

Rosh Hashanah 2016/5777

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### Friendship

In 1936, Albert Einstein wrote an essay in which he observed that we don't know who it was who discovered water. But this we do know: it wasn't a fish<sup>1</sup>. That which we live among is invisible to us. Routines, demands, expectations, cultural assumptions -- we rarely stop and notice these things, but they shape our lives in so many ways. Once a year, Jewish tradition asks us to be more conscious, more aware of what surrounds us. Once a year, at the turn of a new year, we're asked to purposely step out of the flow of life and discover where we are, and where we're going.<sup>2</sup>

This Rosh Hashanah, I'm going to ask you to examine the water with me for a few minutes, in one particular area of our lives. This year I've been thinking a lot about friendship. Some of us are blessed to feel surrounded by and supported by good friends; others of us come to these services feeling quite alone and friendless. Most of us have had both experiences at various points in our lives. All of us, I imagine, enter the new year having had some pretty foundational experiences with friendship starting at a very young age, some very positive and very rich, others associated with hurt and loss. Both of these aspects accompany the experience of friendship – but we rarely zoom out and consider what this most fundamental of human relationships is actually all about. We often think about Judaism in the context of family, and family ties are certainly an important component of our culture and tradition. But so is friendship, and the differences between family relationships and friendships are significant enough that each yields different spiritual teachings for us to draw on. I'm going to start with some reflections on friendship as an interpersonal theme, but in these remarks I will also touch on some ways this theme pertains to us as Diaspora Jews in terms of our relationship to Israel, and also at this season of the Yamim Noraim, as it pertains to our relationship with God.

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I start with one of the most unusual sages to appear in Talmudic literature. He was known as Resh Lakish. He lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, in Roman Palestine, and was notable for his unique and colorful background.<sup>3</sup> Before becoming a scholar and halakhic authority, Resh Lakish had at times earned

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<sup>1</sup> Out of My Later Years by Albert Einstein, Chapter 2: Self-Portrait (Essay dated 1936), Citadel Press Book: Carol Publishing Group. New York, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Ed Feinstein

<sup>3</sup> Bava Metzia 84a

his livelihood as a bandit, and at times as a gladiator in the Roman circus, risking his life continually in combat with wild beasts. Not surprisingly given his occupation, Resh Lakish is described as possessing enormous girth and extraordinary strength. His life took a fateful turn by a chance encounter he had with a sage named Rabbi Yochanan, when the latter was bathing in the Jordan River. Rabbi Yochanan saw something in Resh Lakish that led him to say חילך לאורייתא "Your strength would be more appropriate for studying Torah." Resh Lakish was convinced, and decided to study Bible and Mishnah with Rabbi Yochanan. The former gladiator proved extraordinarily diligent and eager to learn. Eventually he came to equal or surpass his teacher in knowledge of Torah, and in the acuteness of his legal arguments. He also married Yochanan's sister. Just from the bare outlines of this story, you can already imagine that the relationship between these two men would have been, at the very least, complex. Indeed it had a very tragic ending, which I will share with you a little later. For now, I wanted to open with the story of Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan because, despite all the complex layers of their relationship, these two men, who lived 1800 years ago, were – above all-- friends.

Few words in the English language have as wide a semantic range as the word "friend". Take a moment to think about some of the various people in your life who you call friends. [pause]. My guess is that while you use the same word "friend" to describe what they are to you, and the role they play in your life, your relationship to each of them is actually quite different. An old friend of mine once said that his father, a prominent man in the Jewish and wider community in Atlanta, had invited "500 of his closest friends" to his wedding. In making this remark, he was teasing his father of course – but in our time one can easily have that many "friends", or more, on social media, and the process of including (or excluding) someone from that category is as easy as a swipe or a tap on a smartphone screen.<sup>4</sup>

In the British novel *White City Blue*, a young woman Veronica and her fiancé Frankie are planning their wedding. "How many friends have you got in all?" she asks him as they are trying to decide on their guest list. Frankie answers, "I have no idea. Ten really good ones. Ten more peripherals. A score or so right at the outside edge, virtual acquaintances. A few left over from school, a few more from college, a few picked up at work, perhaps an ex in there somewhere. One or two borrowed or stolen from other friends. An ex-flatmate or two. Not as many mates as I used to have, that's for sure." A little later, he asks Veronica in turn, "How many varieties of friends are there?" and she replies "Oh, loads. For a start there are friends you don't like. I've got plenty of those. Then there are friends you do like, but never bother to see. Then there are the ones you really like a lot, but can't stand

