you won't go far wrong."*

We can find all we need in this statement. The Rabbis believed in serving God through halacha, mitzvot and ritual, through prayer, through Torah study and through doing good deeds. This is what the Rabbis believed should be at the basis of Jewish life. If they saw the Jewish community as the central framework for Jewish life, the institutions of the community would have to reflect all of these things. A community that did not allow and encourage these things to develop would be a failure from the Rabbinic point of view. We will come back to this subject in the next chapter.



## WHAT DID THE PEOPLE WANT? COMMUNITY NEEDS



Meanwhile, let us look at the issue from a different angle. A community is made up of leaders and members. Ultimately, if it is going to succeed, it must serve the needs of both. We know what the Rabbinic leaders needed from the community. What did the rest of the Jews need?

Let us look at some of the needs of an individual Jew that the historical Jewish community in Diaspora would be expected to try and fulfill. We suggest seven.

### 1. PHYSICAL SECURITY:

In an often hostile environment, the Jew had a paramount need for physical security. The most likely guarantee of security - and no less important than real security, the feeling of security – would be found within the Jewish community. Sometimes, in the larger communities, there would be strong buildings where an individual could find refuge in time of need. Even where this did not exist, a feeling of “safety in numbers” would play a major part. There are a number of cases where the community would form the basis of some kind of self-defense groups. Needless to say, there are many cases in history where the reliance on the community for physical safety, turned out to be a tragic illusion, but in the reality of Diaspora, it was the best that could be expected.

### 2. ECONOMIC SECURITY:

In the lands of the Diaspora, the fortunes of the Jews were largely tied up with the economic role that they played within the framework of the outer society. In general, it can be said that the more important the role that the Jews played, the better off they would be, guaranteed the goodwill and protection of the rulers of the lands in which they lived. Conversely, the Jews often came under pressure from economic rivals, especially in the towns, who tried to push them out of an important economic role in the society as a whole. In this situation it was vitally important for the Jews to act in an organized manner to try and push back the outside threat to their economic position. It was the institutions of the organized Jewish community that were in the best situation to try and fight for Jewish rights. Something this was done by the employment of a specific Jewish official, often known as a 'shtadlan', who worked as a kind of lobbyist for Jewish rights with the outside authorities. Sometimes communities took certain steps to avoid friction with economic competitors by limiting economic activity to certain fields in an attempt to minimise tension.



### 3. RELIGIOUS LIFE:

Jewish religious life was predicated on the existence of a Jewish community. A Jew needed a minyan to meet prayer needs, a shochet to meet kashrut needs, a cemetery and burial society to provide for the needs of a bereaved family. In short, all of the needs of Jewish life could only be properly met within the context of community.

Let us take a slightly deeper look at one of these examples, the minyan. The minyan is a rabbinic creation which necessitates a quorum of ten for some of the most vital and central aspects of the prayer experience such as kaddish, repetition of the Amidah with the kedushah, reading from the Torah scroll, the priestly blessing and the saying of Barechu. If we ask ourselves why these things necessitate a minyan when in theory prayer is a matter of personal communication between a person and God, then we come to an interesting insight into Judaism. The most central aspects of the prayer service, those aspects that should demand the isolated concentration of the believer making communication with God, are precisely those aspects that necessitate a community of Jews (i.e. a minyan) around the believer.

A comparison with Christianity is instructive here. The supreme model of prayer in Christianity is the lonely monk, isolated in his monastic cell, pouring out his heart to God. In Judaism it is the believer surrounded by his community. At precisely that moment that the believer is in the most intense contact with God, he is also in the strongest symbolic contact with his community. This is a great illustration of the importance of community in Judaism. Without a community, it is impossible to live the religious life that Judaism has traditionally dictated.

### 4. EDUCATION:

At the centre of Jewish life was education. Life was constructed around a series of texts. A Jew was expected to know the texts and to understand how to apply them to everyday life. Only a community could adequately supply the full educational needs of the individual. Only a community would have the institutions – not to mention, in many eras, the books – to allow the educational process to develop adequately. Places of learning for young and not so young, a study house full of books where the individual could come and study with others or by himself - these would only be supplied within the framework of community. Tutors, individual studying could supply the some of the study needs of individual Jews, but they could only go so far. Jewish study was based around collective learning with others. For that you need community.



## 5. THE NEEDS OF THE LESS FORTUNATE:

This was always central for Jews. The traditional Jewish community was a veritable beehive of activity as it attempted to meet the needs of the poor and the infirm. Sometimes this was done through the activity of a community official who would take on a particular sphere of activity. More often this would be done by a specific group of community members who would take on themselves to respond to a particular need on a voluntary basis. Between these two mechanisms, within the context of a Jewish community, the attempt would be made to provide for many of the needs of those who needed help.

