

Dancing Circles: From Gujo to Judaism, Rediscovering the Heartbeat of Community

Another memory from my trip to Japan this summer with my son Ari:

After the first week of our trip which we spent in Tokyo and Nagoya, the city where I studied for my college year abroad, we found ourselves with a reservation in a quaint town named Gujo in Gifu prefecture.

Gujo is known for its celebration of the Japanese Buddhist festival for the Dead called “Obon,” through dances called Odori, and coincidentally, as luck would have it we would be arriving there on the second day of the commencement of this festival which lasts for three months during the height of summer!

Our taxi dropped us off on a seemingly random street, shrouded in darkness. But then, as we walked closer to where our driver had pointed, the distant sounds of flute, shamisen, drum and singing, reached our ears, guiding us like a beacon. As we moved closer, the sounds got louder.

As we followed the sounds, we were met with a sea of people moving as one, circumambulating around a float with six or so musicians. The rhythmic beats of taiko drums, the whistle of the flute, the plunking of the stringed shamisen, and the sweet sounds of singing echoed, drawing us even closer to this dance that has been celebrated for over four centuries.

The streets, bathed in the soft glow of lanterns, were alive with dancers. Their feet clacked in unison, the sound of their geta (wooden sandals) creating a rhythmic backdrop to the music. Their clapping in unison had the same effect.

Some were dressed in traditional Japanese yukata robes, while others wore jeans. People of all ages, from toddlers to elders, were immersed in the dance.

At first, I stood at the periphery, filming the spectacle. But as the minutes passed, the pull of the dance became irresistible. I looked and saw my son already dancing in the midst of the crowd.

Taking my son's courage as inspiration, I tentatively began to mimic a few gestures, claps, and stomps. An

inner dialogue began to play out in my mind: *"I don't do this... What am I thinking? I can't do this... I must look so silly... Wait, this actually feels good... I guess I can do this after all!"* By the end, I was flowing with the crowd, I felt the boundaries between myself and others fall away whole at the same time I felt completely grounded in my body, my feet stomping on the ground, my hands clapping in unison.

As I danced, lost in the rhythm and the collective spirit of the Gujo Odori, I felt an overwhelming sense of connection—a profound realization of what it means to be a part of something larger than myself.

The history of the dances show us how the dances were meant to equally honor the inherent gifts of each individual: A man named Endo Yoshitaka started the Gujo Odori festival in the Tokugawa Period over 400 years ago. It was **“an attempt to encourage all the town's citizens to get together, regardless of social level or position.”**

This spirit remains today as the heart and soul of this very popular summer bon dance festival. Often in traditional practices like this, we are asked to set aside

our values. But here it was both. Unity, harmony, community, AND egalitarianism, and equality, where everyone's gifts are uplifted and honored.

In a true spiritual community, EVERYONE is invited to the dance regardless of gender, class, age or social position.

What a gift to be able to experience this.

We danced for 2 hours. The dances continued late into the night but noting the infrequent train schedule, and not wanting to have to walk back ten miles to our hotel, we pulled ourselves away to make the mile walk back to the last train back.

As Ari and I ambled through the narrow streets of Gifu Gujo, the echoes of the festival still humming in our ears, our feet met the occasional cobblestone, we were speechless.

Ari and I are individualists and introverts but this manner of communal experience was a sensation Ari and I rarely, if ever, felt in the hustle and bustle of our lives in the States.

The profound connection, the dissolution of the self into a collective spirit, was something we hadn't realized we were so starved for. We walked in silence for a while.

Then I said, "It's no wonder that we feel such profound loneliness and anxiety in the West. No wonder we're so afraid of death. No wonder we're all so self-conscious and self-critical. No wonder we're in the midst of a mental health crisis--perhaps this is a piece of what we've been missing."

Ari nodded, adding, "It's not just a problem in America, Dad. Modernization is everywhere, even here in Japan in cities like Tokyo!"

As Ari and my processing conversation continued, we acknowledged the many gifts of Western culture—the scientific advancements, the relentless march of progress, the strides towards equality. But we also recognized the loss, the void left by the absence of this kind of deep community connection. "It's a balance," Ari said thoughtfully. "There must be a way to integrate the best of both worlds."

I thought of our synagogues back in New York. "We have glimpses of this connection, especially during the High Holidays. But it's not the same intensity. The ultra-orthodox and orthodox communities might come closer to this, but then there's the trade-off. The lack of egalitarianism, the constraints on women's rights and freedoms."

