Intentional Communities and Moral Behavior

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Moral Exercise

A Hassidic tale tells of a *rebbe* in a Russian village who used to take a dip in the river every morning. One day, the new local policeman on his first patrol just before sunrise, saw the *rebbe* diving into the frozen river. He ran to the strange old man, calling him to get out of the river and shouting, "Who are you? What do you come from? And where are you going?" The old *rebbe* smiled gently and asked the policeman: "How much do they pay you for this job?" "Ten Kufeykas a day," answered the baffled young policeman. "I'll tell you what," said the *rebbe*, "I'll pay you twenty Kufeykas a day if you come to me every morning and ask me who I am, where do I come from, and where I am going to."

Human beings are dynamic and ever evolving creatures, and just like our muscle system becomes atrophied if it is not stimulated enough, so does our moral and intellectual system. Hence, it is crucial we get asked those questions, about ourselves and our purpose, constantly.

One way to do it would be putting a sticky note on the fridge, setting up a reminder on our smartphone, or meditating about it. However, in this article I argue that communities, and more specifically intentional communities, are the optimal environment for nurturing and sustaining moral behavior. An intentional community is a group of people who have consciously decided to live together spatially and temporally around a shared purpose. In this sense, an intentional community can serve as a framework for individual growth and moral behavior, and we will dive deeper into this later. But first, let us look into moral behavior and understand why it is important in and of itself.

Navigating the Sea of Life

Moral behavior is the kind of behavior that is consistent with certain moral values. Values can be considered the compass, whereas moral behavior is the practical work of navigation itself. We could go deeper and ask what moral values are. However, as answering this question will require a separate article, I would propose to accept as an axiom that core Jewish values, such as justice, treating people with dignity, aspiring for spiritual presence in the material world, family, and more—are indeed prime moral values. I wish to put this as an anchor for us in a postmodern world, on which we can build the next level.

Anyone who has dealt with navigation knows that you are never really spot on; only rarely do you progress toward the absolute North (or any other direction). You need to check and double check, make adjustments, and always be on the lookout for unexpected turns, tides, and winds. The compass gives you the direction, but you need to do the work of sticking to it, what we call in Hassidism *Avodat haMiddot*. How is this work to be done? While the compass itself can be acquired in a theoretical way through reading books, the implementation of these values can be acquired only through trial and error in real-life situations. In this regard, communities are the single most important laboratory for practicing this navigation, for developing moral behavior.

The purpose of moral behavior from a Hassidic standpoint, is to reveal God's presence in this low material world, or, as the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Shneor Zalman of Liadi, puts it, "to make for him a dwelling place in the lowest worlds." This can be done through the refinement of one's actions, through practical commandments, so they will reveal the divine essence within him or her. Some of the commandments are moral behavior in and of themselves, these are also called "intellectual commandments" (*mitzvoth sikhliyot*, also referred to as *mishaptim*), meaning commandments we would have realized even without a divine Torah, such as the prohibition to kill or the obligation to help a fellow human being in distress. Alongside these, there is a corpus of "irrational" commandments (called *mitzvoth shimiyot*, or *hukkim*), such as purity and impurity laws or *shatnez* (the prohibition to wear a cloth containing both wool and linen). The Midrash teaches us something important regarding the purpose of these commandments: "Does the holy One, Blessed be He, care whether someone slaughters from the neck or from the *oref* (decapitates)? You should say: The mitzvoth were only given in order to *letzaref* (refine/combine) the creatures" (*Midrash Rabbah* 44). According to Jewish law, slaughtering an animal for food has to be done in a specific way that has no rational explanation, and the Midrash doubts that it's really that specific way that interests the creator. Rather, says the Midrash, God has commanded us for the purpose of *letzaref*, which in Hebrew has two meanings: One is refinement, like the work of the goldsmith; the other is bringing things together. I argue that both things are one and the same: You cannot refine yourself and your moral behavior without following a pattern of practical behavior, but you cannot do this alone, only with other people.

