A History of Jewish Belonging

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Our identity is shaped by many forces—our character, beliefs, knowledge, relationships, experiences, and the dreams that guide us forward.

Identity is also shaped by our sense of belonging. The larger groups to which we are bound play a powerful role in shaping who we are. These communities establish the fundamental values that shape our character and guide our moral compass. By upholding these values, our communities and families give us stability, identity, and a deep sense of belonging. Belonging is the scaffolding upon which identity is built. It does not dictate who we are but provides the structure within which we grow. Without "belonging," the task of constructing identity becomes far more challenging.

Modern society is grappling with a profound identity crisis, a disorientation born, in part, from the erosion of traditional forms of community. For generations, human identity was anchored in "belonging"—to families, faith communities, and societies bound by shared convictions and sacred traditions. These communities provided foundational values that shaped the individual and bound people together in a common mission.

As these classic communal structures wane, the process of identity formation has become untethered—fluid, unmoored, and dangerously unstable. Without the steadying force of "belonging," identity is left to the whims of personal preference, shifting trends, and fleeting emotions. The absence of an enduring framework has turned the search for selfhood into a struggle against quicksand—where anything goes, but nothing holds. Without community, it is hard to belong. Without belonging, identity remains uncertain.

Three Jewish "Communities"

At the dawn of Jewish history, we were told that we belonged to three different types of communities. As our nation took its first steps in history, on the first Pesach ever observed, we were commanded to offer the inaugural *Korban Pesach*.

The Torah describes this *korban* (offering) as being brought by three communal entities:

"וְשָׁחֲטוּ אֹתוֹ כֹּל קְהַל עֲדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל"

"And all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it" (Shemot 12:6)

This *pasuk* reveals the three-layered nature of Jewish communal belonging. We are not merely members of a single collective; we are part of three communities—*eidah, Yisrael, and kahal*—three interwoven yet distinct identities. Each plays a unique role in shaping Jewish communal consciousness. Belonging to the Jewish People is not a singular experience but a multifaceted one, enriched by these overlapping dimensions.

Eidah

In his landmark essay entitled *Kol Dodi Dofek*, Rabbi Soloveitchik draws a crucial distinction between two dimensions of Jewish community and belonging: membership in the nation of Israel—or *Am Yisrael*—vs. commitment to an *eidah* or *Adat Yisrael*. The nation of Israel, or *Am Yisrael,* is a historical and sociological entity, forged by the shared experiences and unfolding history of our people. We are bound to this national framework, shaped by the depth of our shared history.

The *eidah*, however, represents something far deeper—a covenantal community bound not merely by history but by destiny. It is not just a people or a race but a collective that aspires to a common mission. Membership in the *eidah* is not automatic; it is a choice, a conscious embrace of the Jewish mission, what Rabbi Soloveitchik termed *brit ye'ud*, the covenant of purpose. While history places a Jew within *Am Yisrael* the nation, it is only through sacred commitment that a person joins the *eidah*, a community that carries forward the divine charge of the Jewish People.

Kahal

Beyond these two dimensions of Jewish identity—*Am Yisrael* and *eidah*—there exists a third: *kahal*. The *pasuk* describing the first *Korban Pesach* speaks not only of *Am Yisrael* and *eidah* but also of a *kahal*. While the concept of *kahal* shares similarities with *eidah*, it carries its own distinct meaning. Like *eidah*, a *kahal* signifies a community united by a common mission—a purposeful assembly, deliberately organized and committed to a higher calling—rather than a collective shaped solely by historical circumstance. And like *eidah*, membership in a *kahal* is neither inherent nor automatic; it is not an identity passively inherited but one that must be actively embraced.

However, *kahal* exhibits an important difference from *eidah*. The word *eidah* is closely related to *eidut*, signifying testimony. An *eidah* represents the eternal Jewish community, entrusted with bearing witness to the foundational truths of monotheism and morality and inspiring the world to live in the presence of God. There has always been and will always be only one *eidah*—spanning the entirety of Jewish history—uniting all Jews across generations, regardless of the era they inhabit.

By contrast the term *kahal* denotes a gathering of Jews assembled at a particular moment in time, united for a specific purpose or mission. It is a dynamic, responsive entity, forming and reforming as history unfolds. An *eidah* transcends time; a *kahal*, however, is fluid, shaped by the shifting tides of history and the pressing needs of each generation.

