

Choosing Connection
Yom Kippur 2020
Rabbi Sarah Graff

As most of you know, I always begin my Kol Nidre sermon with baseball. And tonight, it's quite easy, because I feel like I'm a baseball player, playing this season in a beautiful, but unfortunately, empty, ballpark.

This is not how the game is meant to be played. But like major league baseball, with our amazing tech team, we're making it work.

I suggested that we let you order cardboard cutouts of yourselves to place in the seats here. It could have been a great synagogue fundraiser. But actually Zoom is much better than cardboard cutouts. This way, you are here in the Sanctuary with me, live. And I get to be in your space live as well.

It is weird though to speak and not be able to hear your reactions. The baseball players get piped-in crowd noise - cheers when the home team gets a hit, collective sighs when a batter strikes out. I don't have that. But I do have a little monitor in the first pew here. So I'm hoping you'll communicate with your faces, your hands too if you want. To show me that you're out there and you're with me.

So without further ado, let's play ball.

This past December, it was discovered that my mom had a life-threatening tear in the mitral valve of her heart and that she would need open heart surgery to repair it. The surgery was set for January 21, and we decided that I would travel to Chicago without Scott and the girls. That way I could focus on helping my mom, and being with my dad - in the waiting room, and in the apartment we would stay in near the hospital, since it was an hour away from my parents' house. I flew in a day early, so I could spend

some good time with my parents before the surgery. Unfortunately, I promptly developed a cough and a fever, and what turned out to be the flu. Not COVID. Influenza A.

We all panicked about what this would mean for my mom. Had I endangered her with my germs? Could she still have the surgery? The doctors said yes. As long as she didn't have the flu, she could still have the surgery. And so, at 4:30 the next morning, my mom and dad left for Northwestern Hospital. And I lay in bed with a 103 degree fever, in my childhood bedroom, alone. The house creaked with the frigid winter wind. And my mind went to morbid places. Dreading a day when I might lie in that bed and my parents wouldn't come home again.

At 9am they took my mom into surgery. And I carefully made my way downstairs for food and medicine. I was about to take my first dose of Tamiflu, thinking maybe this would shorten my flu enough that I could make it to the hospital and at least see my mom before I returned to California. But then I started reading the fine print on the medicine. Common side effects: nausea, vomiting, dizziness, insomnia. Next thing I knew, I was sitting on the kitchen floor, head between my knees, ringing in my ears, feeling I was going to faint.

"Don't faint," I said to myself. "Don't faint. You can't faint. You're all alone."

I didn't faint. And my mom, thank God, came through the surgery well, and is hopefully watching me give this sermon now. But the ensuing days were tough - really tough for my mom, and also tough for me.

Despite the fact that I was in frequent touch with my family and with friends, I don't know if I've ever felt so alone.

I thought about members of our congregation who feel this way often. People who live alone and tell me their biggest fear is that something bad will happen to them, and no one will know.

And of course, now, with COVID, I think about all the people in hospitals and nursing homes who aren't allowed to have visitors, no matter how healthy they may be.

We are living in a time of unprecedented separation. I appreciate why we're doing it, but it's not how we humans are meant to live.

In the whole Torah, there are two things that are described as "lo tov," "not good." They both have to do with loneliness. In the creation story (Gen. 2:18), God says "Lo tov heyot adam levado," "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a partner for him." Then in Exodus (18:17), Moses's father-in-law Jethro sees Moses judging the people's disputes alone from morning until night, and Jethro tells him, "Lo tov hadavar hazeh," "It's not good this thing that you are doing.... The task is too heavy. You cannot do it alone."

These are not the only cases, though, where the Torah is sensitive to human loneliness. Over and over, God sees a person lonely and afraid and God says, "Don't be afraid, for I will be with you." Ehyeh Imach.

God says this to Isaac, after his father's death. God says it to Jacob, alone for the first time in his life. God says it to Moses, standing at the burning bush, terrified of the tasks that lie ahead of him. And God says it to Joshua, when Moses is about to die, and Joshua must now lead the people.

"Fear not. For I will be with you." Ehyeh Imach.

I want to lift up these words for us tonight so we can hear God saying them to us too. Now. And when we're feeling alone or scared. God is whispering to us, "I will be with you."

I want to lift up these words also as a way we can be like God.
We can say these words to other people.

I participated in a journaling workshop before the High Holidays this year, and I was asked the question: When have you felt you were your best self this year? Maybe take a moment and consider how you would answer the question. When did you feel like you were your best self this year?

My answer is ... when I showed up for people. Sometimes in person. Sometimes just by a text or phone call.

In August, the husband of my old camp friend Dina needed major surgery for an aneurysm on his aorta. I had been out of touch with Dina, both of us busy with jobs and kids, and her living in North Carolina. But two days before the surgery, I decided to call. I was sure she'd be too busy to talk, but she picked up the phone and we talked for an hour. She explained to me that due to Covid rules, she wouldn't be allowed to wait in the hospital during the surgery. She would actually drop Ethan off at the hospital the night before, and then go home and put her kids to bed. I asked her what she was going to do with herself during the surgery. She didn't know. "Can I call you?" I asked. "Yeah," she said. "That would be great."

