

**Rosh Hashanah: It Is All About Connection**  
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Shanah Tovah to everyone.

“I don’t know about you but I am exhausted. Where did the slower-paced days of the summer go? Schools are back in session, work is busy, the holidays managed to sneak up on me again and the number of errands on my to-do list never seems to get smaller. There just doesn’t seem to be enough time for everything I want to do.”

How often have we said similar things to others when someone asked us how we were doing? How often do we talk about how busy we are? How often do we feel that our lives are so crazy that we rarely have time to take a breath and think about anything beyond the next hour, day, week or month? How often have we felt that there just wasn’t enough time for reflection, family or rest? Life loses its meaning in the rush, and when we can only focus on getting through the day, we risk losing any real sense of what is most important to us in life.

That is one of the things I find so precious about Rosh Hashanah. Here we all are, together, with nowhere else to go. Surrounded by our community, perhaps our family, the ancient words of the prayer book and the evocative melodies of the service. We are in a safe place for an extended period of time. We are given a haven, a sanctuary in time and space, to dwell upon what our lives are all about. As I have said before, since Rosh Hashanah is the celebration of the creation of the world, there is no better time to contemplate what is most important to us.

In that spirit I would like to share with you a comment that a colleague of mine made a few weeks ago, which I found intriguing and which caused me to ponder something that I think is important to us all. Her statement was simple. She said, “When you think about it, the United States is becoming a Facebook nation”.

To those who do not know to what I am referring, please be assured that this is not a political or patriotic statement of any kind.

Facebook.com and Myspace.com are social networking tools that are accessed by computer, using the internet. Utilizing their format, technology and database people can create extensive virtual communities on-line. In making her statement, my colleague was referring to the fact that these sites have been attracting literally, millions upon millions of users over the last few years. Facebook alone reports over 100 million active users, not to mention Myspace and so many other sites like them. I would guess that over 90 percent of the High School and college students in this room have Facebook or Myspace accounts. And while the vast majority of the users are between thirteen and thirty, this is not exclusively the case. I personally know many folks beyond that age who are on Facebook, who have learned to use the site to connect to their children and grandchildren as well as other relatives who live far away. Organizations, profit and not for profit, including synagogues, use this site, or similar ones, to connect to their constituents. McCain and Obama, for example, are both on Facebook, because they recognize that they can reach a whole cadre of voters more easily using this tool. On-line social networking

is simply a part of the coming generation's culture and it is part of how millions of Americans currently interact with the world.

However, whether you use and understand these sites, or whether much of what I have said so far sounds like I am speaking a foreign language, makes little difference. And I assure you that the reason for my citing this phenomenon and teaching you about it, is not simply to seem hip and in touch with what the younger generation is doing (although the latter is not a bad idea in general for adults). Rather what is important is the fact that if millions of our fellow Americans are using these sites, we need to try to understand why they do so. On this important day in the Jewish year, I bring this up because I believe it reveals to us something critical about the very nature of relationships between people. And I believe that Judaism has something very valuable to teach us about how human beings should relate to one another.

In trying to understand the popularity of such sites, I have discovered a number of factors that contribute to their success. However, at its core, stripped of all sophistication, it seems to me that this is simply a 21st century expression of the human being's great and timeless desire to be in a relationship with others. Despite all of the complexities of life, all of the things competing for our attention, all of the opportunities open to us in this day and age, deep down the thing we crave the most is the love, respect and companionship of other human beings. As part of our nature, we yearn to be close to others, to learn their thoughts and feelings and to share ours with them. We want others to validate that we are likeable and loveable because we cannot do that completely for ourselves. We understand that life's joys are heightened and its sorrows sweetened primarily through sharing of these events with the people we love and trust. And when we find those who will guard our feelings and our confidence with great loyalty and love, we know that we have found a true friend who becomes a tremendous source of strength and comfort for us as we go through life. So we search and we search, we reach out and we reach out, trying to find such companionship, love and validation.

If you are no longer a child between the ages of 11 and 18, for example, try to remember how important it was back then who your friends were, what social group you were associated with, what image you portrayed and how popular you were. I bet most of you can still remember the names of each person who slighted you or each friend who betrayed you, even if it was twenty or more years ago. Or at least you can recall those particular moments, as clear as if they were yesterday, when you were embarrassed by another or when someone was cruel to you. Conversely, you know in your heart which people in your life love you and have gone out of their way to support you. No matter what age we are now; in a sense, we are still that young person striving to be loved, respected and accepted by the others around us. We are still that vulnerable child who basks in friendship and kindness and withers when exposed to rejection and cruelty.