## 6. EMOTIONAL NEEDS:

Perhaps above all other needs, a Jew needed support. Living in a land which did not ultimately belong to Jews, Jews would need the support of other Jews to feel that they were not alone. Life is never easy for those who constitute a minority. For those who live a way of life so different from the dominant majority, a way of life that sets them apart, it is even less easy. For those who try to live their way of life in a frequently hostile environment, life can be particularly difficult. In such circumstances, to live an isolated Jewish life could prove almost impossible. On a psychological and emotional level, the need for other Jews would be acute. Answering that need would be one of the major functions that a Jewish community would play for an individual Jew.

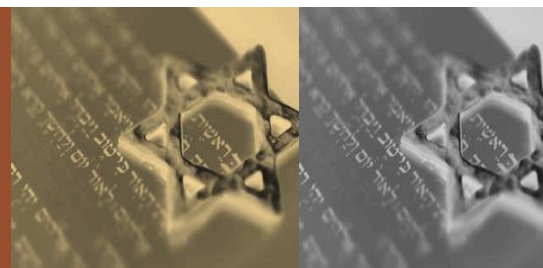
## 7. CONTINUITY:

Finally, the Jew had a need for continuity. An isolated Jew would find it difficult to find matches for children. A Jewish community would play an important role in supplying a range of possibilities of future marriage partners. The range of social activities such as different life cycle events or festive celebrations would allow some kind of an opportunity, even if limited, for social interaction. These things are essential when talking about a minority group for whom continuity was extremely important.





## MAKING THE ABSTRACT REAL: SIX CASE STUDIES



This is good but rather abstract. So let us now ask a number of different Jews from different places in history what their needs are from their community. All of these Jews are anonymous: they have names but you will not find them in history books. It is their opinion we must solicit, because it is their needs with which we are concerned for the moment. If the community does not answer their needs, the community will either have to change or will not continue to exist.

1. Shmuel. Ashkenaz (the German lands) 11<sup>th</sup> Century, a time when the Ashkenaz community was flourishing (just a little later than the time of Rabbenu Gershom, whom we met in chapter three).

*What do I need from my community? You ask me at the moment – I'll tell you what's on my mind. What I need most of all is job security. I am very worried. I am a trader and much of my trade is with southern Europe. Life has been good to us here and our trade has flourished. Many have become quite wealthy and I am pleased to say that I am one of them. My trade is on quite a large scale. We use the Rhine River to bring boats up and down to the south. But recently things have been going badly. We are under pressure on a number of different fronts. For one thing the local townspeople are organizing in what they called 'guilds' – associations of traders and artisans who are trying to increase their business by organizing to hurt ours. They operate a 'closed shop' and they're trying to push us out. In addition, Italian shipowners with whom we've had an arrangement for years have suddenly started to work hand in hand with the guilds. They refuse to hire their ships out to us. We need the community authorities to try and interfere. They need to remind the prince – the local ruler – that if we get into financial trouble, he won't get his taxes. When we came here, we were offered lots of privileges. What's happened to those promises? I hope the community officials do their work. Otherwise it might mean the end for business."*

2. Rosa. Italy. 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Italian community was one of the oldest in Europe. They had gone through a good and rich period for the last couple of centuries, but nevertheless, there was large-scale antagonism to the Jews as we hear now.

*What do I need from my community? You ask me at the moment – I'll tell you what's on my mind. What I need most of all is security. There are mobs on the road. They've already attacked some of the Sicilian communities. It happens every Easter. To a certain extent you get used to it. No that's not true, you never quite get used to it. How can we? It's not clear why they hate us, but all I know is*



that they do. Anyway, this time, the mobs seem to have been more vicious than in past years. I've heard that a mob set out for our town last night. I can't hear them but I'm scared. Not just for me but I have children. Why must they spend their days hiding? From what I hear, it's not like this everywhere. My husband is a trader and he trades with North Africa. He says that some of the Jews there live very peaceful lives, but it's been bad here for generations. Where are the leaders of the community? They know what they have to do. They have to go to the prince and offer him a bribe to keep the mob away. It usually works. It depends how much they can offer him. We're not as wealthy as we once were. He doesn't love us but we've helped to make him rich and he helps us when he can and when it's worth his while. I hope they're already meeting him. And I hope he's in a good mood."

3. Yichia. Yemen 18<sup>th</sup> century. The roots of the Yemenite community were very old indeed. There are even claims that the first Jews came to Yemen some three thousand years ago. Yemen was on the whole one of the most isolated Jewish communities, cut off from the rest of the Jewish world. As such it produced few great scholars and the community, which had to rely on its own poor resources, felt the lack.