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<sup>4</sup> Kate Murphy, "Do Your Friends Actually Like You?", NYT August 7, 2016.

their partners. There are those you just have out of habit and can't shake off. Then there's the ones you're friends with not because you like them, but because they're very good-looking or popular and it's kind of cool to be their friend. Trophy friends. Then there are sports friends. There are friends of convenience – they're usually work friends. There are pity friends you stay with because you feel sorry for them. There are acquaintances who are on probation as friends. There are ---<sup>5</sup>

Frankie finally can't take it anymore and interrupts her litany. Readers may laugh at some of Veronica's categories of friends, but perhaps our laughter is a bit uncomfortable because she may be telling truths about our friendships that many of us don't like to acknowledge. Friendship is one of those primal categories that can press a button deep in our souls. From an early age, the quantity and quality of our friends is a matter of grave concern to us and to our parents. Social success brings great rewards, spoken and unspoken. Its opposite can do great damage. So the stakes around those playdates, and their equivalents as we get older, are high – and the pressure correspondingly great. We worry about our friendships, both their number and their depth. We worry about just how mutual they really are.

Friendships, as opposed to family relationships, rest fundamentally on choice – who do I choose to be my friend? Who will choose me? How much of my time and my energy and my soul will I choose to invest into this friendship? How much are they choosing to devote to it? Knowing that not all friendships are positive or healthy, how will I know the difference? All these choices can result in a great deal of anxiety and stress.

And there may even be some science behind our preoccupation with friendship. Brain scientists say there is a nerve called the “smart vagus nerve”, near the carotid artery and the jugular vein, which allows us to be in intimate, supportive, and reciprocal relationships. In the presence of a true friend, that nerve is what makes us feel at ease, rather than on guard as when we are with a stranger. It is that part of us which allows us to be okay about sharing our vulnerabilities, those things about ourselves that don't match the image we present in our Facebook profile or public persona. In the ongoing absence of authentic friendships of this type, however, whether because of bad luck, or because we play it too safe, our smart vagus nerve isn't exercised -- so it loses tone, and the cycle feeds on itself as it becomes ever harder to establish abiding connections to people.<sup>6</sup>

This scientific research points us to an important insight about friends – when it comes to our our smart vagus nerve, those 500 close friends the

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Lott, *White City Blue*, p.41, 45-46.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Banks, “Wired to Connect: The Surprising Link Between Brain Science and Strong Healthy Relationships”, p.140.

father wanted to invite to the wedding, all those gazillion friends we have on social media, our fair-weather friends, our “frenemies”, our “umfriends” – as in “This is my, um, friend” – they don’t count. Our smart vagus nerve is too, well, smart – it knows the difference. Just as we can’t fool our muscles by taking out a gym membership and not going to work out, we can’t fool our smart vagus nerve by having lots of people we may call friends but with whom we are not in true, authentic, open, honest, trusting relationship. Cole Porter summed up the difference between true friendships and all the other kinds in his immortal song: “If you're ever in a jam, here I am. If you're ever in a mess, S.O.S... If you're ever down a well, ring my bell... It's friendship, friendship, just a perfect blendship. When other friendships have been forgot, ours will still be hot.” James Taylor ended up singing Carole King’s “You’ve Got a Friend” pretty much every night of his career partially because it’s a beautiful song, but also because the message about friendship it contains is so powerful.

The depth of caring expressed in that song, that feeling of “he has my back”, flows from true encounter, from honesty and authenticity, from the “I-Thou relationship” to use Buber’s term, and from ongoing presence in each other’s lives – but of course it comes with a price. As wonderful, and sustaining, as our true friendships can be, with apologies to Cole Porter, they are rarely “a perfect blendship.” Conflict, jealousy, annoyance, anger, even affliction and misery and loss are also features of true friendships. One of my favourite depictions of true friendship in recent literature is that of two girls in postwar Italy in the Neapolitan Novels by Elena Ferrante. In the first novel, called My Brilliant Friend, the two girls Elena and Lila are growing up in a poor, tough, but vibrant neighbourhood on the outskirts of Naples in the 1950’s. They learn to rely on each other ahead of anyone or anything else. At one point, Elena, the narrator, realizes she has become utterly dependent on her friend: “I soon had to admit that what I did by myself couldn’t excite me,” she writes. “Only what Lila touched became important. If she withdrew, if her voice withdrew from things, the things got dirty, dusty.”<sup>7</sup> As they grow, however, as their paths repeatedly diverge and converge, the power relations between them shift, the hierarchy changes and tremendous hurt is inflicted. Yet Elena and Lila remain best friends.<sup>8</sup> True friendship, as Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan could testify, as Elena and Lila could testify, as we can all testify from our life experience, is difficult and challenging and frustrating and painful– but whether or not we buy into the science around the smart vagus nerve, I think most of us can agree that it is so very much worth it because of the sustenance and comfort we draw from our friends, and from the myriad ways we grow and learn and are challenged in our friendships.

