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Week 134, Day 4

19 Sivan 5766

## Creating a Nurturing Congregational Community

By Rabbi Richard Address

June is a wonderful time of year, a time of transition. There are weddings and graduations, ending of school terms, beginning of summer vacations and concluding of academic years. In most synagogues there are special services that mark completion— Confirmation and honoring religious school faculty, volunteers and leadership. There is a sense of completion and at the same time a sense of looking forward. There is within all of this a profound acknowledgement of the passing of time; with that comes feelings that grow as we age, of searching for our place and purpose within this great experience of life. How our communities honor that search goes a long way in determining the type of communities that are created.

I have some friends, good friends, who are now experiencing momentous changes that mark significant life passages. As frequently happens, part of us participates in what our friends and family experience. None of us is isolated from each other. I am sure that many of you know exactly what I am referring to. We observe the passing of time, the experiences of life and we utter a quiet prayer that somehow we could slow things down. We look at our children and wonder where the time went; we look in the mirror and wonder who is the person reflected in the image. There is also that time when we become aware that what is most precious is not so much our outer image but our inner core, our soul. In his new book *Everyman*, Philip Roth put this in perspective: "When you are young, it's the outside of the body that matters, how you look externally. When you get older, it's what's inside that matter, and people stop caring how you look."

There is a message for our congregations in this bit of dialogue. Synagogue communities, communities of faith, must be about nurturing the inner self, the soul, the core being. We are at a very interesting place in the development of North American Judaism. The onset of the aging of the first wave of the baby boom generation is creating powerful new opportunities for synagogues to develop responses of meaning, programs that enhance and stimulate often suppressed needs for meaning and purpose in life. The gift of longevity is making it possible to explore and experience new ways to be Jewish and embrace new pathways to that Judaism. Meaning and purpose in the face of longevity is a mission that awaits each of our communities. If we only model a "performance" Judaism, if we remain pediatric in our orientation, then we may exclude what for many congregations is the majority of its members. Communities that do not develop avenues for people to seek meaning as they negotiate the passage of time will see those people drift away to venues that embrace that search and encourage those journeys.

Let me suggest that the most powerful element in community building will be in the creation and sustenance of sacred relationships. More powerful and lasting than any synagogue program, building or even clergy are the human relationships formed when creating a caring community. In a secular world that often segregates community and celebrates privacy and self, it is the synagogue community that must stand as an example of diversity, inter-generational activity and inter-personal involvement. Each of us needs to ask how our own congregation responds to this need for relationship, caring and community. How do we celebrate our passages and how do we make them sacred, not only on special occasions but more importantly in the every day needs and demands each of us faces? If God is in the details, then so must be the work of our communities, for it is in the details of daily existence that great and powerful opportunities to find meaning present themselves.

But how do we do this and where do we find the guidance, the blueprint? We return to our sacred texts. What does it mean to create a relationship-based, caring congregation? Let me

suggest that we look at the prayer book and a prayer that is part of our daily expression of belief. The *eilu d'varim* prayer contains the basic instruction guide, informing us how to sanctify time through sacred relationships. Though many of us pray these words, how many of us truly live them? And therein lays the challenge.

*These are the obligations without measure, whose reward is without measure:*

*To honor father and mother,*

*To perform acts of love and kindness,*

*To attend the house of study daily,*

*To welcome the stranger,*

*To visit the sick,*

*To rejoice with bride and groom,*

*To console the bereaved,*

*To pray with sincerity,*

*To make peace where there is strife,*

*And the study of Torah is equal to them all, because it leads to them all.*

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