

“The Indispensable Community”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Pagan deities demanded obeisance but not morality. The great emphasis and innovation of the Jewish tradition was the insistence that God cares about how we treat one another. As Rabbi Harold Kushner points out, the central prayer of Judaism, the *shema* — Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One — is not, strictly speaking, a prayer but a declaration. We address it not to God but to one another. The community is the arena of religion. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote that religion is what a man does with his solitude. Not so; religion is what we do with one another.

Solitary prayer is less elevated than communal prayer; solitary study less praiseworthy than study with others; a whole range of observances require a minyan, a community of people.

When asked for a charitable contribution in Charles Dickens’ immortal tale, Scrooge replies they should put him down for nothing. “You wish to be anonymous?” the solicitors persist. He answers, “I wish to be left alone.”

The desire to be alone is natural, and at times necessary. But the drive to be with others, to help them grow, to help them heal, to draw strength from them and share faith with them, is central to the human quest and the religious mission.