

Shabbat Shalom. Today's drash asks what happens to community muscle when we transition in this parsha from a family clan to a people numbering over a million.

Shemot begins with our family of 70 settling in mitzraim (Egypt). Our people were fertile, prolific and multiplied. [Rashi](#) tells us that we literally swarmed — meaning we bore six children at one birth. Sextuplets. Every pregnancy produced six babies. In a later generation, the Midwives told Pharaoh that the Hebrew women gave birth like animals. Pharaoh believed them because...Sextuplets.

I am overwhelmed by this Midrash. I cannot imagine how overwhelmed those parents were. Six infants become toddlers and then there are six more infants and soon there will be at least a dozen teenagers all at once. It may take a village, but even the best village would be hard put to have the muscle to help raise this many children.

So we couldn't make a gradual transition from a supportive family to a cohesive community. What held us together? Part of the answer is that the enormous birthrate prevented us from assimilating into the Egyptian population, as Joseph had. More importantly, in the period of rapid growth, did our community muscle atrophy? And if so, when did we get it back?

Let's go to a turning point in our parsha. The King of Egypt dies. As long as the old king lived, our enslaved ancestors had hope that with his death the harsh decrees against us would "die" also and that a new regime would grant general amnesty to the slaves, as was the custom in Egypt.

Our hope turned to despair. And we cried out. Or HaChaim tells us that, 'We did not appeal to G'd to save us from our situation; we merely groaned.'

The Etz Hayim commentary on the following passage, "G-d took notice of them", cites an ancient Rabbi. "What G-d saw was that despite their misery, the Israelites tried to help each other. For example, instead of each man looking out for himself, when one would finish making his quota of

bricks, he would help out a weaker neighbor.” When Pharaoh makes the quota impossible later in this parsha, the Hebrew bailiffs took upon themselves the beatings for the brickmakers’ failure to keep up.

We were unified by more than our despair. Even in our distress, we were able to show up for each other. We were able, despite that disruptive birthrate, to keep some community muscle.

I have been a member of Netivot Shalom for over 25 years. I have seen members working full time while raising young children or caring for older relatives or doing both. Although, I haven’t seen any sextuplets. Yet somehow so many busy members have found the bandwidth to volunteer. Even with active and demanding lives, we

- visit the sick,
- welcome strangers and
- organize tzedakah within our congregation and in our community.

We bring meals to

- a family with a new baby, or
- a person recovering from illness, or
- a mourner.

We attend brises or shiva minyanim even when the only thing we know about the people receiving our support is that they are also members of this congregation.

Our opportunities and methods of performing chesed (acts of lovingkindness) have undergone a lot of upheaval in the last two years. We have suspended some of our activities. We also have adapted and innovated. Now is the time to consider the best ways to exercise our community muscle, whether they are

- a return to our prior in person practices,
- the new pandemic innovations,

- or actions we've yet to imagine.

Shabbat shalom.