"What do I need from my community? You ask me at the moment – I'll tell you what's on my mind. What I need most of all is teachers for my children. I would teach them myself but we're too poor for me to give up much of my time. I'm a silversmith like many of the other Jews in town, and we have to work very long days in order to make ends meet. It hasn't been easy for us in recent years. Our relations with the local rulers are bad and, in addition, we have a lot of problems with the local townspeople. They're always provoking us and causing problems. In past times when things were more peaceful and we had more money, I would teach my children – the older ones never went to another teacher in their life. I was happy to do it. There's no better feeling than seeing your own sons learn from you. But now I can't do it any more and I can't spare money for a teacher. Sometimes, at times like this, the community has organized teachers and paid for them. It's meant to be their responsibility in such a case. It's written in the Talmud. The community leaders are not always so helpful. They're not made from money so I understand the problem, but I hope this time they'll be prepared to help. It's not just me. There's a lot of us."

4. Sara. Spain 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Jews of Spain had been under Moslem rule for hundreds of years before most of the country was conquered by Christian armies and kingdoms. Both under the Moslems, and for some time, under the Christians too, they had, on the whole tended to flourish. But from the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, things started to go downhill as we hear from our next guest.

"What do I need from my community? You ask me at the moment – I'll tell you what's on my mind. What I need most of all is other Jews around me. Look, we are in trouble. We've been going through ups and downs for centuries. Once



*upon a time it was wonderful here but things have been going generally downhill for generations. And now suddenly things have got worse. In Saragossa, a few years back they accused us of killing a Christian child to use his blood. God in heaven! Such things have been said in the lands of the north for over a hundred years but who thought that they would come to us with such accusations? There are new laws against us. They're even talking of some kind of a religious debate between Christians and Jews that just happened in Barcelona. The great Ramban was the spokesperson for the Jews. While the debate was going on, the mob was standing outside shouting for Jewish blood! What is happening here? It's as if the Christian world is going mad. I can't understand them. To start with, they wanted us and now they don't. Who can understand the rules for playing the game of survival? Anyway, I feel that I can't trust the Christians. I need to be among my own. I need people around me and I need those people to be Jewish."*

5. Isaac. Morocco 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Jews of Morocco were going through a very good period at the time we meet their community representative. The period had already lasted for several centuries. A flourishing centre of Jewish life appeared to be developing.

*"What do I need from my community? You ask me at the moment – I'll tell you what's on my mind. What I need most of all is exactly what I've got, a centre of learning and halacha. We have a great Yeshiva here and we are becoming a centre of learning. Students come from all over North Africa. Since the great scholar Isaac started to teach here and since his Rabbinical decisions became known throughout this part of the world, students have even started to arrive from Spain and mainland Europe. This is what we Jews in Fez have dreamed of for generations! Which Jewish community doesn't dream of becoming a centre of learning and producing its own Rabbinical authorities instead of having to rely on everyone else's? Isaac is a local boy. They call him Alfasi – the one from Fez. We have reason to be proud. I need nothing else."*

6. Hanna. Salonica 16<sup>th</sup> century. Salonica (now part of modern Greece) was part of the Turkish Ottoman empire. Especially after the exile from Spain at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which brought many exiles to the town, Salonica developed as a great textile centre and was a very important Jewish community known more for its trade than its scholarship.

*"What do I need from my community? You ask me at the moment – I'll tell you what's on my mind. What I need most of all is people to help me look after another seven orphans. The plague took several more victims yesterday and we now have yet more children to worry about. I need to find some more families who are willing to take in a child apiece. Thank God that we are a generous community. We're also a fairly wealthy community. Our fabrics are the talk of the Turkish Empire. So we're in a position to be able to help each other. I can't imagine living in a place where everyone keeps to themselves and minds their own business. Here you can always find people who are willing to help you. It's not clear to me whether it's because of the law, the feeling that they must do this*



*because the Law tells them to do it and they must obey the Law, or whether it's because they simply have become used to helping each other believing that it's the right thing to do, especially because we're a small minority in the world and in the last analysis if we don't take care of ourselves who will? In the last resort, of course, it doesn't matter why they do it, it just matters that they do. What did Hillel say in Pirkei Avot? "If I am not for myself, who will be for me, but if I'm only for myself, what am I?" Very nicely put. That's exactly our situation today. Now all I've got to do is find some families..."*

Six Jews in different places in different centuries. All with needs. All with hopes. Needing their community to do something or to be a certain kind of place. A good reflection of common Jewish needs in Diaspora.



## SUMMING UP THE STORY

We have talked of the emphasis that the Rabbinic leadership put on the institution of the Jewish community. We have seen the values that lie at the heart of the Rabbinic system and we have suggested that the community of the Rabbis would have to reflect those values in order for them to see it as successful. That is what **they** as the architects of the system of Jewish existence in the Diaspora, would need to find in a community.

We have also seen the needs of the Jewish population from the Jewish community, what **they** would need in order for them to see it as successful. What we will examine now is the structure of the Jewish community in reality and to what extent that structure reflected the needs of the two groups that we have assessed.

