



Shabbat for the World

By Steve Greenberg

When thinking about community, it is easy to miss a crucial form of the communal life that has no particular place, tends to bring a different group of people together every time, has no particular political or social agenda and is still an epitome of Jewish life. What could this be? The Shabbat table, of course. We don't normally think of Shabbat as such a wild frame of community making, but it is. Let me paint the picture.

Imagine a Shabbat table filled with lots of great food, surrounded by friends and accompanied with great singing and divrei Torah. Shabbat dinner for me last week surely fit this rather homey Orthodox image. Okay, so not all the folks around the table were Orthodox; in fact, a good third of the participants was not Jewish at all. There were Catholics and Protestants joining the mix of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews and just over half of those present were gay and lesbian. Add to this that the German, Dutch, American, British, Israeli, Australian, gay and straight Jews and non-Jews were celebrating Shabbat in, of all places, Berlin.

This event was part of the Berlin Film Festival and among the first fruits of a film project with which I have been associated for more than five years. Trembling Before G-d is a documentary by Sandi Simcha DuBowski about gay and lesbian Orthodox and Hasidic Jews struggling to reconcile their passionate love of Judaism and God with the Biblical prohibitions that forbid homosexuality. The film is a loving and fearless testament to faith and survival.

CLAL and Working Films, an organization that supports the use of films for community development, have sponsored a number of community dialogues and two Shabbat dinners, the first at the Sundance Film Festival and the second at the Berlin Film Festival. The cinema, itself a place of community, was expanded in the dialogues and even more profoundly at the Shabbat dinners to which film makers, actors, media business people and locals from the Jewish and gay communities were invited.

"Shabbat table community" was especially evident in Berlin. Secular Israelis who had been raised in anti-religious homes spent the evening talking to German Lutherans who were trying to square the Bible with their lives, while, on the other side of the room, a gay Jesuit priest explained a rabbinic interpretation of Genesis to an Australian Jew raised in the Melbourne Orthodox community.

Perhaps the most dramatic moment at the dinner was when an East German man who discovered only twelve years prior that he was Jewish told his story. He shared how both his grandparents had committed suicide on the day following

Hitler's 1933 rise to power, after which his mother had been given to a non-Jewish family to raise. Across the table listening to his story were men and women whose grandparents had been members of the Nazi party.

The Shabbat table community defies easy categorization. First, it can happen anywhere that there are people, wine, hallah and good food. It helps, too, to set the mood, to prepare white tablecloths and flowers, but with these ingredients and a measure of good cheer, a Shabbat community is created. The rituals of Shabbat dinner themselves, while being very Jewish, seem nonetheless to speak a much wider language. For example, netilat yadaim, the custom of washing hands before eating bread, marks the table as an altar, the hallah bread as sacrifice, and members of the Shabbat community as priests, responsible for all the families of the earth. With that introduction, along with Jews who had never washed before, all the non-Jews felt privileged to join in. Everyone was reminded that Shabbat was a day of Edenic joy, a taste of a perfected world to come. To celebrate such a day, everyone was obligated to share with friends, eat more than they would ordinarily, drink a few glasses of wine, and then go home to the intimate embrace of a loving partner.

A Shabbat community is convened in a single evening and then disappears; still, its power to shape identity and experience is remarkable. While other forms of community may be able to generate a more sustained set of relationships, Shabbat dinner is a freer venue. Since the Shabbat dinner community has no fixed membership rules, anyone can join and feel like a member in good standing. It engenders great pride in Jewish tradition and culture, while stretching the very meaning of Jewishness in marvelous ways. Shabbat dinner provides us with a sense of nostalgic Jewish homecoming wherever we are, and is, at the same time, a most amazing gift to almost anyone.

