Social Texture: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tetsei, August 17, 2013

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By

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An old Turkish proverb states: “My heart wants neither coffee nor coffeehouse; my heart wants a friend, coffee is an excuse.” We all seek a social texture for our lives…friends, community, a sense of belonging and continuity.

We drink coffee together not because we want coffee but because we want sociability. We want a friend with whom to talk. We want a peaceful respite from a noisy world.

In our technological age, it becomes increasingly difficult to sit down to a friendly cup of coffee. People are busy with their cell phones; they are texting; their minds are far away from us. You say hello to a neighbor, and the neighbor doesn’t even hear you because he/she is plugged in to an iPod. Friendships whither, communities fragment…and we look for someone who has time and inclination to have a relaxing cup of coffee with us.

My wife and I recently attended a synagogue where the Rabbi was celebrating his 36th anniversary with the congregation. In the middle of his sermon, he stopped and looked around the room. He pointed to one seat, and then another, and then yet another. “I remember who sat there,” he said, “and who sat there, and who sat there.” In his 36 years with the congregation, he shared life with so many congregants, and he remembered all those who had passed on to their eternal reward. The congregation had texture, a historical memory. The rabbi and other long-standing members remembered the voices of all those congregants who had been part of the community during their lifetimes. As long as they were remembered, they still mattered to the congregation. They still were part of the living texture and tradition of the community. Shared memory fosters a sense of togetherness, the linking of generations.

People need and want a sense of community and continuity. Yet, our world seems to be increasingly obsessed with undermining societal wellbeing. The contemporary catchwords are “new,” “change,” “technological innovation.” While these terms reflect much that is valuable, they also reflect social malaise, breakdowns of families and communities, increasing alienation from the past, from historic social texture.

We need to find the formula for being receptive to the “new” without losing the continuity and strength of the “old.”

This week’s Torah portion includes various rules relating to creating and maintaining a proper society. Among them are: the commandment to return lost objects; to help an owner unload an over-burdened animal; to build a safety fence around one’s roof so no one will accidentally fall off; to offer loans to those in need; to pay laborers on time; to provide justice to the widow and orphan. All of these rules contribute to a society with moral fiber, with a social texture that is inclusive, caring and loving. They teach us to focus on the “other” as a fellow human being, rather than as a nameless, faceless entity.

We all need to worry less about coffee, and more about friendship. We need to maintain and deepen the texture and traditions of our lives, of our communities and societies. We need to

put down our cellphones, stop our texting, and concentrate on the people around us. We need to strengthen the fabric of our communities by connecting us to each other, and by connecting our generations to past generations and to the generations yet to come.

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Angel for Shabbat