Three Examples of *Kahal*

For example, the day of Har Sinai was designated *Yom HaKahal* because we assembled as a nation to collectively experience divine revelation. That epic gathering, however, dispersed the next day, which was no longer a day of *kahal*. Though the *kahal* may have disbanded the day after, our belonging to the *eidah* remained unchanged.

Likewise, every seven years, we gathered in Yerushalayim to rekindle the spirit of *Yom HaKahal* through the ceremony of *Hakhel*, a reenactment of that foundational moment of unity. As a *kahal*, we sought to revive the transformative experience of Har Sinai. Yet, the day after *Hakhel*, that *kahal* dynamic dissolved.

Kehillot emerge and fade, forming in response to specific historical moments, uniting us for a shared purpose before passing into history.

Similarly, when Moshe prepared the nation for the construction of the *Mishkan*, he summoned us with the word *Vayakhel*, forming a *kahal* united by a grand mission of building a house for Hashem. Centuries later, Shlomo once again gathered the people—*az yakhel Shlomo et kol adat Bnei Yisrael*—as he prepared to establish the permanent *Mikdash*, forging an additional *kahal* assembly bound by a historical purpose. These moments of *kahal* were not enduring structures but rather assemblies convened for a specific task or a shared experience. While *eidah* is eternal, *kahal* is defined by specific purpose and action.

Jewish collective identity is composed of three distinct layers. We belong to the nation of Israel, a historical entity shaped by the unfolding of time. Additionally, we are part of an *eidah*, a transgenerational community bound by an eternal covenant and a shared divine mission. Finally, we belong to *kahals*—dynamic assemblies that form and dissolve throughout history, gathering for specific moments and historical experiences. These *kahals, or kehillot* are not fixed; they arise in response to historical necessity, uniting us in mission before dispersing once their objective has been fulfilled.

Kahal Culpability

Parshat Vayikra introduces a different dimension of *kahal* identity—collective culpability. Responsibility is not solely an individual burden; a *kahal* can and must experience collective guilt. Typically, when a person sins, he undergoes a process of personal moral reckoning and offers a *korban* as teshuva to atone for his transgression. In addition, there are moments when an entire *kahal* is held accountable for its actions and must atone as a unified entity.

The Torah outlines the specific details of the *"kahal" korban*: If the Sanhedrin issues an erroneous ruling that causes the majority of the *kahal* to transgress, a unique communal offering—the *par he'elam davar shel tzibbur*—is required.

This *korban* offering messages that *kahal* identity encompasses not only historical mission but also joint moral experience. We do not merely share a national identity or agenda; we bear collective religious and ethical responsibility.

By designating this *korban*, the Torah trains us to assess moral behavior not only on an individual level but also as a collective. We are conditioned to ask not only, "How am I faring in my personal religious journey?" but also, "How is my contemporary *kahal* navigating its spiritual and moral responsibilities? What shortcomings within our community call for reflection and repair?" This *korban* embeds *kahal* identity into the fabric of religious consciousness. We are part of a *kahal* not only when we experience divine revelation or build a *Mishkan*, but also in moments of religious failure.

Who is Part of the *Kahal*?

While outlining the halachot of this *kahal korban*, the Gemara in Horayot <u>asserts</u> that only the Jewish population residing in the Land of Israel is counted when determining whether the majority of the *kahal* has sinned. The calculus of *kahal* is intrinsically tied to the land itself. Jews residing outside of Israel are not inscribed within the *kahal* registry.

Evidently, the curse of Jewish exile is fragmentation and exclusion from halachic *kahal* identity. Haman's assessment of the Jewish people in exile as <u>*mefuzar umeforad*</u>—scattered and dispersed—was tragically accurate. Though Jews may live in firmly established communities throughout exile, they do not attain halachic *kahal* status nor are they counted within its ranks.

Kahal identity, in its fullest legal sense, is inherently tied to a specific place—belonging to an assembly rooted in historical mission in the land of history.

Before we arrived in Israel, our history unfolded in the desert and *kahal* identity wasn't bound to land. When we stood together upon the desert sands, hearing the voice of Hashem or building the *Mishkan*, we experienced a *kahal* dynamic. However, once we entered our homeland, halachic *kahal* status became exclusive to those who reside in the land under Jewish sovereignty.

