

Sermon: “We Walk Together”

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Emily’s dad, Jerry, is probably the most outgoing person that I know. Family famous are his trips to restaurants, super markets, and car rental counters and his emerging afterwards with a new “best” friend. We like to challenge Jerry to walk into a store – any store – and buy something without speaking to anyone. He can’t do it! Genuine and gregarious - he is just wired that way. At the same time, Jerry also happens to be a huge St. Louis sports fan. And so, when the St. Louis Blues faced off against the Bruins last spring for the Stanley Cup, I knew that interesting times were ahead.

Jerry and Melanie, blessedly visit us quite often. In fact, they are here now for Yom Kippur - just as they were here during the weeks leading up to the NHL finals. During that time, the same scene played itself out dozens of times. Jerry would be out somewhere and spot someone wearing a Bruins jersey or hat or something Boston sports related.....and he would approach and ask them: “Sooo...are you a Bruins fan?” To which – a bit taken aback by Jerry’s forwardness - they would – not surprisingly - confess to being a fan. Jerry would then quickly pull out of his pocket two items: a dollar bill and his business card. With a warm smile, he then explained to the unsuspecting individual: I am giving you this dollar and my card. If the Bruins win the Stanley Cup, you have the dollar and our bet is consummated. But,” – he continued – “when the Blues win - and they will win, he joked - you should return the dollar, using my address on the card, and match it with another dollar.” Every time he did this the people happily agreed. And over several days, several Bruins-Blues bets were made.

Since the Blues won the cup, Jerry has been joyfully collecting dollar bills – all of which he is contributing to charity, by the way. But, to me, the real win was the well of good will that Jerry had tapped into by simply stepping into these people’s lives.

At a time when so many are feeling worn down by divisiveness and division - and when the distance between people seems to be growing greater by the day - it was uplifting to see that when Jerry took the opportunity to lean in towards people’s ‘better angels,’ far more often than not, people were more than happy to lean back.

Recent national statistics on disconnection tell an important story about where we are as a society. A 2018 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll reveals that upwards of 80% of Americans view our country as being deeply divided. A Pew Study from 2019 reports that 64% of Americans believe that our trust in one another is diminishing. While, according to another study, over the past thirty years, there has been a steady decline in Americans’ satisfaction with peer-to-peer relationships at work. Cigna, one of the nation’s largest health service companies, recently reported that according to their research, nearly half of all Americans feel alone - with one in four saying that they rarely, if ever, have people in their lives who understand them.

Jewish tradition consistently points to the difficulties – if not the dangers - of societies in which people feel frustrated, embittered-by-one-another, and alone. According to the rabbis, it was feelings such as these that legendarily led to God's bringing the flood in the story of Noah, to the fall of the Tower of Babel, and ultimately, they taught to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, not once, but twice.

The Book of Genesis speaks almost immediately to humanity's need for others. In the story of the Garden of Eden, after the text describes God placing Adam in Eden, we read:

VaYomer Adonai Elohim lo tov he'yot ha'adam l'vado.

And God said: 'It is not good for man to be alone. I will make for him a partner.'

The text is one of only two times in the entire Torah when the phrase "lo tov" – "Not good" – is used: a clear emphasis on the importance of relationships that are sustaining and life-giving. Hence, the name given to Adam's partner: Eve – in Hebrew: Chava - from the Hebrew word: "Chai" – meaning "life." And while it is that the story, on its surface, focuses on the creation of a single partner for Adam, rabbinic tradition, in looking deeper, saw in Eve's creation a more expansive message regarding a person's need for others.

Rabbi Marc Katz, referencing one Midrash on this text, has written: "In observing Adam's loneliness, God understood the profound role of others in our lives.....Eve's creation was meant to replace sorrow with joy, helplessness with support, unease with peace.....(Similarly,)" – Katz continues – "without our fellow human beings, we will never live life to its fullest, deepest, and highest. Turning towards others brings us face to face with connection. Their presence in our life is sustaining."

