



Participants in a Jewish festival hosted by Wilderness Torah.

The Magic of Emergence

BY NATAN MARGALIT

THE WHOLE IS GREATER than the sum of the parts” is an old adage, but it could be one of the most important keys to a healthy, meaningful life. People yearn to be a part of something. When we are a part of something, we feel whole. When we see how things connect and relate to form a whole, they make sense and resonate: they come alive.

In 1973 I arrived at Camp Swig, a Reform Jewish summer camp in Big Basin, California as a shy 15 year old kid from Hawai`i. My parents were New York Jewish intellectuals who moved to Hawai`i when I was a baby. They wanted nothing more than to get away from the New York part of their identities, and were fairly unconcerned with the Jewish part as well. So to say I didn’t have much Jewish background would be an understatement.

But Camp Swig hit me like a revelation. There was something magical about it. I could feel it especially on Friday afternoons when we sang together in a big circle under the redwoods; everyone cleaned up and dressed in white. I loved

the sound of the Hebrew songs. I loved discussing and earnestly arguing about God, social justice, and identity. I loved the artistic creativity and do-it-yourself ethic seen when campers painted the water tower or dug our own gaga pit into the ground instead of just turning over some benches. I loved the camp friendships. The fact that we were all thrown together in an intense, highly interactive social environment, away from the cliques and in-groups of home made it easy to talk, easy to interact (or at least easier for this shy kid to meet girls). That magical mixture of camp life changed me, as it has for many Jewish teens — it made me finally feel whole. When I graduated high school and got too old for summer camp, I found that I needed to go in search for whatever it was I had experienced there.

It wasn’t a straight path, but the next time I deeply felt that wholeness was in my early 20s, when I was involved in the Orthodox Judaism of Jerusalem; especially on Shabbat. Shabbat in the Orthodox world wasn’t the same as at Camp Swig — there was no swaying with a pretty girl on

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each arm singing Hebrew songs — but it came to epitomize for me much of what attracted me to Orthodoxy. On Shabbat, I felt I was entering into something that gently held me for 25 hours, transforming my experience of time and self. I especially loved the Shabbat meals. They were almost always with a group of friends, maybe with a family or two. There wasn't anything wrong with small talk, catching up, and joking around, but it was also perfectly normal for someone at the table to open up a book of commentaries on the weekly Torah portion and read a little, offer some of his or her own thoughts on it and start a discussion.

After a good discussion, we sang. The singing of Shabbat songs (*z'mirot* in Hebrew) is true folk music in the sense that tunes are composed, learned, and passed on from person to person. Sometimes we'd lose ourselves in the singing and it would go on for hours.

Put together with good food, and a little rest (sometimes I'd take a short nap right in the middle of the meal, lying down on a couch and catching a few Z's before returning to the table) the Shabbat meals of my Orthodox days were usually very restorative and often richly satisfying experiences. Deep friendships were created, personal journeys were navigated, and I really did understand why Ahad HaAm had famously said, "It is not that the Jewish people kept Shabbat, but Shabbat has kept the Jewish people."

What was the commonality between the Camp Swig experience and my Orthodox Shabbatot in Jerusalem? Both had the same magic — it's the magic that happens when people come together long enough, or intentionally enough, to let down their guards; to share something of themselves; to enter into a circle (literally or metaphorically) and focus on something larger than themselves.

This feeling of Shabbat as an entity, as a palpable reality that one can enter into, emerges from the community of people practicing it. I'm reminded of a story from the Talmud (BT Tractate Shabbat 119a) in which the Roman emperor, having experienced a Shabbat meal with the rabbinic community, asked Rabbi Yehoshua, "Why is it that the Shabbat meal has such a delicious fragrance?" Rabbi Yehoshua answered, "There is a particular spice that we put in it." The emperor ordered Rabbi Yehoshua to give him some of the spice. But Rabbi Yehoshua had to tell him: "it works if you're keeping Shabbat, but if you're not, the spice doesn't work."

I think Rabbi Yehoshua is saying that you can't take one thing like the food, that tastes so good on Shabbat, and "bottle" it, taking it out of the context of the whole of which it is a part. It won't taste the same. A meal, as we know from writers like Michael Pollan, Claude Levy-Straus, and Mary Douglas, is not simply putting food into your mouth. A meal is a cultural creation, something that emerges from the people around the table, the feelings and memories attached to the foods, and the tempo and rhythm of the event.