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<sup>7</sup> My Brilliant Friend, p.100.

<sup>8</sup> <http://elenaferrante.com/works/my-brilliant-friend/>

And now, since it is Rosh Hashanah and we Jews are gathered together in greater numbers than at any other time of year, I want to raise for your consideration two critically important areas of Jewish life and faith in which I think the model of “friendship” can provide us some insight as we welcome 5777. I want to ask, given all the inherent difficulties of the relationship, can we as Diaspora Jews be true friends with Israel, and if so what does that mean? And I want to ask, given all the inherent difficulties of the relationship, can we be true friends with God, and if so what does that mean?

Our relationship with Israel has been and continues to be so fraught. The gaps in distance, language, culture, and experience often lead to misunderstanding and mistrust. Divergent political views often present an obstacle. Yet we know that some of our personal friendships transcend these types of barriers, and we learn as much if not more from the ways in which we are different from our friends, than we do from the ways in which we are similar. Can the same be said for the relationship of Diaspora Jews with Israel? Can our friendship transcend the obstacles? Does the word friendship even apply when we move beyond the level of the individual and think about more conceptual connections like those between Diaspora Jews as a whole and a sovereign state, Israel? If it is a helpful word, is it the friendship of the deep, authentic, long-lasting, “I have your back” kind, or is it the more superficial type like the one that can be turned into a verb on social media, the kind that doesn’t survive the inevitable rough patches?

In the coming year of 5777 one particular potential rough patch comes to mind: we will be marking 50 years since the Six Day War. Five decades since those six days that changed everything. Some, both here and in Israel, will see this as an anniversary to celebrate, as we recall a military victory so swift and so decisive over three neighbouring countries bent on Israel’s destruction, and as we reflect on a politically united Jerusalem where Jews can now visit holy places including the Western Wall, from which they were barred before 1967. Others in our community and in Israel will see this anniversary as a time to mourn the decisions taken in the wake of that war especially around civilian settlements, the opportunities for negotiation not seized or not at least left open, the evolution of the IDF into an army of occupation, and most especially the seemingly endless domination by Israel of a sizable minority population with few democratic rights. Many of us will see both elements in this highly complex 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Given the diversity of views, the anniversary may become yet another in a long series of stresses on our friendship with Israel. My message today is that however we remember 67, I hope we can still be friends – still care about each other, still affirm our shared history and fate and culture as Jews, and still find ways to help our friend -- through visits, through our tzedakah choices, through following Israeli news and culture, and more.

One thing we generally don't do with our true friends is find ways to punish them when we disagree with them. That is how I view the BDS movement, as an attempt to punish one side of a very difficult, complex, decades-long conflict for which there is plenty of blame to go around and for which a clear oppressor-victim narrative is lacking. As a friend of Israel who considers the occupation to be a disaster for both peoples, I will never support efforts to single out Israel for punishment. That's just not what friends are for.

However, friends are also not there simply to be "yes-men". If we see our friend doing something that we feel is disastrous for them or for others or both, we have a duty to say something. We should have the humility to acknowledge as we do so that we're not necessarily right, and we should also accept that our friend might not necessarily heed our advice, indeed might have and express their own opinions about ways in which we're going off the rails, and that is their right. A true friendship isn't only about being a cheerleader for the other. Sometimes it's about having tough, honest, loving conversations when we think they're about to drive off a cliff. Friends don't let friends drive off cliffs, not if they can help it. So as the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary approaches next spring, Diaspora Jews on the left, on the right, and everywhere in the middle on the political spectrum, will have an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of this milestone anniversary, and on how best to be a friend to Israel at this time.