Our tradition, from the earliest story in the Torah, recognizes the human need to be in a relationship with others. We were never meant to go through life alone; we were created to make connections with other human beings. Adam, as you know, was the first such human. If you will recall, he lived in the perfect paradise, the Garden of Eden. All of his

needs were taken care of: he had luxurious accommodations, ultimate safety, all the food he could want, a new world full of interesting things to explore and a direct connection to God. Yet, the Torah tells us that despite all of this Adam was unhappy. As it is written in Chapter 2 of Genesis, God noticed this and said, “It is not good for the human to be alone...” And thus he created Eve, an “Ezer C’negdo”, “the perfect companion” to help him through life. Only then was Adam happy; only when Eve was by his side was Adam fulfilled. Once he had a companion with whom to share the Garden of Eden, he was finally able to appreciate its beauty. Therefore, right from the very, very beginning, our tradition tells us that essential to being human, is the need to be in a relationship with others.

Now I know what some of you are thinking, because you know the end of the Adam and Eve story. You know that it was not until Eve was created that human beings got into trouble. You remember the story of the tree, the apple and the snake that led to their banishment from the perfect Garden. And therefore I concede, that there is a price to pay when we engage in relationships. Humans, are far from perfect. Even the ones we love, give bad advice, make mistakes, are sometimes weak and occasionally, or maybe even more than occasionally, they fail us. Isn’t that why Yom Kippur needs to exist? Yet, the end of the Adam and Eve story only proves the power of human companionship further. For despite their banishment from the Garden, Adam and Eve remained and continued to be: happy, devoted and productive human beings. Their banishment from perfection did not leave them destroyed and in utter despair. They moved forward, had a family and became the parents of the entire human race. People, it seems, can remain happy, even in an imperfect world like ours, even when things are difficult, as long as they have each other.

To illustrate this point in a different way I share with you a wonderful anecdote written by Rabbi Harold Kushner in the popular book *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. He wrote: I was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sandcastle by the water's edge, with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand.

I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all of their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore, away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle.

I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh.

Kushner is telling us that the world may crumble around us, as it did in a sense when Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden, or when the castle the children built was

washed away, but when we have another beside us with whom we truly connect, we can endure, continue to grow and retain our optimism in the beauty of the world. Our experience in life, our Jewish tradition and our soul, all tell us that our relationships to one another are: of central importance to our happiness, affect deeply how we approach the world and multiply what we can accomplish and endure in life.

And it must be noted that this type of connection is not only created with a spouse. As in Kushner's story such relationships can be with a friend, a parent, a sibling, a cousin, a teacher or a colleague. Theoretically, every person in this world has the potential to be that person, or one of the people, that makes life that much more beautiful by simply knowing that they exist and that we have a relationship with them. Somewhere inside of us, I believe, we all know that it is the other people in this world that makes our own lives worth living.

So what strikes me about the Facebook phenomenon, the internet dating phenomenon and the general explosion of tools to create broader social networks, is that the people of the upcoming generation crave these human connections as deeply as ever, and feel that they need to enhance the traditional methods by use of the internet, in order to make the connections that are so important to them. What they are really doing, is seeking community. For they recognize that such relationships develop best within a communal framework. Within a structure that creates opportunities to meet others, values such connections and provides a meaningful context for developing relationships.

In this sense I believe that their endeavors are noble and true. Relationships are at the core of life and community is where the most meaningful relationships can be created. Further, anyone who has used this technology can tell you, it really is a wonderful tool when used to make initial contact with others and when utilized to keep in touch in a world that is increasingly fast-paced and impersonal. This technology, therefore, should be harnessed and used as the effective tool that it is. It has great potential to further the goal of keeping our connections vital even over great physical space and even with great numbers of people.

However, what I worry about is that over time these forms of communication and connection will come to largely replace face-to-face encounter, which provides a dimension to a relationship that has indescribable power and substance. Unfortunately if Facebook, and the like, become the primary way in which people actually develop a relationship, the research indicates that these methods would leave most further away from the true relationship they were seeking to begin with. I, and many others, who have dwelt on the subject, fear that too many of us today spend much too much time communicating through the computer, in a closed office or room, glued to a screen, sending IMs and e-mails, sometimes even to the person working in the cubicle right next to us. In an article entitled *Internet Paradox: A Social Technology That Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being* (a thrilling read), a Carnegie Mellon team of researchers concluded that there is a strong causal relationship between Internet Use and Depression as well as a decrease in social activities. If we continue to devalue: face-to-face communication, personal encounters and real person-to-person communities, I fear that the notion of friend, companion and community will suffer a great blow. Instead

of making the ultimate connections we seek, we will inadvertently push them further away.

