One of my favorite things that I do at TBZ is engaging with our students in the Beit Rabban program. On Wednesday afternoons, sixty energetic students come racing through the TBZ doors. We learn Hebrew, talk about the holidays, and discuss what it means to find holiness and wonder in the world. We sing and we make art. But the truth is, whenever parents ask me about their students at Beit Rabban, they don’t ask about the lesson plans. They usually ask: “is my child making any friends?”

We, as teachers, plan lessons about the Torah and the wisdom of the Rabbis, yet on a fundamental level we know that showing up in this building is essentially about building community. It’s about making friends, and forming bonds that will carry us through the good times and the hard times.

There is a story that is told about Rabbi Haim of Romshishok in Lithuania. It was said that he was given the ability to visit heaven and hell. He first went to hell and saw a dining room of tables, and at the table sat people who were pale and moaning out of starvation. Each person sat in front of a plate of delicious hot food, and each person had a spoon in their hand with which to eat. Their hands, though, were locked in wooden slats which made it unable to raise their elbow and eat. They could lower the spoons into their bowls, but they were unable to feed themselves, constrained by the slats. They sat in silence, and they were starving.

When Rabbi Chaim went to heaven, he noticed that the conditions were almost exactly the same. People sat in tables, spoons in hands, and arms locked in wooden slats. And though almost everything was the same, no one looked hungry at all. Rabbi Chaim moved closer to understand what was happening, and he instantly understood what was different. The people in heaven would reach down into their bowls with their own spoons, and then would lean forward and feed the person who sat directly across from them. The people worked together, and no one in heaven was hungry.

Judaism is a team sport. We need a beit din of 3 to rule on a Jewish legal case, we need a minyan of ten to have a prayer service, and we need a group of ten to preform a circumcision ceremony to welcome someone into the community.

And look at all of the commandments in the Torah. Many of them are about prayer and sacrifice, but most of our mitzvot outline the basic principles of living in a good society with other people.

We can’t do it alone.

I think Judaism is set up this way because, not only can we not do Judaism alone, we can’t really do much of anything alone. I was speaking to a member of our community yesterday after Shabbat services. And they told me that one of the things they love best about TBZ, is that it no matter who is at services on any particular morning there will always be people that will wave hello. People are always willing to check-in and have a conversation. Hearing this made me so happy. This is the textbook definition of what it means to be in sacred community. We acknowledge how deeply we need each other, and then we begin to do the small things that show that we care about one another. We make it known that we are here to support one another.
Tonight, we will read the words:

בחיים
חפץ
מלך
לחיים

Remember us for life, O God who desires life.

Like so much of the High holiday liturgy, we are praying in the plural. I am not asking to remember me for us, but for all of us. And maybe, I am not really even asking for God to remember us each individually, but collectively. To give us as a community, the strength and the power this year to sustain each other. It is an acknowledgement that if we truly want to build a world from love as we continuously sing, we need to start by strengthening the bonds that are right here before us.

In a moment, we are going to invite everyone to greet the people around you. We hope you will take a minute to find someone you have not seen before to introduce yourself, and to say sincerely, “I am so happy you are here.”

When you say these words, “I am so happy you are here,” We are really saying to someone, “I see you.” We are saying, “It is important that you are here, and community desperately needs you.” And, this is what we are about at TBZ.

As we continue through these sacred days of fear and awe, we know that we enter this holy work together. That a major part of the reason we are able to find God on these days, is because we have found each other.

I hope, just as I hope for my students at Beit Rabban, that you have found friends here. And that as we enter this work of repair and introspection, we acknowledge the teshuva of Ben Adam L’chavero, the repairing of relationships between us and those in our community. This is what it means for us to be a holy people.

So now we will sing the words Hareni Mkabel Ali,

“I hereby take upon myself
The will of my creator,
To love my neighbor as myself.

Before we enter into holy relationship with God, let this be our task.