

Jewish Community: You Can't Be a "Jew by Self"

In speaking about the importance of Jewish Community, I often comment that you can be a "Jew by Choice" (meaning a convert, as contrasted with us born Jews or "Jews by Chance"), but you can't be a "Jew by Self" – a Jew apart from the Jewish Community. Traditionally, you cannot even fulfill your most basic obligation to God, that of daily prayer, unless you join with a *minyan* of nine other Jews for the three daily services. I know that there are times when we would all like to just stay home and communicate with God directly rather than coming to the synagogue for services – but I also know that there are always people at our services who need the comfort, support and just the presence of their Jewish community to be with during life's most trying times.

All this came dramatically home to me at the March 9th funeral of my dear friend, Shirley Sussman. As most of you know (and as discussed elsewhere in this month's Megillah), Shirley was a wonderful, dedicated "Mitzvah Woman." She was always more than willing to help out, anywhere, any time, whether asked or not, whether in good health or not. She was an inspiration to me and to everyone who knew her.

What you might not know about Shirley was that, other than two nephews living in New York, she had virtually no surviving family. Over time, this Temple and our Ner Ami community became Shirley's family in a wonderful spectrum of ways. She served us and we supported her. She helped members of our community when they needed physical, emotional, spiritual and even financial support and we were able to do the same for her in her final weeks and months. Our traditions inspired Shirley and our members were, with much difficulty, finally able to teach her how to accept help rather than just give it. And, in her last two years, Shirley became our rabbi, our teacher, in communicating through her grace, spirit, faith and strength, how to die and how to live.

But what I am most proud of is the way that our community responded to this remarkable woman. When she was healthy, Shirley was able to share her ability and desire to serve with Temple Ner Ami and our community. And when Shirley needed help, members of our community, people who would have never met Shirley were it not for Temple Ner Ami, were there for her.

Shirley's relationship with Temple Ner Ami proves the wisdom of our ancient rabbis' observation that if we don't serve God, if we don't do God's work, then, for all practical purposes, it might just as well be that God does not exist. In biblical times, God may have split seas, sent plagues, shook down walls, etc., but these days, God works through people. In one rabbinic story, a frustrated Jew meets God after his passing and complains about all the problems in the world: "Why didn't you do something to help?" he asks. "I did," God responds, "I sent you!"

I believe with all my heart that God sent Shirley to us and us to her to make all of our lives, our community, and this world just a little bit better. *Zichronah l'bracha*, may her memory continue to be a blessing!