How It Actually Works—One Example

Somewhere in the early 1990s, when I was in the fifth grade, I remember watching a TV show describing what might be the consequences of global warming and the ozone layer hole. I remember the sense of upcoming catastrophe that sent me to bed lying ill for three days. On the fourth day, I decided I had to do something about it, so I ran for my school's "pupils' council" and became chair, joined a youth movement… and eventually ended up working mostly on developing intentional communities in Israel.

What's the connection? Well, I ask myself the same question from time to time, wondering if communities are really what we need as the climate system is going off track. True, the dark forecasts of 25 years ago did not come to pass—at least not yet—but experiencing our fifth year of drought in a row here in the Negev, and unprecedented heat waves in Europe and Japan, does sound like an alarm

call to me. Something is changing: We are about to reach 8 billion people who want to live an American lifestyle, and I am not sure my children will enjoy the same nature and climate I was privileged to enjoy. We need some urgent response. How can living communally help when we need urgent moral action and behavior to save the planet?

I believe there is a strong connection, and that is not because community is somehow more important than sustainability—such things can't be compared. Sustainable living is not a "thing" in and of itself. Sustainable living is the aggregate outcome of many individual actions carried out by human beings endowed with free choice. People's choices are rooted in their identities, dreams, and values—which are, in turn, rooted in their families and communities. Healthy and vibrant communities can induce more sustainable actions and forms of living, if they only see such sustainability as central to their identity.

For instance, it is well known that the main factor determining the burden we put on our environment is not the number of people living but rather the ecological footprint per person (meaning, roughly, the amount of resources we each consume). When people live in an isolated manner and need to provide for almost everything themselves, within the family unit at best, they demand a much higher volume of resources from the environment. The simple examples of communities changing this include carpooling, sharing rarely used stuff (hence buying less), composting and recycling together, or supporting local farmers as a group of mindful consumers (CSAs).
But it goes deeper than that.

Human beings have an internal desire to be loved, to be recognized, to belong to a group in which they can feel safe and flourish. When they are isolated, those needs transform into over-consumerism intended to compensate for the lack of social bonding, which increases probability immoral behavior, in my opinion. On the contrary, deep ongoing relationships forged around shared intentions create happier and fuller people, who need to consume less in order to feel filled-up.

This is but one example of how intentional communities induce and catalyze moral behavior, and we will see more examples from Israel below. However, our current communal structure is failing, and we need to be creative and innovative for the next step. Before discussing solutions, let us analyze the challenge first.

The Challenge of Jewish Communities

Second only to the nuclear family, the Jewish community has been what binds Jews to our identity, fortifies our commitment to Jewish peoplehood, and constantly improves our moral behavior. However, it appears that a paradigm shift is evolving in Jewish society, as a growing proportion of young adults do not identify with the traditional structures of Jewish communities, not to be confused with Judaism itself.

The postmodern revolution, along with tectonic changes in the economy, have resulted in a dissolving sense of community and belongingness in the Western world. More people live alone today than ever before, despite the fact that more people live in crowded cities with more people per square meter than ever before. Previously solid social networks—such as synagogues, neighborhoods, and offices—are disintegrating, leaving people unconnected to the world around them, and their moral behavior more fragile and vulnerable.

The modern structure of Jewish communities in the Diaspora is based on the historical Jewish community model as it has existed for generations (roughly speaking); but it underwent significant changes and crystallized into a new model after World War II (in the Western Hemisphere). The most significant factor was the rapid and dramatic improvement in the economic situation of the Jews. At the same time, the Jewish community structure was influenced by the structure of the Christian communities and the civil society around them. The synagogues continued to be the center of the community, and the formal demand for them to operate as nonprofit institutions caused them to be similarly reshaped based on elected lay leaders who appoint spiritual leadership (rabbis and cantors). Later on, the Jewish Community Centers were established, and it was agreed in various ways between them and the synagogues that they would not perform religious activities in order not to empty the synagogues of worshipers. There is no doubt that this structure served the Jewish people in an exceptional way for a long period of time. I would like to focus here for a moment on the main characteristics of the traditional communities (in the sociological rather than the religious sense) that rendered them irrelevant to the new generation.

