

# Weekly Teaching

## January 4, 2019

This past week my next door neighbor asked me to explain what a “minyan” was and why was it was needed.

It led to an interesting discussion, and I found myself recalling an old episode of the television show, *Northern Exposure*.

If you are not familiar with the show, the main character was a young, Jewish New York doctor who was required to live in a small, isolated town in Alaska.

One episode found the doctor in need of a “minyan” so he could say Kaddish.

His Alaskan friends help him search far and wide so as to locate ten other Jews so the doctor could recite the Mourner’s Kaddish.

This particular episode led me to have a somewhat ambivalent response to the conclusion because in the end the Jewish doctor decided to not gather the Jews who were “strangers” to him, and instead count for his “minyan” his non-Jewish friends who were the ones who cared for him and his personal loss.

On the one hand, I admire the message that our non-Jewish family and friends can bring us comfort and support when we most need it.

However I think there is something to the power of “belonging” to the Jewish People that is properly promoted when we require that a “minyan” consist of at least a quorum of ten Jews who are (at minimally) of bar or bat mitzvah age.

Jewish history has always traditionally preferred “communal” worship vs. “personal worship”.

The “Call to Worship” (Barchu) can only occur when a minyan is in place.

The repetition of the Amidah with the prayer of Kedushah can only occur with the minyan.

It is within the Kedushah that the Jew can proclaim “L’Dor V’Dor”; from “Generation to Generation”; seemingly an acknowledgement that without the presence of Jewish community there is no means of effective transmission of Jewish law, traditions, customs and/or values.

In this same spirit, the public reading from our sacred Torah scroll cannot occur without the presence of a minyan.

And, finally, the Jew who wishes to fulfill their obligation to say Mourner’s Kaddish cannot traditionally do so unless they also find a minyan.

Growing up in Palo Alto, California, in the 70’s, my small synagogue consisted of families who lived as far as 30 miles away.

A daily minyan could only be maintained if each Jewish household that belonged to the congregation adopted at least one day a month by which they took on the obligation to help make the minyan.

When I became Bar Mitzvah, I felt the power of being “counted” when I accompanied my father for the monthly commitment to help make the minyan.

Within Temple Shalom, I routinely lead shiva minyans in people's houses as they observe their period of home mourning.

Sometimes calls need to be made to help secure a minyan.

One of the more inspirational aspects of my rabbinate is the overwhelming positive response to help make a minyan even if the person in mourning is a "stranger" to their fellow congregant.

The minimum quorum of ten is rabbinically derived from the verse in Psalms that states that "God stands in the congregation of God."

The Hebrew word for "congregation", EDAH, is also used in the Torah verse that was connected to the sin of the ten spies who provided to their fellow Israelites a poor report on the Promised Land.

It's also noteworthy that ten was the stopping point by which Abraham negotiated with God trying to save Sodom and Gemorrah; he secured God's promise to spare these wicked cities if Abraham could find at least ten righteous people with the community.

Ten is of course the number of the Ten Commandments; and the number ten has always been understood as the numerical symbol for both good luck and power.

While the quorum is preferential, and helps to foster Jewish communal life and meaningful connections with one and another, it is important to note that the Jew is required to pray even when a minyan isn't possible.

A rabbinic midrash teaches that God encourages us "to pray first in the synagogue, but if we cannot do so then we are to pray to God in our own home. If this also is not possible then we are to pray at our work place. If this is too inconvenient, then we are told to pray to God when we lie down to sleep. And, even if this is not possible then we should at least pray to God within our heart."

Prayer is the opportunity to come together as a particularistic Jewish community; to help foster an internal Jewish communal strength and a mechanism by which to help guarantee a Jewish future for our children, and our children's children.

But we are always able to additionally welcome to our prayers our non-Jewish family and friends.

The television show, *Northern Exposure*, would have been better served to gather the ten Jews along with the Jewish doctor's local non-Jewish friends and neighbors.

Then individual human support would have been bolstered by also supporting Jewish communal life and ties.

We have just started a new secular year. I encourage you to consider attending your own "monthly" minyan.

If we manage to do this once a month, we will surely prompt greater spiritual meaning within our lives.

Shabbat Shalom!

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