



## Renewing Our Covenant of Friendship

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Friends. This evening, my words will be brief – sorry, wrong sermon.

Friends... Let's start there – friends.

Steven Covey famously said, “the main thing is to keep the main thing main thing.”

That's how we might think of the High Holy Days. Given how long it's been since we were last here for Days of Awe, let's start there: with the main thing we call, “Friendship.”

We sure have come a long way. Early on in the pandemic, Adam Grant wrote a column in the *NYTimes*, helping us see our new reality through the lens of the Durkheimian term, “collective effervescence,” that is, that feeling of collective belonging that we can sense in large groups. Durkheim was a learned Jew, son of a rabbi, expected to be a rabbi himself. I have to believe that the High Holy Days figured somehow in his notion of “collective effervescence.” We've missed this for a long time. And though we're not *all* present here yet, we are now closer. More together. Less alone.

In those first days of the pandemic, we strived for moments of relief, sometimes with success. We leaned into the good parts of life that were available— from nature walks to cooking; all kinds of new hobbies. We had to permit ourselves to be open to enjoyment; and yes, open to moments of laughter.

Allow me to share with you one such moment, two years ago on this day. Our team, as you know, had spent so many hours on technology, making sure everything here was set up – camera angle, the lights, the sound, the screens. I remember walking to the sanctuary, where I would be leading, alone. I passed in the hallways that wonderful quote by the late Charlotte Levin, of blessed memory, describing the early years of Judea Reform: “ya'll come over and join us, we've got a house of Jews and we're havin' a party.” Every time I walk by, I read it and smile. And next to it, the largest words on the wall: “A Congregation of Friends.”

*Friendship* has always been “the main thing” at Judea Reform. But on that day, on that walk into the quiet sanctuary, “the main thing” didn't feel like “the main thing.” I pushed open the door of the sanctuary, and to my utter surprise I was greeted by about 10 faces— masked and spread out throughout the pews. It was super. No, really, there were superhero cardboard cutouts, staring at me. (Masked...mostly.)

I won't “out” the family responsible for this “surprise,” but let's just say... the award that year for Best High Holy Day Ushers went to the Raney family.

It was a gutsy move, but it sure paid off. Message received: *you are not alone*. And I really felt it. I laughed so hard... before kindly escorting our superhero congregants out of the sanctuary. But not before taking this glorious picture. (You're welcome.)

There were many ways we sent those messages to each other, many ways we returned to our commitment to be “a congregation of friends.” A community that says, *you are not alone*.

There was irony in that moment, in seeing those faces— because the last sermon I gave in that sanctuary with you present— the very last, before lockdown— was about faces. And not just any faces, but “superhuman” faces.

Yes, there are superhuman faces in the Torah. It was late February, and we were in the middle of Exodus. The Israelites were in the Wilderness, with detailed instructions on how to craft the Tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant in particular. That Shabbat we looked at these verses, when God commands Israel to:

Make two cherubim of gold...Make one cherub at one end [of the ark] and the other cherub at the other end...they shall look at each other, the faces of the cherubim....

*V'noad'ti sham*, and I shall meet with you right there, and speak with you—above the cover, *mibein sh'nei ha-kruvim*, in between the two cherubim....<sup>1</sup>

In other words, God says to Israel, “You want to find me, while you’re lost in the Wilderness? Don’t look inside the Ark to the tablets. Don’t look up toward the sky or mountains. Just gather together, by the Ark, in between these faces, looking at each other. *“Ya’ll come over and join us!”*...

We don’t know exactly what the faces of these cherubim look like. But we can imagine what the Israelites feel like.... moving from the dread of abandonment to the awe of togetherness. Having been through what we’ve been through, surely, we are all closer to that sense.

The more I study the cherubim, and the space in between their faces, the more convinced I am that this is a story about Friendship.

We often throw around the word “friend” in flippant ways. Perhaps someone once said to you, “let’s just be friends,” while breaking a heart. “He’s just a friend,” as opposed to “*significant* other.” And could there be a better example of an “insignificant other” than a friend on Facebook. To “friend” someone is a verb, meaning... absolutely nothing.

Now, the Torah doesn’t use that word, but only because the Hebrew Bible doesn’t have a word for Friendship. We *do* get plenty of biblical Hebrew words that are friend-*adjacent*: *Re’a*, “a neighbor,” *ezer*, “one who helps,” or *ohev*: “one who loves.” But the Hebrew word *chaver*- “friend”- or *chaveirut*- “friendship”- that word enters our language in Apocryphal Hebrew works. And, really, we can thank the Greek philosophers for that.

“Friendship,” as we understand it today— in the deepest sense— we don’t find it literally in our Torah. To discover it, we have to peel away the layers of language and consider: *what do we mean by friendship?* As a “congregation of friends,” this is as good a time as any for us to uncover the authentic Jewish essence of this word.