I've found that to be especially true of the Shabbat meal.

We can eat Challah and have wine, we can even light candles and make a blessing, but if there isn't enough context to make it a whole Shabbat experience, those individual Shabbat items by themselves can feel flat and lifeless. Perhaps even worse, they can feel *kind of nice, sort of meaningful* — and then we can conclude that this is all Shabbat is: kind of nice, sort of meaningful.

And, unfortunately, too much of contemporary Judaism does seem to fall somewhere into that zone between "flat and lifeless" and "kind of nice, sort of meaningful." We're like that Roman emperor, trying to reproduce something by pulling out an element or two, but missing the whole that emerges when all the parts come together. The point of the Talmudic story is that there isn't one "spice" that makes Shabbat special; but rather that there is something essential, ineffable, even mysterious, that emerges from the whole.

I am no longer Orthodox and I'm too old for summer camp, but I, and I believe many people in the Jewish world, find ourselves searching for that magic of wholeness that I found in those contexts. For some it may be camp-like immersive experiences such as retreats, going to a Kallah or a Shabbaton. For others, some version of the weekly traditional Shabbat experience can capture this magic. This isn't the property of any one form of Judaism. I've felt some of this in every movement and many different synagogues and homes. The key is creating enough of a deep context for sharing and community that there is a palpable feeling that something new has emerged.

When I use the term "emerge" it is more than a casual phrase. In Western academic and scientific settings "emergence" is a new discipline in itself and it is gaining acceptance



The indescribable making an appearance in the California Redwoods.



Jews gathering at a festival to find presence and community.

in many fields from biology to entrepreneurship, from sociology to medicine. When one talks to the experts there are many and conflicting definitions, but the simplest way that I've found to express emergence is in the old saying, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

Water is H_2O — a molecule made up of hydrogen and oxygen. Neither hydrogen nor oxygen by themselves feels wet, puts out fires, or sustains life. But, together they do. Something new has emerged when the parts become a whole. Closer to home: if I'm teaching a class and I'm droning on with what I think is a fascinating topic, but the people are just sitting there trying to absorb my brilliance, that usually feels deadly dull and boring. But if I engage the class in a discussion by laying out an idea and getting their feedback and then the feedback leads me to a new idea and it bounces back and forth, that class feels alive and vibrant — something new has emerged in the interaction that was more than the subject, more than me, and more than the students. We've all felt classrooms of both types.

It is important to recognize that emergence as a modern, scientific concept is bucking the trend of more than three hundred years of scientific thought. Since the days of Descartes, Bacon, Newton, and the other pioneers of the 17th century Scientific Revolution, we have been taught that the scientific way to understand the world is to break things down into component parts. Emergence is one concept within the growing area of systems thinking which move in the direction of seeking explanation by putting together rather than breaking apart. While there have been a number of discrete schools of thought (think Cybernetics of Jungian) and different labels for the movements that have parted from reductionism, these have been like waves lapping up on a shore, even as the tide is going out. I believe that we are perhaps coming to a tipping point (another concept spun off from systems science, by the way), in which the tide is turning. We are coming to a point where the old reductionist explanations are not adequate to the problems that we face, and thinkers in

many different fields are turning to a new systems approach. This approach, as I hope to show below, is much more in sync with traditional cultures such as Judaism.

For one clear example: It has been very powerful to know that diseases are caused by particular bacteria that we can see in a microscope. That we can now make antibiotics to fight those bacteria has been a revolution in human health. But, for all the success that modern medicine has had through breaking things down and looking for the most basic underlying causes of disease — an example of "reductionism" insofar as it explains by reducing a problem to such underlying causes — we are starting to see the limitations of this approach. We've started to see that killing the bacteria isn't a one way street, it's a feedback loop: the more we use antibiotics on them, the more the bacteria mutate to resist them and we are now in real danger of "superbugs" or antibiotic resistant strains.