A Growing Value Gap

Until a relatively short time ago, there was institutionalized anti-Semitism even in the United States. In fact, the reason why Jewish community centers were established was that Jews were not allowed to join the non-Jewish community centers, and Jewish hospitals were set up in order to give Jewish doctors a place to work. In addition to the collective memory of the Holocaust, the birth pangs of the State of Israel and the crisis of Soviet Jewry, it should be understood that the main factors shaping the Jewish identity and community until the 1990s were related almost entirely to the historical narrative and image of the Jews as a persecuted and weak minority group, that needs to stick together in order to survive. This meant prioritizing Jewish needs over general issues unrelated to the Jews or the State of Israel, which are now included under the code name *tikkun olam*.

Today, however, most young Jews (at least in the West) perceive themselves as belonging to the strong side of society in which they live. In addition, the vast majority sees itself as connected to its country and responsible for it as any other citizen, and for the entire world in many ways, hence the growing use of the terminology of *tikkun olam* and universal responsibility over the terminology of survival and national-particular responsibility. The change in language is not cosmetic; rather, it reflects a change—and even a reversal—of values as the Y generation embraces universal moral values, although rooted in Jewish tradition (e. g., social justice, sustainability, healthy diet, fair trade, etc.). This reversal led to a growing gap in values ??between the leadership of the traditional communities and their young flock, and as a result, the younger generation is gradually abandoning the traditional communities.

Quality Preference

Traditional communities, especially the Conservative and Reform denominations, tended to grow to gigantic proportions. In practice, however, the vast majority did not attend the prayer hall except for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and many of them ended their membership in the community when the youngest child reached the age of bar or bat mitzvah. In addition, studies show that a spiritual leader is unable to provide a real response to more than 100 to 150 people (this is called Dunbar's number); communities with more than 200 households lose the ability to create an intimate connection and safe space for their members. On the other hand, the younger generation has deeply experienced Western loneliness, and it seeks an authentic, intimate, and relevant experience of belonging and community.

Hierarchy and Internal Politics

The combination of a large community and large-scale asset and financial management created a hierarchical organizational structure that maintained the stability of the communities but also brought the byproducts of internal politics and strict hierarchies. The younger generation, however, is characterized by flat thinking, not to be confused with superficial thinking. Flat thinking means seeing the world as a network of individuals and groups that interact on a free and egalitarian basis, with each individual determining the level of involvement in the processes that interest him or her. This dramatic change in worldview is also connected to the far-reaching technological changes of the last two decades. These changes have led to changes in the value system and the worldview of the Y generation, and not only in their daily conduct.

The tendency among the previous generation to misinterpret this profound change has at best alienated them; in the worst case, it has created programs aimed at bringing young people closer by turning to a very low common denominator such as beer evenings and free musical events. Many young Jews do come to these events, especially if they are free, but the assumption that this will create a long-term commitment to the traditional Jewish community is a false hope that stems from a deep lack of understanding of Millennials' need for belonging, identity, and meaning.

Organizational Structure

The desire to act professionally, in the spirit of Western culture, brought communities to hire professional teams including chief executives, educators, and rabbis. As a result, maintenance and operating costs reached enormous proportions that require high membership fees. This has led many young people to opt out of traditional synagogues, which is sometimes misinterpreted as lack of willingness to pay for Jewish communal life. However, people are willing to pay for something that is relevant to their lives and gives them a significant added value. It is enough to observe the phenomenal growth of organizations such as Hazon to see that when a Jewish organization offers a relevant "product" it has quite a few buyers who are willing to pay. Even though young Jews, like all young people, have fewer available resources at the moment, for the most part Millennials will be the generation with the greatest resources in history.

Legacy institutions may rightfully claim that they invest huge resources in attracting young people back to their ranks. However, this is based on the erroneous assumption that investing billions of dollars in the young generation from age zero to college will ultimately lead them to return to the traditional communities. Needless to say, the work done in these areas is truly remarkable: From Jewish kindergartens and schools, through summer camps, to Hillel on campus—almost every Jew in the United States has a place to go. The problem is that this assumption ignores both the inherent irrelevance of these institutions for many young people, as well as another essential sociological component: the extending gap between end of college and marriage. For young Jews in this period there are almost no relevant activities, and where they exist, they do not provide a deep response that can connect them in the long term.

