

Thank God for Gershonites: The Responsibility and Joy of Serving the Community

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I'm a big Larry David fan, so I love it when the Torah reminds me of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

Here's the scene:

Larry is caught attempting to steal a fork from a restaurant. Actually, he wasn't really stealing it; he was just borrowing it for his driver. But the maître d' had it out for Larry because, when they ran into each other on the street the other day, Larry refused to do a stop-and-chat with him.

So the maître d' calls the police, and Larry has to appear in court. He comes before a Judge Katzen, who Larry assumes is Jewish.

When the judge asks if Larry has anything to say for himself, Larry, trying to curry favor, says, "Yes, Judge Katzen. And may I say, 'Shabbat shalom.'" But the judge doesn't blink.

Then, Judge Katzen asks Larry what he thinks an appropriate punishment would be for stealing the fork. Larry responds, "I could work at the temple on Saturday mornings; hand out tallises and yarmulkes."

"And you think this is a fitting punishment?" the judge asks. "Isn't it a *joy*?"

"Well," says Larry, "temple *can* be quite grueling, as you know."

I think that's what the Gershonites, one of the clans in ancient Israel, probably said at the beginning of this week's parashah when Moses told them that they would be responsible for schlepping all the stuff for the mishkan through the wilderness.

How would you feel if you woke up one day and, just because you were related to some guy named Gershon like a million generations ago, you got this job assigned to you?

"Carry the cloths of the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting with its covering, the covering of dolphin skin that is on top of it, and the screen for the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; the hangings of the enclosure, the screen at the entrance of the gate of the enclosure that surrounds the Tabernacle, the cords thereof, and the altar, and all their service equipment and all their accessories." (*Num.* 4:26)

Well, when we read this passage at morning minyan on Thursday, my initial reaction was that this was a big bummer for the Gershonites—because, anytime the community would be getting

together for services, *they* would have to be the ones to get there early and set everything up, and then stay late and take everything down and carry it to the next location.

But then Howard Herman said something that helped me see it differently.

He said every community *depends* on people like the Gershonites to make sure things are taken care of properly, so that *everyone* can have a meaningful experience.

As Howard saw it, this isn't a burden that the Gershonites are stuck with. It's actually a *privilege*—an essential and honored role they get to play for the benefit of the whole community.

And it made sense that Howard saw this in the text because Howard is the consummate Gershonite in *our* community.

He's always one you can count on to come early and set up the technology, and he makes sure we have everything we need for the service or the program; he's always there to lend a hand, and move furniture around, or go find supplies.

And when the event is over, Howard is there cleaning up the stray plates and napkins and packing up the bagels and making sure everything goes back in its place.

No one told him to do it, and no one is paying him for it either. He just does it because he loves Temple Beth-El, and he wants all of us to have a great experience when we're here, and he knows our congregation couldn't function well for everyone without Gershonites who are willing to help out.

Fortunately, we're blessed here at Temple Beth-El to have a lot of Gershonites.

Phil hands out the prayer books every Friday night and makes us feel welcome when we come in.

Roberta, Linda, Sharon, Martha, Aaron, Ellen, Ina, Gloria, Sheryl, Debbie, Maria, and others I'm probably forgetting bake challah and amazing goodies for our oneg each week.

Elaine does more things than I can possibly list, let alone remember, but among them she brings our Torah down to the atrium for Saturday morning services, and makes sure our challah and kiddush are set up, and helps ensure seating and countless other details run smoothly on the High Holidays—thanks to Bill's mentoring.

Gloria, Arlene, and Joanie help out in our office, spending hours stuffing envelopes, answering phones, and making calls to congregants.

Terri, Debbie, and Randi reach out to congregants who are in need and bring them food and offer friendship to people who are lonely.

Along with Howard, Lea and David and Stuart all lend a hand with tech setups so people who can't make it in person can still participate online.

Beth comes in every week to make sure our loved ones' yahrzeit lights are turned on for Friday night services.

Steve and Debbie are constantly helping out with fixing things around the building and decorating our sacred spaces.

Gayle and Barbara work in the garden to keep our temple landscaping beautiful.

Paul runs back and forth collecting medical supplies for our lending program and selects appropriate equipment for those who need it in our temple family as well as in the broader community.

Ronnie and Joe prep the bagels on Sundays. Claire runs the registration table for holidays and congregational events.

Matt and Sandy and our Brotherhood guys help out at the food pantry and build the sukkah and barbecue for our events and carry our banner in the Memorial Day Parade.

Jenn, Rochelle, Sandy, and the Sisterhood ladies organize all kinds of events and projects and help out with pretty much anything the congregation needs done.

And, of course, there are all those congregants who give their time and energy to serve on our board and on committees, like our engagement committee, our young families committee, our producers' circle, our development committee, our assistant rabbi welcome committee, our ADL team, our religious school liaisons, our early childhood parent-teacher committee, our worship committee, our prayer task force, and our tekiah shofar team.

These are only the ones I could think of this afternoon as I was writing my sermon, but I know there are so many more.

If I missed you, I apologize; it was not intentional. Please know our leadership, our staff, and our clergy are so deeply grateful for all you do for our congregation.

The Festival of Shavuot, which was last night and today, celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and reaffirms the covenant that is the heart of Judaism.

That covenant is multidimensional.

On one level, it means we have a special relationship with God and special obligations toward God.

On another equally important level, each of us is in a special covenantal relationship with our community and, as such, we have responsibilities to the community.

The Talmud articulates this key principle: "*Kol yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh*"; meaning: "All Israel is responsible for one another." (Sh'vuot 39a)

But this apparent duality—the obligations we have to God, on the one hand, and the obligations we have to the community, on the other—is actually given *unity* in the statement of Pirkei Avot (2:2) that "all who work for the community should do so *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven"; meaning: not for any ulterior motive—not for credit or personal benefit—but only for the pure, sincere, and holy motivation of serving God and God's people.

In other words, to serve the community with purity of heart *is* to serve God. And that is a privilege and a joy.

If Larry David thought that temple is grueling—that handing out tallises and yarmulkes at Shabbat services is a burden to be avoided or delegated to the proverbial "someone else"—it's only because he lacked this broader perspective.

Maybe he was only thinking of himself. Maybe he figured it wasn't a good use of his time because it detracted from other things he wanted to do, or because he saw no benefit in helping out.

I wish he'd had the chance to learn from Howard and all the many other Gershonites at Temple Beth-El.

Fortunately, *we* do have the chance to learn from them.

On behalf of our whole congregation, I want to thank you all for showing us the true meaning of covenant and service.