Brene Brown, a social scientist, lecturer, and best-selling author, relays the same message – explaining that not only are such relationships essential, but also that people are longing for them. She writes:

"I'm a qualitative grounded theory researcher. The goal of grounded theory is to develop theories based on people's lived experiences rather than proving or disproving existing theories. In grounded theory, researchers try to understand what we call 'the main concern' of study participants. When it comes to belonging, I ask: What are people trying to achieve? What are they worried about? The answer was surprisingly complex. (People)," she continues, "want to be part of something – to experience real connection with others – but not at the cost of their authenticity, freedom, or power. Participants further reported feeling surrounded by 'us versus them' cultures that create feelings of spiritual disconnection. When I dug deeper into what they meant by 'spiritually disconnected,' the research participants described a diminishing sense of shared humanity. Over and over, participants talked about their concern that the only thing that binds us together now is shared fear and disdain...not common humanity, shared trust, respect, or love."

This ‘better angel’ desire to be part of a circle of people that celebrates shared humanity..... builds trust.....nurtures respect.....and whose love brings joy and healing....is immensely hopeful in times such as this. And, with this in mind, we are now finding a number of local and national efforts working to reclaim the power of community. The most successful of these programs do not dismiss the reality of difference in opinion or approach. Rather, they emphasize the need to bring people together who are – in the words of scholar Alan Jacobs – “not so much like-minded as like-hearted.”

One such initiative, founded by author, columnist, and commentator, David Brooks, is called “Weave: The Social Fabric Project.” Its stated goal is quote: ‘to work to repair our country’s torn social fabric....to shift our culture from one of hyper-individualism, that is all about personal success to ‘relationalism’ that puts relationships at the center of our lives....To move us from a culture of ‘me’....to one of ‘we.’” To do this, Brooks writes, people are quietly working across America. They are weaving inclusive communities that seek to limit loneliness and end isolation.

“Weavers,” he says, “can be found everywhere – from the guy who runs a boxing gym in Appalachian Ohio where he nominally teaches young men boxing, but really teaches them life.....to the woman in Florida who says that she doesn’t have to volunteer, but that’s because she spends several hours every week looking out for local kids and visiting people in the hospital.” Through efforts of people such as these, more and more individuals are being seen, heard, and known.

As Adela Mendoza, one Weaver, writes: “I don’t think that we’re giving each other the opportunity to tell each other who we really are. I think that we are assuming that we understand. And I think that when we open ourselves up to that type of dialogue, that is when the magic happens in terms of building community.”

Brooks concludes, the time has come for us, as a society, to declare our own personal declaration of interdependence.

This effort, and others like it, are in deep harmony with Judaism and Jewish values. In an age when so many are ‘bowling alone’ – disconnected – and living in discord – our tradition warmly invites us into community.

Jewish mystical literature speaks to the impact made by a circle of special souls. The Zohar, the foundational text of Kabbalah - dating back to approximately the 13th Century – speaks of a particular community of sages whose purpose is to bring God’s healing presence into a broken world. They are led by a man named Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and known as the Hevraya – an Aramaic word meaning “Fellowship” --- related to the Hebrew word: Chaver – “friend.”

One fascinating motif in the text is that Rabbi Shimon and his disciples are repeatedly described as doing their teaching and learning while they are ‘*hol’chim b’yachad*’ – while they are walking

together. Over and over again, we find the repeated phrase that: “Rabbi A and Rabbi B were making their way along the road.” Rabbi David Greenstein, in his book on the Zohar, entitled: “Road to Utopia” writes that these walking stories are essential to understanding the work of the Hevraya. He notes that it reflects movement – by the individual and by the community as a whole – that people are striving to get somewhere.

This image of being ‘*ba-derech*’ – of being ‘on a path’ together – resonates deeply for me when I consider what it means for us to be part of our own Beth Shalom community. Like the Hevraya of the Zohar - and the visionary societal “weavers” about whom I spoke earlier - we, too, are on a shared journey.

Sacred Stepping Stone #1: Torat Chayim

There is a beautiful teaching that says that every soul in the community is like a single letter of a magnificent Torah scroll of lives – literally, a Torat Chayim. The imagery is all the more present, by the way, as I look out upon all of you who have gathered to mark today’s holiness. Our rabbis tell us, that just as every letter in a Torah scroll must be legible in order for the Torah to be kosher, so too – we are taught - must each person in the community be truly seen and heard in order for the community to be healthy. Here, in our own Beth Shalom community, an important part of our journey is recognizing others – listening to each other’s stories.....our questions about life....our hopes for ourselves, our families and for our world. We spark encounters with one another and then hope to see those sparks turn into the flame of friendship. We are not like-minded, but we are most certainly like-hearted. And through all of our shared encounters with one another - and with the richness of Jewish wisdom, prayer, and culture - we seek to grow as human beings.