Therefore, accumulating friends on Facebook cannot replace the true gifts that face-to-face friendship can give us: the type of friendship that allows us to grow through personal interaction and dynamic conversation. To me, even using the word “friend” to describe the amassing of hundreds of virtual Facebook associations, in a sense, degrades the true meaning of the word. We cannot allow ourselves to give birth to a world in which the primary way we know each other is through their page on the web.

Just recently my brother-in-law shared with me a cartoon that illustrates this danger in poignant albeit comical way. While it is always hard to describe a visual in words, I will try. In the first frame there is a teenager on a reclining chair texting on his phone intently as his mother enters the room behind him and tries to ask him a question. Without looking up or responding he holds the phone over his head and takes her picture using its camera. Looking down at his cell phone, seeing her picture there in the phone, his eyes brighten and he says, “Mom?”, as if recognizing her for the first time now that her face was on a screen. In the final, more serious, frame, the mother is pictured speaking to her husband sadly saying, “Don’t you miss face-to face conversations?”

Funny, maybe, but the point is: technology is wonderful, however, nothing can replace: the personal connection that comes with face to face interaction, in-person encounters and the gathering of people you love in an actual physical space. Imagine the difference, for example, if we experienced this very moment as a video chat, each of us in our own homes and spaces? Imagine how holiday dinners, birthday parties and celebrations would change if done through virtual community instead? Clearly, Facebook and the like have their value, but they also have important limitations.

That is why on days like today, we have to remind ourselves of the power of actual communities. We have to be sure that we are conveying to the next generation that while social networking on-line is great for keeping in touch, is in some cases a valid way to initially meet people with similar interests and is surely a convenient way to communicate with others about certain issues -- the true development of worthwhile friendships happens in authentic community. Think about the people you love. They are members of your family community, your synagogue community, your school community, your summer camp community or your volunteer community. They are people you spend time with in the same physical space in the context of something meaningful, something you value, like family, Judaism, career or a just cause. These in-person communities, despite the convenience of the internet, need to be supported and cultivated and our children need to understand both in word and deed how important these communities are to our own happiness and to the condition of the world.

Speaking as a rabbi, I cannot endorse more the value of the synagogue community. In my short time here I have seen how much of a difference an authentic community makes in peoples lives. Those who have chosen to make the synagogue a priority in their lives have been enriched with deep friendships, as well as so many other wonderful things.

Friends of one year, five years or forty are there for each other in happy and sad times. For example, they come on Shabbat morning to share with us their birthdays, baby namings, B'nei mitzvah, weddings and anniversaries. And the community celebrates with them.

And we are there in difficult times, too, to provide comfort and support. Only this past week I was reminded by a woman that one day, after her husband died, when she was sitting shivah in her home, there was a huge snowstorm. Sad, that no one would now be able to come for minyan, she resigned herself to the fact that she would not be able to recite the mourner's kaddish that night. Yet, at the time the minyan was supposed to begin, bundled up and snow covered, ten hearty Beth El souls walked through her door, most of whom knew her solely through Beth El. She was overwhelmed and that memory remains a source of strength for her until today.

So on this Rosh Hashanah I ask you to make a commitment for this year. A single commitment, to help foster real community at the synagogue and to further your goal of nurturing true relationship. One exciting way you can do this, is by joining a Beth El havurah – a smaller more intimate group within the larger shul community in which you and your family can grow with other Beth El families. Just call the synagogue, go to our website or fill out the brochure that was sent to your home and is available on the tables outside (after yuntif, of course). You can also do it by coming to Shabbat services more often, joining a synagogue committee, taking part in our Bikkur Holim society that visits the sick to ensure that none in our community are left alone, or partake in any other wonderful community service we carry out (some of which are listed in the Social Action brochures you received today). Whatever you do, let your community help you create the bonds between us that lead to the type of relationships that can sustain us, and the world, in life. I assure you, in doing this both you and your community will be enriched.

Having said all of that, there is still one more dimension of true companionship, true friendship, that I have not yet mentioned, but needs to be highlighted. And that is the ability of human companionship to bring us closer to God. As some of you know there was a great Jewish philosopher named Martin Buber who identified two types of relationships in the world. One is that of I-It. In this type, or moment, of relationship, we relate to another as a means to an end. The architect who can design our home, the customer service agent who can correct the mistake on our bill, the colleague who can feed our ego with a compliment or the spouse who will make us feel needed. As you can see, we can relate to even those closest to us in this mode, treating even those we love sometimes as an entity to serve the self.

