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When Friendship Unravels

We ran into each other on the street. She was on one side. I was on the other. It had been weeks since we'd spoken to each other. We attempted awkward conversation. Our friendship had been precious to me, but in the last year we had been growing apart. We endured strained conversations and difficult email exchanges. And then, forced friendliness followed by weeks and weeks of silence. No acts of betrayal, no gut-wrenching conflict, just a subtle pulling away. Her lack of communication made the friendship feel flimsy, like it hadn't been important.

The only thing I could think about, as we chatted about kids, summer travels, and work, was why she didn't cross over to my side of the street. Such a simple gesture would have signaled that she cared, that she wanted to cross the gulf between us. I considered crossing over myself. But I was always the one who was always trying, reaching out, taking emotional risks. Maybe it was too much to ask for, but I wanted a little reciprocity.

Friendship is considered sacred in Jewish tradition. Friends offer each other support, loyalty, protection, love, and guidance. In the Bible, David and Jonathan commit themselves fully to each other. We read, "Jonathan and David made a pact, because Jonathan loved David as himself." (I Samuel 18:3) We also have the story of Ruth, who follows her mother-in-law Naomi: "Wherever you will go, I will go. Wherever you will lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God shall be my God." (Ruth 1:16-17)

Modern philosophers urge friendship as well. Alexander Nehamas writes,

The benefits of friendship are many. The love friendship provokes gives depth and color to life; the loyalty it inspires erodes the barriers of selfishness. It provides companionship and a safety net when we are in various kinds of trouble; it offers sympathy for our misfortunes, discretion for our secrets, encouragement for our efforts. (*On Friendship*, p. 187)

Similarly, A. C. Grayling writes,

A loyal friend whom one trusts can tell us when we are going wrong, reprove us, advise us, can suggest a course of action when we are wavering in a dilemma, can stand up for us or do something for us when we need an ally. She can also tell us helpful lies when we need reassurance or calming down. (*Friendship*, p. 178)

Current research argues that having friends is good for our health. A Facebook friend you've never met doesn't count. It's the close, significant friends who impact our health and our

happiness. Evolutionary psychologist, Robin Dunbar, says you need three to five of them for optimal wellbeing. Having friends is as important to your health as quitting smoking. It is significantly more important than exercise. (*Time Magazine*, Markham Heid, "[You Asked, How Many Friends Do I Need?](#)" March 18, 2015)

The Hebrew root of the word "friend," *chaver*, has the connotation of joining and forming deep connections. Being attached to someone.

We create different kinds of bonds at different stages of our lives. Children, teenagers, and young adults often make friends easily. They have time to explore new social situations, with fewer responsibilities than their parents. As they grow, friendships become more complex. Dramatic conflicts can erupt as their identities evolve and they form new friendships. These decades are infused with self-discovery and transformation.

Most retirees and the elderly also have time to seek out and cultivate friendships. Some reconnect with old friends. Different challenges emerge, though, like losing friends as a result of illness and death. Social isolation hinders friendship formation for many. Strong friendships are increasingly important in old age and significantly increase life expectancy.

For those of us in the middle, in that ambiguous period called middle age, meeting people and making friends can be particularly difficult. *New York Times* reporter Alex Williams writes,

As people approach midlife, the days of youthful exploration, when life felt like one big blind date, are fading. Schedules compress, priorities change and people often become pickier in what they want in their friends.

In the same article sociologist Rebecca G. Adams explains,

As external conditions change, it becomes tougher to meet the three conditions that sociologists...have considered crucial to making close friends: proximity; repeated, unplanned interactions; and a setting that encourages people to let their guard down and confide in each other. (*New York Times*, "[Why Is It Hard to Make Friends Over Thirty?](#)" July 13, 2012)

When we no longer live close to friends, run into them at random times, and find ourselves in environments where we can freely share personal details about our lives, our ability to make friends is diminished. We juggle work responsibilities, care for parents or children, and navigate a myriad of other obligations. Hanging out with friends ends up at the bottom of the to-do list.

I don't know whether Facebook helps us make and maintain friends, but I am wary of the promises it offers. It seems to give us a false sense of what friendship is. I really want to know whether my 1,255 friends will bring me a lasagna if there's a death in my family. Will they call me up when they're having a bad day? Can I call *them* when *I'm* having a bad day?