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We have also learned that, while it is true that particular bacteria can be a major factor in the onset of disease, many other factors also play a part. For one thing, bacteria are present all the time and we don't always get sick. We now know that other bacteria might be counteracting the "bad" ones that are living in our bodies. In fact, we have discovered that the human biome (the community of microorganisms living inside us all the time) is essential to our health and functioning.

We also know that our immune system fights off many bacteria. What factors, such as emotional stress, might be weakening our immune system? We are starting to see that health is a complex system. It emerges out of the interaction of many factors, biological, psychological, social and spiritual, that together create a whole greater than the sum of its parts. What factors, such as emotional stress, might be weakening our immune system? What factors, such as strong social bonds, might be strengthening our immune system?

What does all this medical theory have to do with the life of the spirit? The father of modern agrarian writing, Wendell Berry, has made the connection very well. He writes,

“the concept of health is rooted in the concept of wholeness. To be healthy is to be whole. The word *health* belongs to a family of words, a listing of which will suggest how far the considerations of health must carry us: *heal, whole, wholesome, hale, hallow, holy.*”

Berry is writing about how farming is much more whole and healthy when it is a complex pattern of plants, animals, human communities, sun, air and land, all interacting with one another as in a small farm. That pattern is broken when we try to increase profits by raising cattle by the thousands in giant Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), or we try to increase efficiency by raising monocrops of corn or soy on giant industrial farms. He is also saying that there isn't a separation between the life of the farm and the life of the spirit. When we break that wholeness, that interactive pattern, we endanger not only our health, but also our holiness.

It is sadly true that religion has especially suffered under the modern reign of reductionist thinking. There is a danger of what some experts have called “nothing buttery”—the tendency for scientists to say something is “nothing but . . .” Love is “nothing but” your chemicals reacting to someone else's chemicals; that religious vision was “nothing but” a mental aberration caused by stress or mental illness; God is “nothing but” a projection of our psychological needs.

Emergence is a concept and new scientific field which touches a wide variety of area from medicine to agriculture, from psychology to theology and more. In science, it is a shift from a reductionist theory which seeks explanation by reducing phenomena to underlying causes, toward systems science which looks for explanation in the interactions within a system. Unfortunately, reductionism has infiltrated beyond scientific theories; our society, our education and our economics have all recently taken on a more fragmented quality, and would be well served to take note of emergence.

Judaism has long been sensitive to emergence, even if it is not named as such. The ancient idea of a *minyan*, the quorum of ten adult Jews (in the past, and presently in Orthodox settings, Jewish men) who must be present for certain prayers and blessings to be said, is a perfect example of emergence. There are certain utterances which are considered so holy that they are not appropriately said by individuals, but only in community. The *Kaddish* (an affirmation of God's holiness) and the *Bar'khu* (a call to communal prayer) for example, may only be said with a *minyan*. There seems to be a deeply felt ancient acknowledgment that there is something that happens in community, a spiritual presence that emerges, which is beyond the individual. The mystics would say that there is a new kind of *kli* — Hebrew for vessel, which is created when there is a community present.

The underlying value of emergence, the magic which comes about when things are put into relationship with one another, is not limited in Jewish tradition. In my own experience of



Smelling that special spice.

studying classic Jewish texts, I've found that they come alive when I look for the relationships and patterns in and between texts, rather than trying, in reductionist fashion, to break the texts down into smallest components. While I'm not against breaking down the texts for some purposes, like finding out who wrote what, and when, or even breaking the texts down into fine points of a Talmudic argument, for me the texts naturally speak to me, they seem most “at home,” when we interpret them in terms of interweaving patterns. After all, the major sections of the Talmud, which we translate as “tractate” (a Latin word having to do with the idea of extending) is in Hebrew *masekhet*, which means a weave.

The ancient classical Jewish texts such as the biblical texts, the Midrash, Mishnah and Talmud, were, in fact, woven together in an organic cultural process over centuries. Many prophets, writers, preachers, editors, and scribes left their marks in the texts, but none of them was the sole author. The texts come together as a whole, but it is not a logical, linear coherence. Rather, the coherence of these texts is harder to define in more fluid, organic patterns.

