

Small Refrigerators

Shanah Tovah/Gut Yontiff

Rachel and I love the HGTV show called *House Hunters International* where people rent/purchase homes across the world. We particularly enjoy episodes when Americans rent apartments in the beautiful Parisian, Roman, or Florentine neighborhoods. It's fun to watch American families walk into the kitchen and immediately notice the missing double wide Sub Zero refrigerator. Instead, they find the small, college dorm-like refrigerator that can only fit a six pack of coke, a sandwich, and, maybe, if they are lucky, a piece of fruit!

These American families are in total real-estate shock. They cry out to their real-estate agent that a small refrigerator is simply impossible for their living conditions. They second guess their decision to move abroad. Life seems all but lost. The size of a refrigerator determines their happiness and their ability to survive in a foreign country.

A rabbinic proverb teaches us that wisdom doesn't necessarily come from years of rigorous study in school or maturity. Rather, wisdom comes from well, wisdom. It comes from anybody and from anywhere. Here we are, on [Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur]. And, the wisdom that I want to talk about on this holy day comes from Adrian Leeds – an American expat Parisian real-estate agent on HGTV who frequently finds herself defending the value of small refrigerators.

Adrian often says, "There's no real purpose for a large refrigerator. In this part of the world, going to the market is an everyday experience." Adrian isn't stressing the importance to buy fresh food daily. After all, we can purchase fresh food practically anywhere in San Diego.

Her words are much deeper. All this time watching this television show, I came to realize that Adrian Woods is speaking to what I consider to be a crucial component for our human survival, that is, human integration. Or, in the most basic terminology: socializing with people on a regular basis and getting to know them!

In Paris, Jerusalem, or in Villagrande, Sardinia, these locals experience the market daily in order to connect with their butcher, their cheese maker, their farmer, and their bread maker. They know their names. They know their hobbies. They know their passions. They talk about family life. How the kids are doing in school or on the "football" field – that's soccer for us Americans! For them, interacting with these people daily – seeing their faces, seeing their smiles, connecting with them is a rewarding part of their life. Daily connection makes them happy; and, there's a major health benefit too!

For example, Villagrande, Sardinia is a Blue Zone – a special region of the world where people live much longer than average. Villagrande is not known for its tourism. It's not known for the obelisk in city center that celebrates a victorious military achievement, or the picturesque European cobblestone streets that travel expert Rick Steves would beautifully write about in his guidebooks. Rather, it's known for its density of apartments and interwoven alleys.¹ But, in this village, there are ten times as many centenarians as there are in North America. [Ten times the amount of people that are over one hundred years old as there are in North America.] Why? People are happy and they especially love socializing with each other. Villagers are greeted not just by family and extended family, but by friends, neighbors, the barkeeper, the priest, and the grocer...daily.

Science teaches us that face-to-face contact, shaking hands, hugging, a high-five or a fist bump is enough to release oxytocin – a powerful hormone that helps us increase our levels of trust and

¹ See Susan Pinker, "The Secret to Living Longer May be Your Social Form,"
https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_pinker_the_secret_to_living_longer_may_be_your_social_life

lowers our cortisol levels, meaning our stress.² These Sardinians are frequently releasing oxytocin because of the amount of connection that occurs daily in their lives. It's like Facebook or Instagram for them, but instead of photos, it's real life with genuine relationships! As Dr. Susan Pinker who conducted this research brilliantly said, "And that's when I discovered a low-fat, gluten-free diet is not what it takes to live to 100 in the blue zone."³

I enjoyed reading about Villagrande, Sardinia. I loved hearing about a real place where people truly know and care about each other – a place where their definition of community is simply stopping by, saying hello, sharing a story and a good laugh, and of course, having a bite to eat. Each home in Villagrande is almost like a real-life episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* – Fred Rogers opens the door cheerfully to greet Mr. McFeely, the postman. They converse about life and Mr. McFeely teaches Fred something new, like how cheese is made.

A High Holiday sermon needs to be realistic. Therefore, I certainly recognize that we're not headed to Home Depot or Target here on El Camino Real to buy a small refrigerator. And, we're not going to list our homes on the market and then move to Villagrande, Sardinia. We know our life here in San Diego doesn't emulate the cultural ethos of Villagrande, Paris or in Tel Aviv.