Intentional Communities for the Next Generation

To summarize, I argue that a paradigm shift is evolving in Jewish society, as a growing proportion of young adults do not identify with the traditional structures of Jewish communities, not to be confused with Judaism itself. In order to respond to this shift and turn it into an opportunity it is necessary, I believe, to invest in a wide range of new initiatives and experiments in Jewish community and learn from the remarkable experience in intentional communities in Israel, from the last three decades.

The main concept I would like to propose in this article is the concept of **Jewish Intentional Communities** as a tool to induce and catalyze moral behavior. First, let us define what we mean by a JIC: First, it is a group of people who have chosen to come together with an intentional focus in mind. This community togetherness is not a mere byproduct/side-effect of the other goals, nor is it simply a means to other ends, but it is an intention/aim/value, in and of itself, what sociologists call a "primary group." While it may sometimes start from an *a priori* geographic fact, this community togetherness is not only a physical coincidence but a deliberate choice in the nature of togetherness itself.

A Way of Living in the World, Not Just in a Bubble

The Jewish and Intentional nature of the community implies values that are expressed both internally and externally. There should, therefore, be a holistic, integrative relationship between the culture and values of the community and their relationship with the society around them. While Jewish Intentional Community values and culture are certainly defined and expressed within the life of the community together, as a microcosm of a good society, they should also be reflected in an external mission, wider than the circle of the community itself. This could include, for example, the local neighborhood, the Jewish community, Israel, or even wider societal missions.

Temporal Togetherness, Spatial Togetherness, or Both

Jewish Intentional Communities involve significant relationships between members who share time and/or space together, physically, in-person. While this temporal and/or spatial togetherness does not necessarily mean that they live in the same house or the same building, their relationships cannot be completely virtual. There needs to be either physical or temporal proximity; the community must either have a significant place to be together or a significant time to be together, or both. Therefore, if community members are not living within a certain proximity to each other, in order to be considered an intentional community they do need to come together physically for a significant amount of time.

Temporal togetherness is potentially a much more viable model to replicate since there is no requirement to buy land or commit to living together in the initial stages, so the resources demanded are much less of an up-front investment. However, there is an ongoing need to intentionally prioritize resources (e.g., finding times, places, etc.) in order to come together for immersive experiences.

Actively Jewish

The community should be actively engaged in Jewish life. Just "being" Jews/Jewish is not enough. The definition of Judaism/Jewish is totally open—the active engagement could be in relation to Jewish culture, religion, identity, practice, tradition, values, history, peoplehood, land, language, nationality, philosophy, politics, and more. However, Judaism should be an "issue" that the community is invested in—something that is about "where the community is going," not just about "where the members came from."

Permanence

A JIC is a long-term/life-long community. There are many wonderful programs, camps, seminars, residences, etc. in which one can experience community life temporarily. Jewish Intentional Community is not, at the core, a temporary framework for trying out a taste of community life. JIC's strive to be long-term communities that are meaningful to their members.

Some Examples from the Israeli Movement

Israel has a long-standing movement of intentional communities, which sprouted in the mid 1980s. It started as a grassroots movement, with the first urban kibbutz established in Sderot in 1986 (called " *Migvan,"* meaning "diversity"). It was established by people who grew up in regular kibbutzim, meaning rural and agriculture based, but who came to realize that the real and new challenge is within Israeli society. They opened a kibbutz inside a city. Instead of doing agriculture, they opened a successful (and today, huge) nonprofit organization that significantly helped build Sderot's educational and welfare systems. In parallel, groups from the religious-Zionist sector came to realize pretty much the same thing, and decided to go into existing cities instead of settlements in Judea and Samaria. A few years later, alumni of *haNoar haOved vehaLomed* youth movement, the "mother ship" of *haBonim Dror,* also decided that it is no longer relevant to go to kibbutzim and started their own urban kibbutz movement. They call them "educators kibbutzim," and have 50 urban kibbutzim with over 2,000 people. Other movements and sectors followed shortly: the Ethiopians, the Mountain Jews, *ba'alei teshuvah*, and even the Druze and the Bedouins. Today there are more than 200 intentional communities in Israel, with 15,000 members, spread from Eilat to Kiryat Shmona, which are literally revitalizing Israeli society from within.

