

# Rayut / Sacred Companionship: the art of being human

Rabbi Steven Kushner  
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It's a "sweet-sixteen" party. The grandmother, who personally related this story to me, notices that her 16-year-old granddaughter is sitting at a table, smart-phone in hand, busily typing away with her thumbs. "What are you doing?" the grandmother asks. "I'm *texting* my best friend," the granddaughter replies. "Just a minute," the grandmother objects. "Do you mean to tell me you didn't invite your *best* friend to your sweet-sixteen party?" "Of course I did," the granddaughter replies. "She's sitting right over there."

Does this sound familiar? Do you have kids who now use their thumbs to talk, even when vocal communication is not merely possible but easier? That, of course, is the question. Does modern technology make communication easier—with cell phones, text messaging, twittering, emailing—or does it actually make it more complex? This dynamic, of impersonal electronic *talking*, should be alarming to us. Forget the fact that we've lost the ability to write longhand. (Kids, your parents will tell you what "longhand" means after the service.) Never mind that we've abandoned the beautiful art form of "correspondence". (My brother and I still have all the letters my parents wrote to each other during World War II.) No matter that we've forgotten what it's like to have to wait to get to a gas station to call someone on the phone. The consequences of instant non-verbal communication may be, even in the short-term, devastating. As Deborah Gussoff suggested to me the other day, this generation that is growing up with such impersonal means of "talking" may find the kind of communication that is so essential to a meaningful relationship—where you actually look the other person in the eye and *speak* to them—very challenging, especially at those times when understanding and empathy are needed the most.

Now don't get me wrong. Far be it from me—as one who has purchased more Palm Pilots, Treos and iPhones than your average citizen of Virginia buys guns—to stand up here and preach the evils of cellular and computer technology. On the contrary, I love this stuff. And what's more, as some of you will recall from a sermon I gave this past June, I will forever be indebted to the Internet and Google and Facebook for reuniting me with my childhood best friend, Howie Graham. In fact it wasn't until Howie (who now goes by the name "Howard") shared with me the pain he felt at leaving behind his best friend when he moved to Los Angeles in 1962 that I came to realize that his moving away from Detroit was my very first experience of *loss*. And were it not for search engines and social technology Howie and I would still be distant memories of little boys in black-and-white photographs.

And yet it is interesting, and maybe it should be even just a bit concerning, that as a consequence of these modern marvels we have turned the word "friend" into a verb. As soon as I heard from Howie (via an email to my Temple computer), I immediately searched him out on Facebook, saw a photo of his father until I realized it was just Howie 48 years later, and—of course—I then "friended" him. To which he then "confirmed" my overture. Touching, isn't it?

Now I'll share with you something that actually *is* touching. And I'll tell you in advance, it's not dramatic. It's not the kind of story you'll feel compelled to remember, to talk about after the

service. But the reason I'm telling you this is, frankly, because I will remember it for the rest of my life.

This past summer a very good friend of mine left me a voice-mail. It seemed, to the casual listener, nothing remarkable. "How are you?" his message asked. "I hope everything is okay," he went on. It was the way most voice messages start out. But then he said, "Maybe we can get together? I need to talk about some stuff." Now even here the words themselves were pretty innocuous. But I knew something was up. So we got together. Like we normally would. We schmoozed for a while, just catching up. And then it came. As I had presumed it would. He was upset with me. Not angry. Not mad. But hurt. Because I had failed him, and not really in a way that would have changed our lives but certainly in a way that might have called into question my claim to be his friend. And he knew, as did I, that this communication had to be not in an email, or a text message, not even on the phone, but *panim el panim* – face-to-face. And by the time our "confrontation" (in the best possible sense of that word) had concluded, we were back on track. *In sync*, so to speak.

