

**Words Matter:
Redefining A Spiritual Community
With a Vocabulary That Creates Connections**

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Perhaps the whole of the Reform movement of Judaism can be summed up with the following phrases: history happens, continuity has always been balanced and blended with change – and the world is made up of the words we use to describe it.

There is much to say about each of these phrases (the notion that evolution is a part of social development, that we interact with the world around us but maintain our own identity, and much more), but I want to concentrate, for now, on the implications of the third idea, that words matter. Words work, to shape the reality around us. That is why our movement changed a number of the prayers: there were some traditional phrases or ideas so at variance with either what we saw of the world, or what we wanted the world to be, that we could no longer say such things out loud. When there were assertions that jumped out at us as primitive, problematic, or even offensive, these were things we amended, adjusted, or simply cut out of the service altogether. (The fact that words work in emotional ways as well, that music moves the soul, and that this is not entirely an intellectual experience – in other words, that we might well “sing” something we would not “say,” or the rhythm of the ritual might convey something other than the apparent cognitive and surface meaning of the words -- that was an insight that came to our movement later in its development; it took us awhile to figure that out.)

Just as the words of prayer matter, however, I also believe that the words we use to build, construct and maintain a community matter as well. And in this regard, this is something I have been wondering, and worried about, for a long time.

Let’s talk about the words we use, things like “membership” and “dues.” What do the words convey? What are we implying, and expecting, and promising with the use of such words? And are there alternatives that might serve everyone’s needs in a holier, and more holistic way?

“Membership,” of course, brings up images of clubs and cliques, of who is in and who is out, and, for those of a certain age, of bad tv commercials from previous decades (“Membership has its privileges!”) It implies a fee for service, an almost commercial context.

But we would not be here at all without those who view themselves as “in” and “part of” the community. The community, as such, would not exist.

What might an alternative be? I am decent with words, but I have not found a satisfying English substitute. “Builders” seems too focused on the physical even though it could mean more than that, “partners” implies a shared vision but echoes too closely the “making partner” of law firms and other business associations.

I do not always or automatically believe that a Hebrew term is superior to an English one just because of its origin rooted in a Jewish world view, but for this term and for “dues,” below, that is what I have come up with. The best I can do in a short exploratory essay is the inexact but common translation of “member,” which is “*chaver*,” or (plural) “*chaverim*.” The “ch” is the Hebrew one, like in “Chanukah,” not the English, as in “cheese.” The term literally means “friend” (remember President Clinton’s farewell to Yitzchak Rabin and the Prime Minister’s funeral – “Shalom, Chaver?”) The term is used for those who are part of a kibbutz, those who are “members” of the Knesset (“*chevrai* Knesset,”), of those who are associates of one another in a shared enterprise-- but it has the active implications of intimacy that, I think, the English “member” only possesses if you think about a “member” as a body part, and part of a larger whole. And related words using the same root promote the same sense of connectivity. “*Chevrei*” are a group of friends, “*chevra*” means “society,” a *chevruta* is a study partner, and a *chavurah* is a small group -- often within a synagogue -- of people connected by common interest or a consciously constructed communal impulse. The root Ch.B.R. has the sense of “uniting, bringing together.” A *machberet* is a notebook, because the pages are “bound together.”

Would it change anything to see ourselves as a sacred society, as intimate friends, as colleagues in a joint venture, study partners on our Jewish journeys, connected parts sharing part of a storied past and shaping a chosen-together future, as *chaverim* of a *kehilah kedosha* (a holy community)?

And what of “dues”? The word implies something we “owe,” an expectation, almost a one-way kind of obligation. Clearly, of course, we need the material support, even for the most spiritual of services. But what word would work better, to get at the concept of a covenant, a partnership, or reflect a shared stake in a values-based vision? Here, a Thesaurus was of no help at all. “Fees” seems even worse, “subscriptions” reduces us to a cable network, “assessments” and “excises” and “levies” are all clearly something externally imposed, and “duties” has a variety of problems as a term. “Responsibilities” or even “obligations” are not terrible terms – but I would never want the

responsibilities or obligations we share towards one another to be reduced to the material and monetary level; clearly the time we give and the care and love we bring are even more important (although we still need the material support as well!)

So, here, too, I turn to Hebrew. “*Tzedakah*” is too broad and has many other implications (including that which we give that is purely for others – clearly in intent and hopefully in practice synagogue dues are something we derive some benefit from ourselves). At the moment the term I am the most comfortable with is “*terumah*” (or, plural, “*terumot*.”) It means “offering,” but it comes from the same root as “to lift up” (Rahm Emanuel’s first name is based on the same root, the Hebrew word meaning “lifting up.”) It happens to have a historic echo, in that the portion describing the very first synagogue building fund (the construction of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness, described in the book of Exodus) is called “*Terumah*.”

The term itself contains a dance between the fact that everyone is expected to lend a hand, but that different people do what they can in different ways. And, I hope, this it is a concept we can come together around – that the support we give to a spiritual community is something that lifts each other up – both others, and ourselves.

I can imagine alternative visions, other terms, different phrases which tease out the values we mean to express in better ways. But for now, as a start, and in terms of an overall theme I want to repeat just this: that words matter. That what we say reflects on who we are, and what we want to accomplish.

Let us, then, be *chaverim*, intimate friends of and with one another, in the building of a sacred community. And let our *terumot*, our offerings, be something which lifts us all, together – and also each one of us, individually.