Eventually, with our exile from Jerusalem, we lost our halachic *kahal* identity and set forth on a fragmented journey through the wilderness of history. In exile, we remained part of *Am Yisrael* and continued to safeguard our covenantal mission as an *eidah*, but the third element of communal identity—the dynamic of halachic *kahal*—was lost.

The *Galut Kahal*: Sustaining Identity in Exile

Though we lost the halachic status of *kahal* in *galut*, a new form took shape—one that became vital to preserving Jewish identity throughout our long exile. As we journeyed through distant lands, we did not simply dissolve into the surrounding nations but instead established semi-autonomous Jewish communities, often termed a *kahal*—especially in Ashkenazic lands.

These structured communities oversaw religious, legal, social, and economic affairs, ensuring the continuity of Jewish life under foreign rule. The *kahal* maintained an internal halachic court system, ensuring that Torah law and halacha remained the foundation of Jewish communal life. *Kahals* also managed communal taxation, while raising funds to support religious institutions and the needy. Finally, *kahals* served as the official liaison between the Jewish population and local authorities, negotiating communal protections and legal rights.

Though these communal organizations in exile lacked the halachic status of a *kahal*, they continued to provide for our material and religious needs—and, more importantly, to foster a sense of belonging to a living Jewish collective.

Through its highly organized efforts, the *kahal* organization safeguarded cultural distinctiveness, provided stability, and ensured the survival of Jewish life and identity even in the most challenging of conditions in exile.

Vanishing *Kahals*

In the modern era, both internal shifts and external pressures have eroded the role and influence of the Jewish *kahal*.

Kahal structures were often—rightfully so—viewed by our host nations as obstacles to full Jewish assimilation. *Kahal* frameworks provided us with stability and order, and ensured the endurance of Jewish life, but they also stood in the way of broader societal integration. Rulers and policymakers recognized that as long as Jews remained organized under autonomous *kahal* institutions, they would maintain their distinct identity, resisting the forces of cultural and social absorption. Eventually, our *kahal* structures were viewed with suspicion, seen as barriers to integration that had to be removed to dissolve Jewish distinctiveness and accelerate assimilation.

A striking example of efforts to dismantle a *kahal* in the push for assimilation was the abolition of the super-*kahal* in Poland in the late 18th century. From the 16th to the 18th century, the *Va'ad Arba Aratzot*, or the Council of the Four Lands, provided a super-*kahal* organizational framework to manage Jewish affairs in the Polish-Lithuanian region. This was perhaps the most significant degree of semi-autonomy that Jews attained throughout the entire period of exile.

As the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth declined in the 18th century it actively sought reforms to revitalize its crumbling empire. Viewing Jewish integration as a means of strengthening the state, the Polish government disbanded the Va'ad, effectively removing this super-*kahal* structure from operation and weakening Jewish communal self-governance.

Emancipation and Russian Hostility

The 19th century witnessed the further erosion of *kahal* authority—due to both internal shifts and external pressures.

In Western Europe, many Jews eagerly embraced broader Gentile society as Emancipation offered them the opportunity to become equal members of a modern, secular world. Those who integrated into non-Jewish society no longer saw themselves as part of the *kahal* or subject to its influence. This severely diminished the *kahal*'s numbers, economic capacity, and authority over Jewish communal life.

In Eastern Europe, where Emancipation was neither as widespread nor as attractive, a different force dismantled the *kahal*. The rabidly antisemitic Tsarist regime of 19th-century Russia viewed the *kahal* as an obstacle to assimilation and state control, seeing it as a parallel power structure that preserved Jewish autonomy and hindered integration into Russian society. Through a series of decrees, various Russian tsars gradually weakened the *kahal*'s authority, seeking to place Jewish communities under direct imperial rule. Finally, in 1844, the *kahal* system, which had governed Jewish life across Russia for generations, was officially abolished. Though the formal *kahal* structure was disbanded, Jewish communities continued to administer their internal affairs, provide charity, and uphold Jewish rituals. Although the formal *kahal* was dissolved, its functions continued in a less official capacity.

For two thousand years, Jewish survival depended upon our unwavering commitment to communal organization, ensuring material sustenance, spiritual continuity, and cultural insularity. More importantly, the *kahal* provided something even more vital—a sense of belonging. Without a land of our own, we found refuge in the embrace of a *kahal*, forging collective Jewish identity not through territory but through community. It was precisely this ability to preserve a distinct Jewish identity that provoked external opposition to the *kahal* structure.