The train journey back to our hotel was filled with reflections, aspirations, and a deep-seated desire to bridge two worlds. We realized that the challenge was not just to remember the magic of the Gujo Odori but to find a way to weave its essence into the fabric of our daily lives.

The experience also left me with a lingering question-- how can this beautiful and necessary feeling of community connection compete against the individualism, transactionalism, and materialism that modernity brings? Or even more forcefully-- CAN it compete?

Even with the incredible feelings the evening in Gujo evoked, it would take an extraordinary force of will to swim against the strong tide of modernity.

Even now the experience has faded into the background of my memory, and feels more like a dream than something that really happened.

I believe that this is what our Jewish ancestors were alluding to in their dreams of the utopian messianic age.

There is a wonderful story which is part midrash and part prophecy from the Talmud that envisions the messianic age. I could hear it echoing in my mind while I was dancing in a circle with thousands of people in that simple street in that small town in Japan.

It says: “In the future, the Holy Blessed One will arrange a circle dance [machol] of the righteous, and God will be sitting among them in the Garden of Eden, and each and every one of the righteous will point to God with their finger, as it is stated: “And it shall be said on that day: Behold, this is our God, for whom we waited, that God might save us. This is YHVH; for whom we waited. We will be glad and rejoice in Their salvation” (Isaiah 25:9). God will be revealed, so that every righteous individual will be able to say: This is our

God, as though they were pointing at Them with a finger.’

The Hasidic master, Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl comments on this text from the Talmud saying:

“In the future, all will reconnect to the Divine root. All separations will end. The full brilliance of the Divine Light will appear in each world. There will be no genders, for all will grasp the light equally, like a circle with no beginning or end. No one will need to learn from another.

This is the meaning of the Talmudic teaching that in the future God will hold a dance for the righteous. It also explains the circle dances we do on Hoshana Rabbah and Shemini Atzeret, which enact this messianic time. As Jeremiah said, “The woman shall encircle the man.”

The same is true regarding the dance led by Miriam. Her song and dance enabled the highest spiritual awareness, like the future era when divisions end.

Moses spoke from the realm where genders are separate, saying “I will sing.” But Miriam brought down the Divine Light and proclaimed “Sing now!” She brought the messianic spirit, breaking boundaries between people.

In a circle dance all distinctions fade away, we all become one with each other and the divine.

Yet each individual can point across the circle to someone else, identifying the face of the Divine in their face.

When Ari and I discussed all of this, we also discussed the *dangers* of loss of ego.

I recounted to him how my teacher Reb Zalman Schachter used to say, “if someone tells you to get rid of your ego, you’d better watch your wallet!”

We talked about the potential for people to take advantage of others when their ego defenses were down. We talked about the danger of cults and other communities where people willingly relinquish their individuality to the collective-- and usually to a charismatic leader.

This is why the circle is the key, both in the Jewish messianic vision and in the dances of Gujo, why equality is the key, why we must balance the lessons of equality, egalitarianism, feminism, and modern and post-modern philosophy with this loss of ego, this loss of individuality.

I expanded on what Reb Zalman said by mentioning how he also said that “the ego is a great manager, but a horrible boss.”

The ego is great at protecting us from being taken advantage of, but when the ego is *running* the show, it becomes all about the individual and we are faced with the selfishness, materialism and transactionalism of the modern world.

Perhaps this is what Hillel meant when he said, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me, but if i am ONLY for myself, what am I?”

How can we create a community that values the gifts of each individual, and yet avoids egotism and individualism?

Here’s a cautionary tale:

In a quaint village nestled amidst the rolling vineyards of Eastern Europe, whispers of an impending visit from a revered rabbi fluttered like butterflies. The air was thick with anticipation, and the villagers, with hearts full of pride, convened under the ancient oak tree's shade.

"Let us celebrate with a wine festival," proposed one, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "A tribute to our land and our labor."

But a murmur of concern rippled through the crowd. "Our reserves are modest," lamented another, "A grand feast would drain our cellars."

From the back, a wise elder stood, his voice steady as the setting sun, "Let's place a grand barrel in the town's heart. Each week, as Shabbat's embers fade, let every home pour their wine into this vessel. By season's end, it shall brim with our collective spirit."

In the hush of twilight, Mendel whispered to his beloved Rebecca, "With the village's bounty, our modest offering will scarcely be missed. Let's pour water, and none will be the wiser." And so, under the cloak of night, water flowed where wine should have been.

Months passed, and the day of honor dawned. The village square bustled, children laughed, and the scent of fresh bread wafted through the air. The grand barrel, now full, stood as a testament to the village's unity.

