

"The Dog Walkers' Minyan"

By David Kraemer

Let me tell you about some of my best friends. These are people I didn't know just five years ago. Then, with my children's urging and my wife's strong support, I acquired a dog. (I guess they would say we acquired a dog, but this is a piece about dog walking, and you know who does that job.) Naturally, a dog needs to be walked. So every night at roughly 10:15, I would-and still do-grab the leash, call the dog, and head out to the park. At the very beginning, I would just walk for what seemed a reasonable amount of time and turn around. But I quickly noticed that there were others out doing the same thing, so I began to exchange greetings, stop for a quick schmooze, and then go on. Unsurprisingly-given the habitual nature of human activities-I found myself meeting the same people each night. Before I knew it, my dog walks were getting shorter in distance and longer in duration. Something had changed, and my social life would never be the same.

I knew that things had really changed when, one pleasant spring night, I returned home to my wife's alarmed question, "Where were you? I was scared to death!" I looked at my watch only to discover that, much to my surprise, I had been out for nearly an hour. So engaged was I in the lively exchange that I had no idea how much time had passed. The company was just too good to bother noticing the time.

These evening dog walkers, a group of people ranging from three to a *minyan* on any given night, came to appreciate that our company was more than just pleasant. Yes, we enjoyed one another. But we have also come to care about one another. And this care extends to genuine commitments. But before I explain, let me describe some of the members of the group.

One of our number is an actor and playwright. He is actually quite active as an actor, turning up in all kinds of small parts. I have seen him in movies and on TV, and he does stage and commercials as well. Another is a management consultant who specializes in race relations. He has advised everyone from large utilities to NASA. One is a dental hygienist and community activist, the kind of person who is everywhere in the neighborhood but whom you might not notice until you stop to look. And one is a young black man who grew up in a tough New York City neighborhood. After struggling to transcend the troubling parts of his urban legacy, he trained to be a professional photographer. He is now one of the staff photographers at The Museum of Natural History. His girlfriend, who often appears with him at these evening meetings, is a Palestinian woman who came to this country in her late childhood. She and I have shared memories of the beauty of "the Holy Land"-her Palestine and my Israel.

As you can see, I know a good deal about these people, and these descriptions just scratch the surface. I followed the young black man's progress through school. The consultant and I have discussed how difficult business partners can be. And we all share the wisdom of child-raising and college applications and the like. We do, I think, actually care about one another. When we begin a conversation with "what's new?", we really want to hear the answer. And, as I said, this caring extends to real commitment. We walk and care for each other's dogs. We invite each other to our family simchas. The dental hygienist has attended my family seder. When one of us has been away, we are eager to return and share an account of our experiences.

What do I learn from this part of my life, from my "dog walkers' *minyan*"? First, I am reminded of how wonderful such intimate communities are, and how important. It is easy to understand how impoverished my life would be without this and similar communities. I also learn that, in crucial respects, a "*minyan*" of this sort is created only through serendipity. No one could have planned this grouping. No one could have chosen precisely the right cast of characters. (There are many dog walkers I pass regularly with whom I barely exchange greetings. They have not "joined" the group, and seem uninterested in doing so.) Of course, we are brought together, in part, by a common interest (our dogs). But there are intangible elements as well. Finally, I have learned that forming a community requires time and habit. It cannot happen if meetings occur only on occasion. A community will not form unless potential "members" make it their habit to be there when a meeting is called.

How can the Jewish community help to facilitate the formation of such important intimate communities? The simple answer is that Jewish institutions, be they synagogues or JCCs or "none of the above," must offer opportunities for people to meet by accident while pursuing things that are important to them in their everyday lives. These include day-care and exercise settings, already common and already often successful at creating small communities. But they must also include unconventional or untraditional opportunities. *Makor*, a Jewish club (emphasis on club) on the Upper West Side, provides an important model. Here young Jewish (and other) singles gather to listen to music, to drink, to attend a lecture on film, and to socialize. The Hebrew Institute of Riverdale (Orthodox) sponsors an all-girls softball league in the spring, gathering children and parents to coach and cheer together for many weeks during the season.

The crucial challenge is to imagine opportunities that relate to what people already do. Many will fail; some will succeed. But the successes make the efforts worth it. Get people together to do what they already do and they will begin to discuss what is important. They will make meaning as they address the meaningful. If "doing Jewish" means making meaning, then the "foot-soldiers" are already in place, for we all want to make meaning in our lives. Just give us a setting and an opportunity, then let it happen. A little yeast makes a large loaf.