And now, a reflection on God. Talk about a long, fraught, often dysfunctional relationship! Going all the way back to the days of the Bible, the Jewish people's relationship with God has been complex: some moments of great closeness and intimacy, but also lots of infidelity, anger, punishment, abandonment, and sorrow. Very often we haven't done what God wanted us to do, and very often God hasn't done what we've wanted God to do. In the modern period, add in the stresses of archeological and scientific doubts cast about the biblical narrative, add in more than the usual sensitivity in the post-Holocaust era over the ancient issue of why bad things happen to good people, add in ever-increasing alienation from religious institutions in the wider society in which we live, add in resentment over all the horrible things that have been and continue to be done in the name of God – and you've got a recipe for a relationship already strained breaking down completely. Can the notion of friendship salvage it?

Does this metaphor of friendship, with its connotations of mutuality and equality and intimacy, even fit when we think about our relationship with God? A traditional critique might claim that there is something quite chutzpadik about the idea that a human being could be friends with God, who is after all רבונו של עולם, the Master of the Universe -- especially at this time of year when God is said to be judging us for our deeds. Does that sound like a friend?

Well, I don't know that judging necessarily disqualifies this idea of friendship. Friends make claims on each other all the time; friends judge each other all the time. There are expectations that go along with relationship, some of which we live up to and some of which we inevitably don't. Periodically, we need to ask, how have we responded to our friends' claims on us? Do we try hard enough to be there for them? Do we sometimes find their demands impossible to meet? How do we maintain our own integrity as individuals in the face of the claims of our friend on our loyalty, our time, our energy, our sense of right and wrong, our emotional capacity? These are questions we need to ask periodically about our human friendships, and they can certainly be asked about our friendship with God. And the rabbis put these questions squarely on our Rosh Hashanah table by choosing the story of Akedat Yitzhak to be read on this holiday, a narrative which more than any other provokes the conversation about what we do in the face of conflicting claims.

This Rosh Hashanah, I would like to put forward the proposal that the metaphor of friendship could save, or at least heal, our relationship with God in the modern period. Not "friend" like a Facebook friend, but true authentic relationship. I see the power of this metaphor in at least three areas:

First, this metaphor has long Jewish roots going back to Abraham, called in the Tanakh "friend of God",<sup>9</sup> and also to the Song of Songs, interpreted since ancient times as being about the mutual relationship of love between God and the Jewish people. If one of the challenges that has led many Jews to distance themselves from God, or drop their belief in God altogether, has been the image of God as King or Judge, angrily punishing the people for their transgressions, then we should be aware that a different kind of image is available for us to draw on from our tradition as well – an image of closeness, of intimacy, and of caring especially well suited to the contemporary period. This is the kind of image of God which can help us at times when we are feeling lost or lonely, to know that we do have a friend. A friend who, like our human friends, can't necessarily solve our problems for us but who cares deeply for us as we suffer, and basks in our accomplishments and successes as well. Someone who is partial to us, who is on our side, who is present for us. That is what a faith in God as Friend offer us.

Second, friendship is a category that can't be easily explained. It's often hard to isolate *why* certain people are our friends. Often really hard to pin down why we're attracted to them, or they to us. It's like the question of why we're attracted to a particular painting, why it evokes something in us,

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Chr.20:7, Is.41.8

and another doesn't. We just are.<sup>10</sup> The relationship of the Jewish people with God is also mysterious. Theologians and philosophers try, but at some point we have to accept that we won't be able to entirely explain it. Many metaphors have been offered over the centuries to try and capture it, we see so many in the liturgy of the High Holy Days – parent and child, king and subject, master and servant, shepherd and flock, judge and defendant, potter and clay. Each has its power, none entirely sums it up. Today I'm putting forward the ancient metaphor of ידידים. We're old friends -- who've been through a lot together and at the new year we renew this hard-to-explain friendship and our commitment to continue to grow and learn from each other.