In the story of Noah, after the Flood, God makes a promise to humanity. A *B’rit Shalom*, literally a Covenant of Shalom. With that promise, that *Brit Shalom*, God says to humanity that God will not abandon them ever again; God will not force human beings to abandon each other, as they did in the ark. The Jewish Publication Society translates *B’rit Shalom* here to mean, a “Covenant of Friendship.” Not “peace,” but *shalom* as “friendship”! It’s God’s promise of togetherness, in contrast to abandonment and

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<sup>1</sup> Ex. 25:18-22



isolation. This is the first and fundamental concept of Friendship that we get. A Covenant of Friendship says: *you are not alone*.

Across myriad definitions of Friendship— from Aristotle and Cicero to modern Social Sciences— that one essence of Friendship holds true. Sometimes we learn the essence of things from what they're not. We know water from thirst. We learn comfort from pain. And from loneliness and isolation we sure know friendship.

However, based on new discoveries of the effects of loneliness and isolation, it is time for us to return to- and revalue- Friendship. Not philosophically. Not biblically or mythically. But experientially.

Our Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, has been sounding the alarm bell about the impact on loneliness on our health. He has spent years – as our nation's chief public health officer– synthesizing research across fields, to call all of our attention to one conclusion: that “human relationship is as essential to our well-being as food and water.”<sup>2</sup>

Countless studies have shown the connections between social isolation and anxiety and depression; it was a crisis before COVID, and it's only gotten worse. For some lousy reason, we tend to pay much more attention to physical health than mental health. What's shocking, what Murthy and so many others are begging us to see, is that when it comes to loneliness and isolation, there is no pulling apart mental from physical health. (Through science we've discovered that the brain is an organ too!). Through science we've learned that loneliness is destroying many parts of our bodies, especially our hearts.

Several years ago, a groundbreaking study out of Brigham and Women's Hospital– a meta-analysis of 138 studies worldwide– showed that people with strong social bonds were 50% less likely to die over a given period than those without. The mortality impact of loneliness is, in Murthy's words, “similar to the impact of smoking 15 cigarettes per day, and greater than the mortality impact of obesity.”<sup>3</sup>

Yes, this is hard to believe. In my disbelief, I called a friend, our congregant, Dr. Mitch Prinstein. Mitch, as you may know, is a real thought-leader in research on how social interactions impact our lives. His research expands our understanding the impact of social isolation– he's researched the effects of social media on our brains.... Some of what we are learning we might be afraid to face. Because we are not simply “victims” but also participants in this collective experience.

Now, this isn't all “bad news” – because one thing we have in common here, in this space, on-site and online, is that we are designed to be “a congregation of friends.” Each for our own reasons, we signed up for something... to be a part of the enterprise of a community, in an age in which this is increasingly countercultural. For all that we cannot change about this world, our social engagement is something we can take on. For all the weights that are too heavy, this is one we can actually lift.

Political Scientist Robert Putnam, in his book *American Grace*, which zeroes in on faith communities. He researches the effects of being a part of a faith community– on human qualities like generosity, trustworthiness, and neighborliness. His research is highly inconvenient for critics of organized religion. According to Putnam's research at Harvard, religious people are nicer, better citizens, better neighbors.

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<sup>2</sup> *Together*, V. Murthy. 2020.

<sup>3</sup> ““Loneliness On the Job Is a Public Health Crisis’: Former Surgeon General Reveals What this Means for You,” Bryan Robinson. *Forbes*. January 3, 2020.



Now, lest you think that I'm being self-congratulatory, I'll also say he points out it has little to do with the sermons, and more to do with the supper– the social bonds, the “mixing it up.”

There are no shortcuts, no quick fixes, no cardboard cutouts.  
(Although that was really sweet. And clever.)

Shalom as Friendship is not a status. It is a skill.

Shalom as Friendship is not a product. It is a practice.

Shalom as Friendship is a *B'rit*. A Covenant. That means, Friendship is, like it or not, conditional.

Friendship requires grace, the willingness to give people the *kaf zechut*, the benefit of the doubt.

Friendship requires courage– to approach someone new, let someone in, start up a conversation, and sometimes the willingness to be uncomfortable; maybe even awkward.

Raise your hand if you are awkward.

(What could be more awkward than telling a group to “raise your hand if you are awkward”!)

Friends...friends...

Let's start here. With a *B'rit Shalom*. A Covenant of Friendship.

A B'rit Shalom that we *feel* when we're together, and *protect* when we're apart;

A B'rit Shalom that is a *force* for healing our anguished minds and ailing bodies;

A B'rit Shalom that emboldens us to heal our body politic; that inspires us to get together, to get organized, and get busy with the holy work we are here to do –

as a community.

as a Congregation of Friends.

Throughout the High Holy Days, we literally beg God to inscribe us in the Book of Life.

Friends, perhaps God is begging us to lead the way.

*Baruch Atah Adonai, M'kor Shalom*

Blessed are you Eternal One, Source of Friendship.

*Amen.*