

## The Obligations of Community

### *Thought for the Day*

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*Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 14 August 2013*

Last week I was talking to an Israeli who has lived and worked in Scotland for more than a decade. He told me he doesn't believe anything Jewish, he doesn't practice anything Jewish, his family aren't Jewish, he doesn't belong to a Jewish community or participate in any communal activities – yet, he said, of course he's Jewish because he *feels* Jewish and he's ethnically Jewish.

That paradox obviously raises interesting – even if not very original – questions, about how one can belong to a community even if one doesn't belong to anything within that community. I once heard this described as a change from the model of membership to the model of citizenship – people are increasingly reluctant to join organisations, but they still expect them to be there when they need them.

That makes communities unsustainable: you have all the outgoings associated with those services – buildings, staff, etc – with no regular income to meet them. So the services suffer, the loosely affiliated are outraged that they're not getting what they haven't paid for, support dwindles further, and the community's infrastructure spirals into ruin. Most faith communities – and I suspect many other organisations – will recognise this path to perdition.

But sometimes being a member of a community isn't a matter of choice – it comes with our genes or our upbringing – and it comes with obligations.

There's a strange passage in last week's reading from the Torah: in ancient Israel, if an unknown corpse was found in the countryside, the elders of the nearest town had to perform a ceremony of expiation on behalf of their community. The Talmud explains that this isn't because the CSIs had found a smoking gun, but because the community had failed in its obligation to welcome the stranger in their midst.

That's a lesson we can all take to heart. We have obligations to family, to friends, to the groups we choose to belong to, and to the groups we belong to despite our choosing – but also to the stranger, the deprived, and the outsider.