This is what I think: the relationships that comprise our lives, the connections we have with other people, are the most essential elements of our existence. They may not comprise the *meaning* of our lives; it is only through the choices we make that we can give *meaning* to this God-given gift we call life. But life's *purpose*, I'm pretty sure, is to do nothing more than to connect with other human beings, to form bonds with them, to heal their wounds and embrace their love and our failure to succeed at this challenge, which we all do quite well, is the primary reason we gather on these Days of Awe. Our existence as human beings is to transcend our differences, to see the beauty in the other, to make ourselves one. Only then, as the prophet Zechariah continually reminds us at the end of every worship service, will God truly be One. On *that* day. A messianic vision. A messianic hope.

The text I want to look at today comes from the wedding service. It's the seventh of the seven blessings (the *Sheva Berakhot*) that are invoked upon the newlywed couple. In its whole, the blessing is a prayer for all things good. This is our wish for these two individuals as they embark on their journey together. In particular there is a string of ten nouns, ten things we hope for in the marriage:

*Sasson, Simcha, Gila, Rina, Ditzza, Chedva...*

The first six words each of which basically mean Happiness. The standard translation renders them "Joy, Gladness, Mirth, Song, Delight and Rejoicing." These are the feelings we seek, the emotions we pray we will know. And then come the last four, which are the environments that foster and nurture those feelings of the heart:

*Ahava, Achava, Shalom and Rayut.*

All four nouns are suggestive of relationship. "Love, Harmony, Peace and Companionship." These are the states of being that can only exist *between* people. These are the conditions that make for "Joy, Gladness, Mirth, Song, Delight and Rejoicing." In their totality, these ten attributes form a kind of liturgical harmonic, a rhythmic cadence of things we all wish for our kids. A la Tony Bennett, "The Good Life." But there's one thing that seems a bit odd about the sequence of these words.

You'd think that of all that we hope for, of the dreams we espouse, the wish for *Shalom*, for peace would be at the top of the list (or in this case, at the *end* of the list). Isn't *Shalom* the

endgame of humanity? Isn't *Shalom* the be-all and end-all of human existence? And yet the seventh blessing doesn't end with *Shalom* but rather with *Rayut*. Peace—at least according to the *Sheva Berakhot*—is not the ultimate goal, instead it's *Rayut*, Companionship – the simple yet amazingly difficult task of people learning to live together.

Back on July 4 Todd May wrote a fascinating piece (in an *electronic blog*, no less) for the New York Times *Opinionator* entitled, "Friendship in an Age of Economics." Dr. May, who is a professor of philosophy at Clemson University, suggests that we engage in three basic kinds of relationships. In an age so influenced by the drive to succeed, in a time where we are wont to evaluate ourselves by income and quantity, the first two categories are rooted in *economic* values.

First is what he calls *Consumer* relationships, so characterized by the pleasure they bring us. We choose friends based on how much we enjoy their presence. One could even say we *acquire* friends and, as those of you familiar with Facebook, we even *collect* friends. The second type is what he terms *Entrepreneurial* relationships, so defined by how such alliances will help us, particularly in our business endeavors. These friendships revolve around our careers or our paths to professional and financial success. *Consumer* relationships exist in the present, the *joy* of the moment, while *Entrepreneurial* relations are geared toward the future. These categories, May points out, parallel the first two of Aristotle's three categories of friendship: pleasure and utility.

But Aristotle identifies a third category of relationship—true friendship. Here the alliance has neither benefit nor utility, and its focus, "although lived in the present and assumed to continue into the future, also [has a deep] tie to the past." "*Shared experience*," Professor May writes, "not just common amusement or advancement, is the ground of friendship." The problem, however, is that this third category of relationship—what I think is the equivalent of that last and the ultimate of those ten values of the wedding blessing, *Rayut*, and what I will translate as *sacred companionship*—is "threatened in a society...where we are encouraged to look upon those around us as the stuff of our current enjoyment or our future advantage." Such *sacred companionships* are threatened, he suggests, "...when we are led to believe that friendships without a recognizable gain are, in an economic sense, irrational."