With the rabbi's arrival, a hush descended. He lifted a ceremonial cup, its silver catching the sun's rays, and filled

it from the barrel. But as he raised it high, a collective gasp pierced the air. The cup shimmered not with the deep red of wine but with the clear hue of water.

In that moment, the village's heart sank, and the weight of a thousand unspoken truths pressed upon them. For in the quest to save, they had lost; in the act of withholding, they had diminished not just the barrel's contents but the very essence of their community.

The tale of the village's grand barrel serves as a poignant reminder of the intricate tapestry of community and the threads of individual responsibility that weave it together. It underscores the profound impact of every single contribution, no matter how seemingly insignificant. When individuals shirk their responsibility, assuming others will compensate, the entire community can find itself bereft.

The story is a testament to the ripple effect of individual actions and the collective disappointment that can ensue when sincerity and genuine contribution are absent. It beckons us to reflect upon our roles within our communities, urging us to recognize that when we all play our part, the collective spirit is enriched, but when we withhold, we risk diluting the very essence of our communal bonds.

In today's world, we find ourselves ensnared in a web of transactional relationships and material pursuits. Our communities, once built on mutual trust and shared experiences, now often resemble marketplaces where interactions are weighed against potential gains. This shift towards individualism and materialism is not just a modern phenomenon; it's a reflection of a deeper human tendency, one that the villagers in the tale of the wine barrel succumbed to.

*On Yom Kippur morning, our Torah reading recounts the meticulous rituals of the high priest as he sought atonement—first for himself, then for his family, and ultimately for the entire nation. This sacred duty, performed with precision and reverence, was the linchpin of our collective repentance. Yet, with the absence of the high priest and the destruction of the Temple in later years, how were we to find atonement? A midrash from Tana de Bei Eliyahu offers an enlightening perspective. It tells us that when King David heard that his Temple would one day be destroyed, he asked God how people would then make atonement. The story tells us that in that moment God proclaimed that in the absence of the high priest and a Temple, **it is the unity of the community that brings about atonement.***

When we come together as one, with shared purpose and intent, we create a powerful force for collective redemption.

This sentiment is beautifully echoed in the teachings of the Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, who posits that the Buddha of the future will not be a singular entity but rather the spiritual community—the sangha. Just as the high priest once stood as the conduit for our collective atonement, now it is our united community that holds the power to heal, to forgive, and to move forward in shared purpose.

Ahad Ha'Am expanded on this idea when he said:

“When the individual values the community as his own life and strives after its happiness as though it were his individual well-being, he finds satisfaction and no longer feels so keenly the bitterness of his individual existence, because he sees the end for which he lives and suffers...”

There's a truth, one that those who've experienced the Gujo Odori or any such communal gathering can attest to, and even those who've shown up for a minyan on a Saturday morning: when we come together, even if it's just for a short while, there's a magic that unfolds. Just as in the rhythmic dances of Japan, the act of gathering for a

minyan is a testament to the power of community. It's not just about the prayers or the rituals; it's about the collective spirit that emerges when we gather in sacred community.

I saw this magic at work over this past year as people stepped up to create an incredible monthly Friday night shabbat experience.

Every time you immerse yourself in such gatherings, whether it's dancing in the streets of Japan or being part of a minyan, you not only gift yourself a moment of serenity and joy but also fortify the community. It's a symbiotic relationship. Today, you might be the pillar of strength for someone in sorrow, and tomorrow, when you face life's storms, the community stands by you.

In our quest to rebuild and strengthen our communal bonds, there are tangible steps we can take, especially within the embrace of our synagogue.

Consider attending our musical Friday nights, a monthly event that not only uplifts the spirit but also fosters a sense of unity through shared melodies. Saturday morning services offer a serene space for reflection and connection, grounding us in tradition while allowing us to support and uplift one another. When a member of our community is in mourning, showing up for a shiva minyan

is a profound act of solidarity, reminding them that they are not alone in their grief.

Beyond these religious gatherings, simply being there for a friend in need, offering a listening ear or a helping hand, can make a world of difference. Our synagogue also hosts a plethora of groups and activities, each providing unique opportunities to connect, learn, and grow together.

Engaging in these communal activities is not just about fulfilling an obligation; it's about actively weaving the threads of community, ensuring that the tapestry remains vibrant and intact.

May we all find the strength to cherish our traditions, to value each individual's unique contribution, and to fortify the bonds of our community in the face of modern challenges.

May our efforts weave a tapestry of unity, understanding, and love. In this new year let us step forward with hope and determination, seeking to build a world where the spirit of community shines brightly, undimmed by the challenges of our times.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.