

## The Challenge of Community

This is my first newsletter column as President of CBST.

I am honored to have this opportunity to serve the community. Over the past year, as I was working with Past President Lisa Kartzman, Executive Director Ilene Sameth, and Senior Rabbi Kleinbaum on the transition, I spent a lot of time thinking about what it would mean to be our lay leader. I've moved around a lot in my life, having grown up in suburban Buffalo, finished high school and university in southern California, gone to grad school in North Carolina, worked in Boston, suburban New Jersey, Bombay India, finally settling in Manhattan eight years ago. Committing to a community was a new concept for me, and so I asked myself these questions: What does it mean to truly belong to a community in the modern world? How do we demonstrate our commitment? And, what can we expect in return?

I don't think my predicament is unique. People pick up and move to go to college or for a job; for a new lover; because they like the weather. We reach out in chat rooms and weblogs to find like-minded people thousands of miles away. This mobility has allowed people to seek opportunity and escape oppressive environments. But in doing so we risk losing our connection to traditional community.

The Jewish people know about this because we've lived over two thousand years in a state of diaspora, always subject to expulsion and mostly feeling like we don't quite fit in. That forced our ancestors to create internal community structures to help people deal with each other, and with the outside world.

I bet most of us would have a hard time coming up with a single answer to the question "What's your community?". CBST is my synagogue, but I'm also a member of the gay community, a New Yorker, a sailor. I belong to the Jewish Community Center and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center.

It's great to have all these places to call home, but too much choice also works against the idea of making a long-term commitment. We come to believe that if the community no longer meets our needs or feels 'right' we can easily pick up, move, or change our affiliation and start all over again. In doing so, we can forget how to accommodate, to get along, to know when compromising a principle might actually be the right decision so that the community remains stable. It becomes easy to get so angry at someone who hurts or offends us that we simply cut them off—or walk away forever.

After all, we tell ourselves, we can always find new friends elsewhere. But this is the path to isolation, because the more we walk away, the more self-righteous we become, and the less others want to be with us. It is startling to think that in a world where we are ever more connected than was even imaginable 200 years ago, we should become less tolerant, not more. Yet even while we live and work in increasingly diverse cities, we risk becoming more inflexible in our chosen communities. We listen only to people who say what we already believe, and we preach only to the converted.

To do otherwise is difficult. It requires that we listen carefully and with empathy even when we vehemently disagree, searching for the few things we share in common to build bridges of communication. And of

course it demands that we learn to accommodate difference, to work things out, to rein in our ego and pride, even accepting that sometimes the other person will win at our expense. But when we do so, we find that something amazing happens. In our humility and acceptance, people begin to trust us, to make a place for us, to listen more carefully to what we say. Sometimes we even actually win our point.

This is what CBST has taught me as I studied to become President, and I am grateful. I believe this next period of time will be expansive for our community, growing our reach and influence in the world while continuing to take care of ourselves and each other in the meaningful ways that spiritual communities do best.

I am interested in your own answers to the questions I posed at the beginning of this article. The CBST office has set up a special email address you can use to send me your comments and your ideas. I look forward to hearing from you at [erosenbaum@cbst.org](mailto:erosenbaum@cbst.org).