The illustration May uses for this third category, this *Rayut*, is an incident from his own youth. He recalls, at age seventeen, how he had to have surgery for a herniated disc. The day after the surgery he awoke, perhaps even surprised, to find a friend sitting in a chair across from his bed. Now, years later, he realizes that such friendship is the substance of life's sacred potential. Quoting the critic John Berger who once said of one of his friendships, "We were not somewhere between success and failure; we were elsewhere..." Todd May concludes, "To be able to sit by the bed of another, watching him sleep, waiting for nothing else, is to understand where *else* might be."

This, I believe, is the essence of what it means to be human. To bind oneself to another, for no reason save that she or he is an other, another sacred being. Another human being. And it is through such bonding that we come to actualize our potential—as human beings. This, I believe, is why we exist. To aspire to *Rayut*, sacred companionship.

But what does it really mean, *Rayut*? It's not the normative word we use for friend in Hebrew, not in Biblical days, not in the rabbinic or medieval periods, not today. The word for friend in Hebrew is *chaveir*. In fact, the only other place where I can think the word *Rayut* is used

prominently in Torah is in the verse from Leviticus, *V'ahavta l'rayakha kamokha*—Love your (not your “neighbor” but your) *rayah* as yourself. And based on its usage in the wedding blessing, I’ve got to conclude that the text in Leviticus means more than just being a good “neighbor”. We are commanded to “love your *rayah*”. *V'ahavta l'rayakha kamokha*—Love your *rayah* as yourself, for many, is at the very core of Judaism, the foundation of the Golden Rule. This is clearly more than ordinary friendship. *Rayut* must be suggestive of something deeper, something more profound.

The root of the word is *resh-ayin-heh*. But what’s odd, yet (as you will see) amazingly revelatory, is that the core meaning of this word is anything but simple. In fact there are four specific words that derive directly from these root letters, each one spelled exactly the same way (including the vowels), so they clearly have something to do with each other yet they seem to have such markedly different even contradictory meanings. But when you look deeper, and even more when you take these four different words in their totality, do you ultimately begin to understand and appreciate the true and sacred essence of *Rayut*.

In its most simple and basic form, the word is *Ra’ah* (*resh-ayin-heh*). It means “to shepherd”. But *ra’ah* also means “to follow”. And “to crush or destroy”. And finally, *ra’ah* means “evil” (as many of us will recognize in its more common state, *ra*). I want to suggest to you that these four (seemingly) radically different meanings of the same word—to shepherd, to follow, to crush and evil—taken not individually but as a whole, comprise to form the essence of what I believe to be the ultimate purpose of human existence, *Rayut*. They are the four pieces necessary to forging not merely a healthy relationship but a sacred companionship.

First: To Shepherd. This should be familiar to anyone who knows the twenty-third psalm in Hebrew. *Adonai Ro’i*. The Lord is my Shepherd. *Ro’i. Ra’ah*. All sacred relationships must have someone who cares for the other, someone who protects and guides. Whether in a marriage or a parent-child relationship or a sibling relationship or a friendship, the need and even more important the desire to care for the other must be paramount. As *Shir Ha-Shirim*, the Song of Songs teaches, the ideal perspective of sacred love is *Ani l’Dodi v’Dodi Li*—I am to my beloved and [then] my beloved is to me. The sequence is essential to its understanding. First I am to be in a position of service, of caring, of providing guidance and direction to my beloved. First I think about what I can do for the other. *Ani l’dodi*. I am to my beloved. Then, only *after* I have fulfilled this mandate, can I even wonder about what my beloved might do for me. *V’dodi li. Then* my beloved is to me. Such is the first state of *Rayut*. To shepherd.