I would like to share two major developments of this movement that shed light on how intentional communities can be a catalyst for moral development. The first is more practical, and the second more essential.

Financial Resilience

The severe economic crisis that hit the United States in November 2008 had implications on almost every corner of the world, except for Israel. While Israel's economy was not affected, Israel's nonprofit sector was severely hit, due to a sudden reduction in U.S.-based donations. All over the country, nonprofit organizations either shut down or significantly reduced their activities and closed branches. Despite this, not even one intentional community closed or even stopped growing. The reason is simple: A community is not an organization; hence it is much more sustainable and resilient, and less dependent on external financial resources. An intentional community is comprised of young adults who have struck root. It's obvious, when you think about it, and yet most of us fail to see the huge social and moral potential of communities in this context.

Strengthening the Social Fabric

Israel is a very fragmented society with about five to seven major sectors and dozens of sub-sectors. Most of them feel enmity toward some or all of the others. Often, those feelings are translated into verbal violence and occasionally into physical violence. In a small place like Israel, bridging the gaps between these sectors is an existential challenge and also a moral one.

How does this relate to intentional communities? It seems that intentional communities have a moderating effect on their members. When it comes to living together all people are different, even in the same sector, and the constant interaction with people who are different cultivates an internal tendency to be a better listener, and to acknowledge the fact that there is more than one right way to view the world. It does not mean that all views are equally relevant, but it means giving more space to the option of being wrong.

Communities create this kind of constant interaction and it is evident that people who live in vibrant intentional communities that are part of a larger city, tend to be more tolerant and welcoming even to

people outside their community.

On the national level, we saw this in Israel in the form of MAKOM, the national umbrella organization of intentional communities, which was established in the summer of 2011. Leaders from 14 different movements and organizations of intentional communities came together: secular, religious, Ethiopian, non-Jewish and more. They all agreed that despite the deep disagreements among them, it seemed that they could agree and work together on 90 percent of the issues, such as education, welfare, social justice, and more. Thus, they formed MAKOM: The National Council of Intentional Communities in Israel. Seven years later, MAKOM is probably the largest social network in Israel, and the cross-sectorial collaboration it embodies is still rather rare.

A large proportion of this success of moral development is due to the communal lifestyle of the leaders of those 14 networks that taught them the meaning of sharing life with people who think, act, and react differently.

Intentional Communities 101

A common misconception is that anybody can build a community and no serious preparation is needed. While I strongly agree that building an intentional community is something that almost anyone can do, and it's not rocket science, it is still worthwhile to learn from others' experience. There is a whole professional field of community development with books, workshops, and research. In this limited framework I will only try to lay out some basic principles that can get one started.

Start Small and Intentional

In modern society we have gotten accustomed to measuring success with numbers. As a result, one of the classic mistakes community entrepreneurs do is to start with a big event with as many people as possible in the room. The problem is that the more people you have in the room, the more opinions you have and the more difficult it will be to agree on a shared intention.

The way we recommend is to start very small, even with three to five people. The first phase should be defining a clear vision and mission for the community, which will then serve as its "identity card." The next step should be inviting only a few people to join at a time until reaching a critical mass of about 10 to 15 people in the leadership core. Those who join will get absorbed in the vision and mission laid out by the founders; and although they can adjust and tweak it a bit, the community builds its backbone this way instead of undermining it.

The Location Trap

An Intentional Community is a group of people sharing both space and time together (as well as intention). Hence, finding a location for the community is obviously something its members should deal with. In some cases, they will already be living in proximity to one another, and will just want to find public space for joint activities; in other cases they will relocate as a group to another place (more common in Israel), purchase a building for co-housing and many other options.

The challenge is that it is much more tempting, and exciting, to discuss potential location than almost anything else. It gives people the opportunity to dream, to feel that this is the real thing, and discuss remote future details and avoid contemporary conflicts. But that is exactly the problem. It is like discussing with a potential spouse the details of the college you would like to send your child to, when you haven't even decided you love each other enough to get married.