But, this doesn't mean we can't have an honest conversation about human connection in our lives and in our communities. This doesn't mean we can't have a truthful discussion about the barriers and the obstacles that prevent us from experiencing the joys of life.

[Deep down,] I am worried. I am worried about how our community and country is connecting. I'm worried about how we are sustaining our relationships. I am worried that we are becoming more anonymous and more isolated daily. And, I am worried how the role of technology is contributing toward our anonymity and our isolation, especially for our youth – which must be addressed this morning. Of course, - I am not talking about a large elephant in the room, but rather the 5.5-inch elephant in all of our pockets, our cellphones.

The Hasidic Masters taught us that, "One who believes one can live without others is mistaken." If Adrian Leeds and the villagers of Villagrande understand this cogent Hasidic principle – that life is richer and healthier when we endeavor to make genuine, lasting relationships and *real* connections daily with our family, friends, neighbors, and strangers, *keal vachomer* – *all the more so*, I think we can take this teaching to heed. We must. Because what we are witnessing today needs to change.

A few years ago, Hollywood made a lot of movies about zombies. Most of these plotlines involved some type of virus plaguing the world causing the zombie outbreak, and a hero like Brad Pitt would emerge with the remedy to save the day. These movies were popular then, but perhaps they were a metaphor for today, foreshadowing our lack of communal engagement.

The nonprofit group, Common Sense Media, found that as of 2017, 42 percent of American kids ages zero to eight have their own tablets.⁴ And, 78 percent of kids have access to a tablet at home. They noted that many kids zone out like "zombies" and become frustrated when these devices are taken away.

This past year, San Diego State University psychology professor Jean Twenge wrote an article in *The Atlantic* entitled, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" Her findings were shocking. Mental health professionals have seen an increase in teen anxiety and depression. Teenagers aren't getting enough sleep. Many teenagers don't want their driver's license. They are not interested in independence or even dating. Rather, many teenagers prefer to be on their phones, in their rooms,

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Geoffrey A. Fowler, "We Tested Apple's New Screen Time Parental Controls. First Came Tears – then Frustration." 23 August 2018 https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/08/23/we-tested-apples-new-screen-time-parental-controls-first-came-tears-then-frustration/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f82e5a460abb

by themselves, and often distressed as Dr. Twenge noted in her research.⁵ One teenager quoted in her article said, “We didn’t have a choice to know any life without iPads or iPhones. I think we like our phones more than we like actual people.”

It’s easy to comment on American teenagers and their use of technology, which Dr. Twenge refers to as IGen teens; however, adults are just as culpable. With a click of a button on our devices, we take steps to reject human integration. Amazon delivers our groceries to our front door. Nordstrom and Walmart launched “Curbside Pickup” so that we don’t need to go inside and connect with employees and customers. [Here’s another stat]: The average American spends fourteen hours per week on social media platforms. The list goes on.

Social media isn’t real community. It’s not connection. It’s not engagement because it so easily leads to isolation. It’s a real-life zombie movie and we continue to star in the role. But, there is one thing clear. We are not “wired” for this. This is not the way we were meant to thrive nor engage the world. And, the amount of times we “like” a photo doesn’t improve human integration. It doesn’t improve our social connections. And, it certainly doesn’t lift people out of poverty or lead to societal change.

Dr. Elizabeth Redcay is a neuroscientist at the University of Maryland who [actually] found a way to use a MRI scanner to map our brains when we interact with a person versus when we’re watching something that’s static - our phones or tablets. Dr. Redcay reported that there is a difference between staring at a 5.5-inch cell phone screen versus talking to a real person. When we talk to a real person, our brain activity thrives – it wants more! We anticipate emotion. We are more engaged.⁶

If Dr. Redcay doesn’t convince us, we can head north on the 5 and talk to Dr. Matthew Lieberman, who is a professor and the Social Cognitive Neuroscience Lab Director at UCLA’s Department of Psychology, Psychiatry, and Biobehavioral Sciences. Now, his research found that it is social connection with others that drives us. And, when we are in the presence with other people – talking, engaging, checking in about life or how the kids are doing in school, our brains are rewarded.⁷

Harvard University’s Department of Adult Development decided to conduct a seventy-five-year-study by tracking the lives of 724 people. This study wanted to answer the following question – What makes a good life? What is happiness? The report indicated the following – “Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Here’s the key factor: Social connections are really good for us – it’s good for our brains, while loneliness is toxic. People who are more personally connected to family, to friends, and to community are happier, physically healthier, and live longer than people who are less well connected.”⁸ This report didn’t attribute smart phones, tablets, social media, or the ability to order our groceries or clothes on demand to happiness. And again, it certainly makes sense why the villagers of Villagrande are happy and live longer.