We are more connected than ever before, and social media opens possibilities for new and meaningful relationships. Relatives in far-flung countries find each other. Childhood friends

reconnect in old age. Strangers meet at a party and hope to become friends. With only a few swipes they can enter each other's online orbit.

But often, Facebook friendships are cheap. Just a click of the mouse – no responsibility, no commitment. Easy come easy go. We cultivate a particular image of ourselves with cool photos, and our friends click “like” – or maybe even “love.” The writer, Andrew O'Hagan, comments on this phenomenon: “You can know everything that's going on in people's lives without knowing a single thing going on in their hearts.” (*New York Times*, [“Reflections on True Friendship,”](#) November 23, 2016)

It's hard to make friends, and many of us don't have enough of them. In this country, the number of people who say they have *no* close friends has tripled in recent decades. (Heid, [“You Asked, How Many Friends Do I Need?”](#))

We are in the midst of a loneliness epidemic.

Thousands of years ago, Ecclesiastes warned us about this:

Two are better off than one because they have a greater benefit from their earnings. For if they fall, the one will lift up the other; but woe to the one who is alone and falls, with no companion to lift him up. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

We live in a society that prides itself on individualism, tells us that our needs must always come first, allows us to shirk responsibility to others outside our immediate families. No wonder it's difficult to create solid, intimate friendships.

My friend, who I encountered on the street, was one of the few close friends I had made since I came out of the haze of having young children. I had friends from college and rabbinical school, and friends from when I first moved to Madison. But working, and raising young children, and spending time with my partner was so overwhelming that there was little time or energy left for new friendships.

Congregations, at their best, can address these challenges. They can work against the trend of individualism and have a unique potential to create real community. They can give people opportunities to meet each other, spend time with one another, develop a shared sense of purpose, and, perhaps, form lasting friendships.

In the sixteen years I have been here at Shaarei Shamayim, I have watched many friendships bloom. Both the kind you'd expect, like parents of young children getting together for Shabbat dinner, and also the rare, cross-generational ones. There are friends who show up for each other at times of loss. There are friends who show up for each other at times of celebration.

Congregational life invites us into new social circles, generates unlikely conversations, fosters those repeated encounters we need to get to know each other. It's the chit-chat after a committee meeting, the exchange of ideas during Torah study, and the laughter of volunteers washing dishes that count.

Pirkei Avot instructs us: “Appoint for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend” (Pirkei Avot 1:6). It doesn’t say *have* friends, but *acquire* friends. We have to go out, find activities we enjoy doing, spend time with other people, invest energy, follow up, get dissed, try again, share of ourselves, and inquire of others’ well-being.

Lest we think there is a quick way to do this, researcher Jeffrey Hall has found that it takes fifty hours of socializing to turn an acquaintance into a casual friend. To move from casual friend to genuine friend takes another forty hours. To get to best friend status, or even really close friend status, requires 200 hours. (*The Independent*, Olivia Petter, [“This Is How Many Hours It Takes to Become Best Friends, According to New Study,”](#) April 6, 2018)

Friendships come in all shapes and sizes, with many different textures. Some of us share our deepest secrets with our friends. We crave emotional intimacy, and we are good at creating it. Others of us aren’t so comfortable making ourselves vulnerable. We are content to do fun activities with friends. There are friends to be had for all of us.

The writer, Tim Lott, describes a young woman and her fiancé planning their wedding in his novel, *White City Blue*. The fiancé asks, “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 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 who you stay with because you feel sorry for them. There are acquaintances who are on probation as friends. There are –

“‘Enough!’ he finally interrupts her.” (Nehamas, pp. 101-102)

In spite of this young woman’s valiant attempt to classify different friendships, they defy easy categorization and are pretty unique in nature.

Unlike relationships with our family, they are voluntary. We choose them. We gravitate towards friends because we have something in common with them and we enjoy their company. It’s not necessarily the case with our family. We don’t choose our parents or our siblings or our children. The threshold for walking away from these relationships is much higher. Drifting apart or getting in a disagreement usually isn’t grounds for ending relationships with a family member.