It is best to avoid discussing location at least for the first few months. It is important to remember that out of 10 groups that set sail only two or three will succeed. All the rest will fall apart, mostly because of internal social issues and conflicts. It is better to disband before signing a multi-million dollar contract with a developer, and sign it only after you a certain level of confidence and trust with your partners.

Ousting of the Founder

Of all the patterns that repeat themselves in communal life, I believe this is the most prevalent and important one. You, the entrepreneur, wake up one morning and decide to make a difference in your life and induce moral behavior by creating a Jewish Intentional Community. You collect a small group of friends, define a clear vision and mission statement, grow it gradually, and avoid discussing the community's location until the group is mature enough. Eventually, you succeed, and after three years you actually lead a full-fledged intentional community doing amazing things. My advice to you, at that point, would be to step back and let someone else take the lead. Otherwise, what is very likely to happen is that you will be simply overthrown.

The dynamic is simple: People gather around a leader because he or she gives them enough confidence in the process. As time goes by, they grow more confident, in their own right, and feel a stronger sense of ownership over the community. The newcomers (relatively to the founder) would like to get their opportunity to lead one of the things they hold dearest in their lives. If they will not be given the opportunity to do this by the founder's initiative, they will take it by their own initiative.

Learn and Do, All the Time

Jewish tradition is rooted in learning, *talmud Torah*; and activism, *hessed* or *tikkun olam*. The same goes for the Jewish family, and it only makes sense that a Jewish Intentional Community will try to live up to the same standards.

Creating a regular space for learning, alongside external projects and volunteering, is the key through which intentional communities induce better moral behavior and make their members better human beings. It also gives the community the space to create its shared language and update its vision and mission as times change.

Furthermore, creating a *tikkun olam* project together is the best guarantee for the internal resilience of the community itself. Think of a married couple without children, versus a couple which has been blessed with children. The former is much easier to disband when conflicts arise, simply because there are no strings attached. When there are children, divorce is still an option, but the couple will go through much more effort to preserve their marriage.

An external project that all, or at least most, of the community members are invested in is like the community's child. Communities face internal conflicts and disputes as well. Communities with significant projects can and have fallen apart as well. But it is much less likely.

Concluding Notes

The few "tips" mentioned above are not meant to discourage anyone from attempting to create a community. I am merely suggesting doing it wisely and trying to avoid repeating other people's mistakes. In the professional community development business, we usually say that the most difficult component in a community is human beings. Alas, these are the only building blocks you can actually

use to create one….

When I was 16, a group of friends and I found a deserted building that used to be a restaurant on the outskirts of Kiryat Tivon (Northern Israel). We renovated the place and became a strongly connected group, my first intentional community. As a result, I joined the *haNoar haOved vehaLomed* youth movement, served in the Nachal, and lived in communes until I was 22 or so. At about this age I became religious, which is a whole different story, and moved to a mixed religious-secular community in Jerusalem and then founded Garin Shuva in 2009, the intentional community on the Gaza border in which I live to this day. This community developed into the Nettiot network of communities, through which I was also one of the founders of MAKOM in 2011.

After more than a decade of communal experience, the idea to try and take the Israeli model of and apply it to Diaspora Jewry in some way came up the first time I met Nigel Savage, founder and president of Hazon, in 2012. Two years later, we received a grant from the UJA Federation of New-York to start "Hakhel," the first ever Jewish Intentional Communities Incubator. Its purpose was, and still is, to cultivate the emergence of a range of new experiments in Jewish communal life, as part of the general rejuvenation of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Hakhel invests in and supports such new models and experiments through professional consulting, seed money grants, international and local conferences, online learning and learning trips to Israel.

As our Sages say, "a person is his own relative," and cannot be considered reliable when testifying about matters relating to his or her own field of interest. However, with all due caution, I believe that if we want to increase moral behavior in our generation, as well as ignite a Jewish renaissance in the Diaspora, Intentional Communities could and should play a major role in this effort. My hope is that this article will contribute, if only little, to this joint effort.