As we embrace each other’s uniqueness.....nurturing genuine relationships with one another, *Anu holchim b’yachad....We walk together.*

Sacred Stepping Stone #2: L’Dor VaDor

Dr. Gayatri Devi is a neurologist at the Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan. Recently, she recalled a conversation that she had with one of her patients who had lived to be 101 years old. That patient, she said, had given her an essential piece of advice for longevity and living most fully. He told her: Try to have a friend from every decade of life.

Judaism celebrates l’dor va’dor.....the sharing of lives from one generation to the next. Here, in our own community, we strive to bring generations together whenever possible – with community elders reading stories in our preschool, with multiple generations participating in our Welcome Corps, as we gather for prayer or learning, amongst our leadership, in our Sisterhood and Brotherhood and Garden Club.....with youth leaders matched with Temple Board members as mentors. We celebrate the sweetness of Beth Shalom today. And we honor those who have built our congregation over the years.

As we learn from and are enlivened by those older and younger than ourselves: *Anu hol'chim b'yachad.....We walk together.*

Sacred Stepping Stone #3: Veh'yei B'rachah

If someone were looking for an outstanding mission statement for a Jewish community, one need not look much farther than Psalm 146. In these few short verses, the Psalmist speaks of God as a “helper” in inspiring the members of the community to bring b'rachah....blessing to others. According to the text, this is accomplished by feeding the hungry.....protecting the oppressed.....opening the eyes of the blind.....welcoming the stranger.....and raising up those who, due to life circumstance, have been brought low. Here in our own community, we work hard to make the Psalmist's vision a reality. Through so much of what we do, we reach out to help.....and to support. We are present with one another and we are here for one another.

As we partner in the sacred task of bringing blessing..... *Anu hol'chim b'yachad.....we walk together.*

Lorie Kleiner Eckert is a professional writer and speaker. A few years ago, she wrote the following: “My mom passed away this past August....It's (customary) after a death for a rabbi to come and visit the immediate family – to offer condolences and comfort – and to gather information for a eulogy. Our family sat together and recalled our mom – sharing stories from her life. We told the rabbi that, through her volunteer activities, our mother had served the temple for more years than we could recall – most recently helping to run its library and also sending out tribute cards to acknowledge donations made to the temple in honor or in memory of others. On the home front, as well, we said, mom was the kind of person who always ‘took care of business.’ The pantry was always full. The house was always clean. All the bills were paid the moment they came in the door. Dad said that she could have run a major corporation all on her own. And I said that if she found out today that something needed to be done yesterday, she'd figure out a way to get it done by then.”

“From this, the rabbi fashioned a beautiful eulogy, which he presented to a standing room only crowd at the funeral.”

“I noticed all of this, without really noticing it until a few days later. I had promised dad that I would attend Shabbat services for a year in order to say Kaddish. On the first Friday night, he and I went to temple together. And afterwards, I complained to him that none of the words in the prayer book had come close to addressing the pain that I felt in my heart. He agreed. But he told me that in focusing on the written prayers, I had missed the point. We didn't come to temple, he said, for the prayer book. We came for the community.”

“That is when I started to notice what I hadn't seen before: the huge outpouring from the network, indeed family, that had been mom's because of her temple affiliation. Driving the point

home further, more than two hundred donations were made in mom's memory in the weeks following her death."

Kleiner-Eckert concludes: "Though I proudly called myself a Jew, for years I have been estranged from congregational Judaism. This had always pained mom. Now I see what she was talking about. Who is it that doesn't need a community? And so, as my final gift to mom – and her final gift to me – I plan to find a congregation of my own – to come home to Judaism. Amazingly, therefore, my mom, Rose Kleiner – the 'get-it-done-gal' - has once again figured out a way to get things done even from the grave. I laugh. I cry. And I thank her."

On this Yom Kippur morning, as we consider our own individual life path – may we also be inspired in the coming year to connect more meaningfully with community.

May we become weavers of lives – leaning into the 'better angels' of others so that each person might be seen.....and heard....and honored.

And may we continue to walk together.....guided by our generations-old call to be bearers of blessing....and messengers of peace.

Cain Y'hi Ratzon.....Be this God's will.