And unlike marriage or other romantic relationships, friendship has no formal structure and few expectations. Even if we truly love our friends, we will likely move away from them if we get a job in a different city. We might not communicate regularly with them, just because we get

busy. We don't usually share a house or a bank account or a child with a friend. There are no rituals that mark the beginning or the end of a friendship. Often, they evolve gradually.

We can get in and out of friendships pretty easily. Sociologist Gerald Mollenhorst found that while our friendship networks generally remain the same size over time, we lose *half* our close friends every seven years and replace them with other friends. (*Science Daily*, "[Half of Your Friends Lost in Seven Years, Social Network Study Finds](#)," May 27, 2009)

The death of a friendship, it seems, is really quite natural.

When my older daughter was six months old, I became friends with a woman who also had a six-month old daughter. One of the few I made in these years. We each took care of the other's baby four hours a week. We cooked dinner for each other's family every week. When I went into labor, she took care of my daughter when I went to the hospital.

But once our children entered kindergarten, we started spending less time together. The rhythms of our lives changed. We developed different priorities. She admitted to me that her husband didn't like my cooking.

The friendship faded, and while there was loss for the friendship we had, it wasn't that painful. It didn't require reconciliation. We just mutually moved on.

Often, though, the collapse of a friendship causes great distress.

Nehamas writes, "...[L]ike every form of love, friendship begets joy and contentment but it also leads to affliction and misery – the dull aches of abandonment, the sharp stabs of betrayal, the agonizing dilemmas of loyalty..." (Nehamas, p. 187)

When we invite someone into our lives, develop strong attachments, and establish trust with them, they begin to inhabit a central place in our lives. When friendship fails, our friend's absence leaves a gaping hole.

Some broken friendships scream for reconciliation. There were misunderstandings and miscalculations. We acted with hostility. We were too judgmental. We couldn't handle our friend's criticisms. We let our anger spin out of control. We need to apologize for our part in the conflict and make amends.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur beckon us to reconcile fractured relationships. We are taught, over and over, to reach out to those whom we have hurt.

"Al chet shechatanu lifanecha be'hona-at rey-ah – For the sin we have committed against You by wronging a friend."

On Yom Kippur we acknowledge the sins of hard-heartedness, careless speech, deceit, and arrogance. It's not enough to utter the prayers. We have to pick up the phone, send an email, a text, a message. Go for a walk. Apologize. Make things right.

We don't try once and give up. We're not off the hook, instructs Maimonides, until we try three times.

Making things right doesn't mean being friends forever. Some broken friendships should be put to rest. They are no longer mutual. They are unbalanced. They make us miserable. Hanging out has become a bore. We feel we know everything about the person, and we no longer care if there's more to learn.

The writer Courtney E. Martin explains:

We make these big life transitions and sometimes it's hard to hold one another's hands while we're traveling at different speeds in different directions. Sometimes we stop speaking the same language. Sometimes our way of seeing one other stays frozen in the past, even as we barrel roll into the future. (On Being, "[Struggling to Find the Silver Lining in Severed Friendship](#)," February 20, 2015)

Even so, I think friendship is worth it. In spite of the heartache, in spite of the awkward conversations. Friendship is really worth it, even if its shelf life is sometimes only a meager seven years. Friendship brings with it great risk. The future is always uncertain. But we need friends. We need those attachments.

I wish my friend had crossed the street. I wish she had extended herself just a little. But she didn't. I finally decided that the forced friendliness was too much to bear. I knew it wasn't likely we would be really close again, but I wasn't ready to walk away from the friendship for good. And I felt a pressing need to make things right. So I struck up a conversation with her the next time our paths crossed. I told her, directly and with an open heart, that it was good to see her again. I thought that was a beginning, a way to move things forward.

It was really good to talk. I loved the familiarity. We picked up right where we left off. But it wasn't really the reconciliation I had expected. I wanted some sort of acknowledgement of the hurt, some kind of honest reckoning of what had gone wrong. That was more than she was willing to do.

I was glad, though, that I had created an opening, that future conversations would be a bit easier, that a more complete reconciliation was at least possible in the future. I prefer heartbreak to loneliness. And I would do it all again.

Gmar chatimah tovah.