I believe that the ancient rabbis knew that the way to keep the Torah alive was to jump into the process of comparing texts, discovering or inventing new relationships between them. This is the essence of what we know as *Midrash* — the rabbinic search for meaning in the texts. This ancient story about one of the early rabbis, Ben Azzai, gives an idea of this process:

Ben Azzai was sitting and learning and there was fire all around him. The other students went to Rabbi Akiva and told him. He came and said to him, “I hear that you were learning and fire was all around you.” He answered, “Yes.” He said, “Perhaps you were dealing with (the secret mystical text) the Chambers of the Chariot?” He answered, “No, I was sitting and threading together words of Torah, and from the Torah to the Prophets, and from the Prophets to the Writings, and the words were as joyous as on the day they were given on Sinai,

and as sweet as the very day they were given. (Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah 1)

The method Ben Azzai uses involves creating new juxtapositions to string the texts together like jewels into beautiful combinations that reveal new meanings to old words. This is why he says the words were as joyous as on the day they were given on Mount Sinai: by creating new juxtapositions, new meanings emerge in what is essentially a new revelation. The fire surrounding Ben Azzai was the same fire that accompanied the revelation on Mount Sinai!

This is one perspective on how emergence works in Jewish text study — the sparks which fly when we follow Ben Azzai's example and bring texts together into new patterns. Another angle brings us back to the image of wholeness which Wendell Berry wrote about — the wholeness of the Torah and also the wholeness of a person. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro (1889–1943) was the *Rebbe*, the rabbinic leader, of the Hasidic community in the Warsaw Ghetto during the war years. He was an amazingly creative and courageous Torah scholar, leader and martyr. He writes about the need for wholeness:

The mitzvot (individual commandments) reveal only the “limbs”, while the *sefer* (book) reveals the essence, the whole structure of which the mitzvot are only the limbs. . . . Therefore, when one looks into a book or hears words of Torah, if one only sees or hears one or two things, and especially if someone only wants to hear a nice idea or “drosh” — one only hears the “limbs” and misses the teacher’s wholeness, and doesn’t encounter the prophecy within the words.

He goes on to give the practical recommendation that when you study, you should focus on a book or two and learn them deeply. When you find a teacher, stay with him or her for the long haul, until you get a deep feel for their personal Torah. He concludes that if you actually do experience that wholeness, you yourself will be transformed. Your experience of wholeness is the way for you to become a fountain of Torah yourself:

And then a person knows not only the words that one heard, but will also come to reveal from within oneself new thoughts and paths and understandings. (*Derekh HaMelekh, Shemot*)

It is interesting to note that, as we saw with Ben Azzai, there is a reference to a feeling of divine revelation when we experience a new emergence. I think Shapiro’s references to “prophecy” are pointing to the same feeling that Ben Azzai experienced: an exhilarating feeling of new meaning emerging. Of course, according to Jewish tradition, prophecy ended with the biblical prophets, but these testimonials from the early



The 72 names of God woven together to create the tree of life.

rabbinic period to the 20th century speak of something akin to prophecy which still remains: that almost magical feeling of something new emerging, like a revelation.

Maybe it’s because I’ve jumped off of a few islands in my journey — the beautiful Hawai’ian islands of my youth, and the intense and exciting islands of Jewish learning and community that I lived in Old Katamon, Jerusalem, New York City or Berkeley, CA in my Orthodox days — that I know what it is to feel adrift in a sea of separation as well as that exhilarating feeling of discovery when I find a new wholeness. I’ve found it when I’m teaching a class and all of a sudden there is a depth of understanding that I didn’t create, or couldn’t have created on my own, but rather that emerged from the event of our energies and thoughts combining. I’ve found it when I’m writing and I discover a new juxtaposition, such as tossing Wendell Berry up against the ancient Rabbis and seeing a new insight emerge. I’ve found it when I’m singing and praying with a group of people and tears come to my eyes because I experience an emotion that is hard to express in words — I feel that I’m touching or am touched by something beyond myself.

Whether we are talking about community and the feeling of being enveloped in something larger than ourselves or diving into a Jewish Torah study, emergence — the continually amazing fact that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts — is a key new concept that we should be paying attention to. As concepts like emergence, which represent a shift away from our habits of reductionist thinking, become more central to our mental tool kit, we may find it easier to create a Jewish life — or any life — that is vibrant, creative and holy. ■