So I didn't get to be in the waiting room for my mom's heart surgery, but I was in the waiting room for Ethan's heart surgery, just sitting on the phone with my friend, being with her, in the fear and the unknown.

"I will be with you," says God, when we're lonely and afraid.
And we can say it too.

A few weeks ago, our community lost a great model of this quality with the passing of Shirley Bob. Shirley knew how to reach out. She would notice who hadn't been in shul on shabbat for a few weeks, and she would call them. If they seemed like they would enjoy more regular attention, she would keep calling them, weekly. Shirley also knew how to receive a call. Whenever I called her, at some point, she would say, "Sarah, I'm so thrilled that you called me." It turns out, she said this, to everyone! And I believe that she meant it.

At the end of shiva, Shirley's son-in-law, David Waksberg, made an astute observation. He noted:

When people die in their 90's, large funerals are unusual, for the simple fact that most people who knew them are no longer around. There were 600 people at Shirley's funeral on Zoom. But even more remarkable is that probably 90% of them got to know her in the last 25 years. The endless stories of Shirley's kindness and good advice were almost entirely things she had done in her 70's, 80's, and 90's. Shirley lost her beloved husband Fred when she was 65. And she lost dozens of beloved friends in the 29 years since. But the number of friends she made in those years was literally in the hundreds. It helped that she ran a Judaica store with her daughter Ellen, where she had the opportunity to help people day in and day out. But she also sought out new friends - other widows to have shabbat dinner with, younger friends who didn't mind driving at night and would enjoy going to the theater with her, new people at shabbat morning services who she'd introduce herself to at kiddush.

Scott and I often say to each other, "What would Shirley Bob do?" Sometimes it relates to making the dinner table look nice or being on time to meet someone. But for me, the most important lesson is: we can be the one to reach out. We can get past the little voice in our head that says, "Who am I to go up to that person? I'm old. I'm young. I'm shy. They should come to me."

We can be the one to reach out. To welcome. To check in. To show up. We can be the one to say, I'll walk this path with you. "I will be with you."

I was talking with my dad about this sermon the other day, and he asserted that, in a way, Covid has been a positive force for human connection. Maybe because we are less busy with the usual activities of life. Maybe because we are more aware of our mortality. Many really are taking the time to reach out. My dad's brother, with whom he'd had a parting of ways some years ago, reached out to wish him a Happy New Year and reconnect. My own brothers, who struggled with each other growing up, are now going to parks together almost every weekend. My dad even feels that their neighborhood, which is predominantly African American, has changed for the better. When he and my mom go for walks, he feels that white people and black people are reaching out as never before. Waving, talking, trying to connect, masks and all.

So maybe Covid is really an opportunity. To reconcile. To repair. To be with each other in new ways.

I want to close by sharing an image from my daughters. Eliana talked about it in her bat mitzvah speech 2 ½ years ago. Chava (age 12) has subsequently taken it in her own direction and she wrote up her thoughts for me, so I could share them with you now.

Title: The Blanket of the World

I am a strand in a big blanket. Ima is a strand. Dada is a strand. Orli is one, and so is Eliana. We overlap. We weave together and we make a blanket. We are pulled together through our connection of family and love. Our blanket is a full blanket for us, but a blanket can always get bigger. Bubbie and Baboo are strands. Grammy and Timpa are strands. We weave together through our connection of love and visits, and even homemade cookies.

If you pull back more, you'll see a much bigger blanket. With strings of all different colors and lengths and textures, but all part of the same thing, the blanket of the world.

I'm always part of the blanket, but I have a choice of what I do with my string. I can pull away from other strings and leave gaps and not everyone will be covered anymore. Or I can reach out to other strings and help pull them together.

I asked Chava: When have you felt like you were pulling strings together?

"When we used to go visit Joan Rabin in the nursing home," she said. "Or when we give away clothes and toys to Haven House, (a family homeless shelter). I'm giving them something they need, which makes their threads stronger."

Chava's notes ended with a comment on prayer.

What I pray for in the Amidah is that God will help us pull the threads closer together. Help us connect and weave the blanket so that it stretches out over the entire world.

We can pull together the blanket of the world with everything we do. We are the blanket of the world.

And with that, I will end. Let's make 5781 a year of connection. A year where in spite of all our rules for social distancing, or maybe because of them, we say to one another, "I will be with you." A year that we reach out and pull together the blanket of the world.

Gmar Chatima Tova.

(For those reading at home, everyone in the congregation got a High Holiday bag with various items, including a sealed envelope with my Yom Kippur sermon card in it, to open now. It reads: I will be with you. Ehyeh Imach.)