This idea of personal connectivity is how we are driving societal change in the world too. In Venice, Italy, Massimo Bottura, a three-Michelin-star chef is revolutionizing the soup kitchen model. Rather than serving one thousand people twice per year on holidays, Massimo serves one hundred people weekly to fight isolation and to improve social connectivity. His soup kitchen is called, “Food for the Soul.” Here, volunteers and patrons get to know each other weekly – knowing names, faces, and personal stories to create family and human connection. They hope this new soup kitchen truly fixes the needs for the Venetian community.

⁵ Dr. Jean Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation” September 2017 Issue
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

⁶ Pinker

⁷ See Matthew Lieberman, *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired To Connect*

⁸ Robert Waldinger, “What Makes a good life? Lessons from the Longest Study on Happiness” November 2015
https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness

And, as science and social change continue to prove the benefit of human integration, so did Judaism, early on in our tradition. When God created the world, every aspect of creation, whether it was - light, the skies, the oceans, land, or the animals – the Book of Genesis tells us that these creative acts were “good.” But, when God created Adam and placed him alone in the garden, the Torah tells us this was “not good.” Our commentators teach us that “For the first time, something is seen as ‘not good’ – human loneliness in the absence of a human association.”⁹ Therefore, God created a *ezer k’negdo* – a [helpful] counterpart to end human isolation in order to create partnership and community. And, as Jewish literature continued to develop, our rabbis always believed in community, social gathering, and being together. After all, “synagogue” means “assembly place.”

[I want to be clear.] I don’t subscribe to beliefs of “Ned Ludd” – the fictitious leader of the Luddites who rejected new technology. I love technology. It’s incredible that I can use my phone and book an airline ticket and travel the world. But, when I head to the airport – the gateway to new cultures – I’m concerned when I see a new generation of Americans, lost in their technology, not looking people in eyes when they speak to a fellow traveler, gate agent, or flight attendant. They don’t inquire about their day, but remain committed to their technological isolation.

We all know this scene doesn’t happen just at the airport. This happens at the checkout line at Ralphs, at the gym, going on dates, Sunday dinners with our family, or wherever community finds itself. The people we interact with daily – the Mr. McFeelys of our community – are becoming more anonymous, while we are becoming more isolated.

But, every year, we get to change. We get to “turn.” We get to make a difference for ourselves and for our community.

On this Jewish New Year 5779 – we have a mission for the McFeelys of our community, our neighbors, the person who checks us in at the gym, or the grocer, and even our families, to make them part of our world too. Their stories, their experiences, their smiles bring us so much reward and happiness. Science clearly proves this. Judaism strongly believes in it.

It’s about replacing some screen time for conversations. It’s about reaching out to a family member or to a friend whom we haven’t spoken to in years. It’s about trying something new.¹⁰ It’s about joining a book club or even bowling league. It’s about striking up a conversation with a stranger. It’s about making a difference in someone’s life. It’s about volunteering and bringing compassion to someone in need. This is human integration at its best.

And, I would never imagine that Adrian Leeds – an American expat Parisian real-estate agent on HGTV would become my inspiration for my sermon. The wisdom of “Small refrigerators.” But, perhaps, it makes perfect sense after all. Before she ventured to the busy life in Paris selling real-estate, she spent time in Israel, living on a kibbutz – which is the total representation of community, family, and human integration.

Our tradition likes to remind us that, “Nine rabbis can’t make a minyan, but ten shoemakers can.” Our community is our minyan – it’s our societal connection. It’s our human integration. It’s what makes our tradition incredible and makes our community strong, healthier, and happier. Engage in the goodness. Inquire about life. Seek to understand. And, As Fred Rogers always use to ask, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” Our answer on this New Year, “Absolutely.”

⁹ *Eitz Hayim*

¹⁰ Waldinger