Finally, true friendship is about finding a balance between affirming the importance of the friendship, and also recognizing that the friendship isn't the only thing about the other person. We do need to leave space for other people and other things in the lives of our friends. This has been one of the challenges posed by some traditional teachings about God which assume that when God is in the room, everything else and everyone else has to give way, because God is *El Kana* – a jealous God and a consuming fire. My teacher Rabbi Donniel Hartman calls this phenomenon "God-Intoxication." He published a book this year provocatively entitled Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself. Rabbi Hartman's thesis is that when there's a conflict between God's claims, and our ethical obligations to other human beings, we need to prioritize our responsibility to God's many children – and indeed that's what God Godself actually wants us to do. "God-Intoxication" has led to much evil which has been committed in God's name over the centuries by adherents of all religions, including ours and including in our own time, because they ignore basic ethical principles in the name of fulfilling their understanding of God's word. There are grounds for prioritizing God's demands over our ethical obligations in ancient Jewish texts, the Akedah seems to be one clear example. But there are also grounds for a friendship model in our vast textual tradition, and this model precludes God-Intoxication. God as our true friend knows and accepts that we have many claims on us – parents and children and work and neighbours and community and country and people all over the world who are in trouble. Because God is our friend God cares about all those things too, because we care about them.

But putting God second, if we buy that idea, doesn't mean we can ignore God altogether in the face of all those other claims. God our friend also wants us to leave some room just for Him. One of the ways we express our friendship with God, one of the ways we make room for God, is through davening, together in community as we are today, and as many of us do

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<sup>10</sup> Nehamas, p.184

throughout the year, deriving great sustenance from our participation in the community of people who are regularly honouring their Jewish tradition in this way. Another way is through observance of the traditional mitzvot of our people like Shabbat and kashrut and tefillin and sukkah. Another way might be through meditation or chanting, or writing poetry. Another way is by practicing God's commandments of tzedakah and social justice in the world. By making space for these things in the midst of our busy lives we are affirming and renewing our friendship with God.

I hope that wherever you've been in your relationship with God in the past, whether God has been an active part of your life, or whether you've felt quite distant, or somewhere in between, that this new year will be one in which you think about what it might mean for God to be your friend. The Talmud says if you haven't seen your friend in 30 days, you should say the blessing Shehecheyanu. But if you haven't seen them in a year, you should say *מחיה המתים* – you should bless God for "reviving the dead"<sup>11</sup>. This new year, let's give each other the strength to nurture or revive our friendship with God, keep it alive and dynamic and ready to engage with all the challenges that friendships inevitably must.

A Greek proverb says, "Show me your friends and I'll show you yourself." I believe that our friendship with God, that our friendship with Israel, that our friendship with our deepest soulmates if we are blessed to have such can help us know ourselves better, can help us become more conscious, more aware, more fully human. That is the gift of friendship.

So you've waited all this time to find out what happened with Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan. It is in many ways a sad ending, but not, I think, without its note of comfort. The Talmud recounts that one day Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan had a dispute in the Beit Midrash about a certain halachic point. In anger during this argument, Rabbi Yochanan referred to Resh Lakish's past as a brigand, and Resh Lakish responded by denying that he had received any benefit whatsoever from having been Yochanan's student. Resh Lakish felt so wounded by this terrible argument that he got sick and died. Rabbi Yochanan fell into a state of deep grief over the loss of his friend, rending his garments and weeping. One of his students tried to comfort him by saying that in regard to the original halachic dispute, he, Yochanan, had after all been correct in his halachic analysis. But Yochanan said, "when I used to state a law, Resh Lakish used to raise 24 objections, to which I gave 24 answers which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the law – while you just come and tell me I'm right. I already know I'm right!" He cries out *היכא את בר לקישא*, *היכא את בר לקישא* "Where are you son of

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<sup>11</sup> Berachot 58b.

Lakish? Where are you son of Lakish?" until he lost his mind and eventually he too died.

It's a tragic story, that's for sure. The comfort that I take from it is in Yochanan's recognition that he didn't actually want a yes man, what he wanted, indeed what he needed, was a friend. Someone to challenge him, but also to stand by him. Someone who was very different from him, but someone he had grown to love.

May 5777 be a year in which we feel renewed gratitude for our friends. May God's help and our own openness allow us to deepen our relationship with our true friends, or make new ones, no matter what our age. In the spirit of the season, may we find the place in our hearts to forgive our friends for the ways in which they have hurt us, and may they similarly forgive us. May we learn how to be better friends to others, as we think about the power of this complex relationship we call friendship. May it be a year in which our friendship as Diaspora Jews with the people of Medinat Yisrael only deepens. And may it be a year in which our friendship with God comes to nourish us in ways both old and new. Shanah Tovah.