However, Buber says that sometimes we have moments when we can engage others in a different type of relationship, which he called the I-Thou. In this mode of relationship, each being relates to the true essence of the other for the sake of that connection alone. The ulterior motives are pushed to the side and a soul-to-soul link is established. This he maintains is the ultimate form of relationship.

While it is true that Buber felt that this could only occur spontaneously, I feel that our

ability to have such moments is greatly increased by the types of relationships we create and the contexts in which they are created. While we cannot force an I-Thou moment we are much more likely to have such encounters if we generally interact with people in a thoughtful and present manner, if we learn how to create deep relationships based on bonding and personal touch, if we seek such relationships in authentic community, if we value how important every person in this world truly is and how essential the others in our life truly are. Like a musician who experiences exultation during a particular concert, a runner that reports what is called “runner’s high” or a teacher that feels inspired by a class she just taught, these moments cannot be scheduled. But like any successful person, we still prepare for each concert, each race, each encounter as if it could be the one that leads to such a moment, knowing that there is a much greater chance we can experience it if we do.

Yet the true genius of Buber’s model is that he believes that it is in this deep human encounter, the I-Thou relationship, that we actually find God and ultimate spirituality. In other words, according to Judaism one way of accessing the Divine, one way to attain a sense of spirituality, is by loving our fellow human beings with a full heart. Our Torah tells us plainly, V’haahvta Lreaicha Camocha” - “Love your neighbor as yourself”. As many of you know, Hillel famously said that he believed that this verse held the greatest truth in the Torah -- all else he claimed was commentary. In other words, everything flows, even our relationship with God, from how we interact with others.

I believe that is an extremely valuable insight. So many of us feel lost in trying to understand how to have a relationship with God. So we feel we need kabalistic charms, a PhD in religious philosophy, the ability to climb to the top of a far away mountain, the skill to meditate and do yoga, ect, ect,. (and indeed some of these things could help). Yet, the most basic way to know God is to love another, to engage in true friendships, to come together in community in a meaningful way and to care about others in the world. How comforting to know that not only do such relationships provide us with love, friendship and companionship but they also help us develop a sense of purpose and ultimately a sense of God. For experiencing true friendship and companionship teaches us that the world is not about us at all, it is about others. And if the world is instead about the billions of others that exist, have existed and will exist, then we can begin to understand that there is something greater than us that connects us all together. We can begin to see ourselves as partners with God in seeking the perfection of the world.

So many times I see people sacrifice the time they spend with loved ones- compromising their most dear relationships -- for material advancement, prestige and a host of other pursuits. But like the children building the sand castle, these things can all be washed away. What is most important are the people in our lives who share our journey and the fellow human beings who inhabit our world with us. It is our relationships that must be nurtured, protected and cherished above all else. For if we do so, we will find that no matter what, somehow life will be uplifted and a layer of tremendous meaning will be added to our existence. For through our relationships will we come to understand the truth about the world, the values that our Torah teaches and the path that God has created for us to follow. Our relationships will strengthen us to carry out all of the other mitzvot that

our tradition holds dear, as when our community responded to make minyan in a snowstorm. And, in turn, those mitzvot will remind us how important the people in our lives are and give us a framework in which to develop our relationships with them.

We must make the time in our lives to develop our relationships properly. We must make sure that the people we love, know it. Not just in words, although they help, but in our actions as well. We can do this by going out of our way to be compassionate and to care for others. And by being an active part of a live personal community, like Beth El, that shares our values, that nurtures our desire to connect and that seeks to build a culture based on caring and doing mitzvot. To me, that is the magic of the High Holidays. We don't see each other, all at once like this, except at this time of year. Our gathering together, fostered by our Jewish tradition, serves as a powerful reminder that each of us are connected to one another in our search for meaning, love and a relationship with God. Our ability to be successful in these endeavors can only increase when we become more involved, gather more frequently in prayer, to celebrate holidays and happy occasions and when we join with each other to make the world a better place. As the Facebook phenomenon suggests, we desperately desire to connect to others. So let us make sure that we do so in a conscious, meaningful and substantive way. On this New Year, I wish you a year of goodness, filled with love, a sense of community and a deeper understanding of the ultimate truth that we are all ultimately linked to one another. Shanah Tovah Umetukah!