On the other hand, *Ra’ah* also means to follow. I can only presume that implied here is that this *Ra’ah* is the mirror side of shepherding. In all healthy relationships one must know when to take the back seat, to allow the other to lead. On its surface it might seem to suggest passivity, but it takes much more energy. When you love someone, your instinct is to *do* for them. It takes much more effort to follow their lead, to resist the impulse to take charge. The kabbalists suggest that God’s greatest act of love was *tzimtzum*, the act of self-withdrawal. Isaac Luria taught that in the beginning all there was was God. Nothing else. So that for there to be a universe God had to withdraw into God’s Self. As my brother wrote so beautifully, it is the process whereby one makes her or himself smaller—in order that another may grow. How hard yet how loving it is to step back and let our children learn to walk on their own. And this must be true for all loving relationships. To receive love is just as essential as to give it.

But how then are we to understand *Ra’ah* in this context of sacred companionship when the word means to crush or to shatter? How might this state of the word apply to a relationship of love? This is what I think. I think that ultimately no relationship can truly exist (let alone grow)

unless each partner is willing to crush, to shatter, to destroy the walls we have built up around ourselves. We are taught that the soul is encased, even trapped, within a husk-like shell called a *kellipah*. It's there for protection. But for the soul to emerge, for the divine spark hidden within to shine forth, for the soul to achieve its ultimate purpose of uniting with other souls, that shell must, out of necessity, be shattered. There can be no hope to become one with the other unless one is willing to destroy the *kellipah* that keeps the holy light in darkness. Clearly then, sacred companionship must entail a partnership of helping the other to shatter the walls in which we mistakenly take refuge.

And this brings me to the fourth and final state of this word *Ra'ah*. Evil. This is hard. Could the *Lashon Kodesh*—the sacred language of Hebrew—be implying that such divine relationships must, by necessity, involve the performance of evil? Or might it be suggesting that evil is simply so pervasive that no relationship can avoid it? Perhaps. Perhaps both are correct. For you see to understand the Jewish notion of evil, especially within the context of Jewish mysticism, one must appreciate that evil is a necessity. It is an essential part of the universe. Day and Night. Male and Female. Negative and Positive. *Ying* and *Yang*. Good and Evil. They are not merely opposites, they are all necessary opposites, essential to balance. In Kabbalah evil is not a bad thing; it is simply the *Sitra Achra*—the Other Side.

And so, in the story of the Garden of Eden, God says that *Adam* requires an *ezer k'negdo*. Usually this is rendered as “helpmate”, but literally it translates as “helper” (*ezer*) “as opposed to him” (*k'negdo*). Which is to say, we are all in need of another who stands in opposition to us, one who can see the things in us we cannot or refuse to see. The truly sacred companionship needs this oppositional partner to help us face ourselves in ways that allow us to grow. Of course such opposition, such *Ra'ah*, must be done with the tenderness and patience of true love. I speak from experience. I know that was at the heart of the day my friend and I sat down and he told me—and I might add lovingly and gently—of my failures that had caused him pain.

You know, when—during the course of our worship on these Days of Awe, and particularly when we engage in the moments of *silent* prayer—when we stop to pray, or think, or simply consider what it is we want from God, when we take that minute of silence we don't think about money or professional concerns, we don't occupy ourselves with thoughts of world peace and economic recovery. We think about our personal failures. And—don't you know—those personal failures always are inextricably tied to those we love. Because all we want of our lives is to get it right. To get it right with our partners, with our children, with our parents, with our dearest friends. Because this is why we exist. Yes to seek *Shalom*, to pursue peace. But the *Shalom* we seek, the harmony we so earnestly desire is the wholeness that so often eludes us with those we love. It's not really *Shalom* that's the endgame of human existence. It's *Rayut*. Sacred Companionship. And these Days of Awe are here not merely to remind us of its importance but also its urgency. It's another year. Another year that's gone by. Will this be the year when I finally get it right?

Samson Raphael Hirsch, the great nineteenth century rabbinic sage, put it this way:

“Life is one glorious chain of love, of giving and receiving, uniting all creatures. No one individual has power, or means, for itself. Rather, we receive in order to give and we give in order to receive, and therein do we find the accomplishment of the purpose of our existence.”

We were created for no the other reason than to love. And be loved. Sacred companionship.