Modern *Kahal* Erosion

What external opponents of the *kahal* experience could not fully accomplish, internal forces succeeded in. During the 19th and 20th centuries, numerous internal forces from within the Jewish world delivered a fatal blow to the *kahal* experience. Ideological and *hashkafic* divisions within Orthodoxy have made it increasingly difficult to sustain a cohesive and comprehensive *kahal* system. For example, the rise of Chasidut created parallel communal structures, with many Hasidic groups operating as independent *kahal* entities, separate from the traditional establishment. This fractured a once-unified *kahal* into smaller, fragmented mini-*kahals*, each with a diminished scope and influence.

Moreover, the emergence of distinct religious denominations fragmented Jewish communal life even more, making integrated *kahal* frameworks increasingly unattainable.

The *kahal* drama of 19th-century Hungary serves as a perfect example of how the emergence of different denominations hindered the integrity of the *kahal*. Intense disputes arose over whether Orthodox and more progressive Neologue Jews should share a unified *kahal*. The Hungarian government sought to impose a single communal structure upon all Jewish factions, but Orthodox Jews resisted, ultimately securing the right to maintain an autonomous *kahal.*

The emergence of different denominations within Judaism as well as the splintering of ideologies within the Orthodox world severely diminished the authority of *kahal*. The integrated community which had for so long served as the backbone of Jewish belonging and of Jewish identity was beginning to fray from within.

Whatever remained of *kahal* life would soon fade as Jewish life in America reached unprecedented heights. Ironically, the success of Judaism and Jews in America would completely undermine *kahal* opportunities.

Too Large For a *"Kahal"*?

In the past century, the dazzling success of Jewish life in America has unraveled the fabric of *kahal*, weakening its hold and reshaping both communal and Jewish identity. In the United States the sheer volume of Jews and the abundance of resources have made any singular *kahal* experience almost nonexistent. There are too many shuls, too many schools, and too much Jewish infrastructure for American Jewry to coalesce around a unified communal structure. Further undermining *kahal* experience, American Jews are highly mobile, frequently relocating from suburb to suburb, rarely remaining in one place for more than three generations. As a result, most modern American shuls have become bare and generic, lacking the historical resonance and echoes that, for example, characterize European synagogues which have stood for decades.

For a *kahal* to truly resonate, it must be rooted in a place where multiple generations have shaped its identity, leaving behind traces of their lives and experiences. *Kahal* resonance requires stability and permanence—an enduring connection to a location that carries the weight of history and the echoes of previous members of the community. Jewish communities in America rarely remain in the same location or within the same buildings for more than two or three generations, which, in the context of a *kahal*, is but a fleeting moment. Ironically it is the vitality of American Jewry, coupled with its relentless mobility, that has rendered the essence of *kahal* identity nearly nonexistent.

It is fair to wonder whether the crisis of modern Jewish identity in the United States stems from the difficulty in feeling a deep sense of belonging to a Jewish community or *kahal*. Without deeply rooted and long-standing communal institutions, the *kahal* bond—once essential to Jewish life—has faded, leaving a void in collective Jewish identity. By contrast, Jewish communities outside the U.S., though with fewer resources, often foster a deeper sense of belonging to a *kahal*. This connection fosters a more enduring Jewish identity, even if it is less informed or less educated in Torah.

Renewed *Kahal* Identity ... in Israel

History has come full circle. As *kahal* identity has receded in exile—diminished by both internal and external forces over the past 400 years—our return to Israel has given rise to a new form of international *kahal* identity centered around the Jewish state. Though it does not serve the practical role of past *kahals* in supervising and enforcing Jewish communal life, the modern *kahal* which is Israel is gradually fulfilling the far more essential function of fostering a collective sense of belonging.

The tragedy of October 7 has underscored how pivotal Israel is—not only for Jewish material survival but for Jewish identity itself. In a fragmented Jewish world, Israel remains the one element of Jewish life to which almost every Jew feels connected. It is an international *kahal*.

We await the restoration of full halachic sovereignty and the return of a halachic *kahal* in Israel. Meanwhile, the Land of Israel and the people of Israel have restored *kahal* identity. We all belong to Israel, and Israel belongs to all of us. Belonging makes it easier to build a rich Jewish identity and ultimately a more profound religious identity.

Kahal identity is alive and well in Israel, its natural home.