

*Havruta* is Life:  
Interdependence and Responsibility

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Two thousand years ago, in the Land of Israel, there lived a man called Ḥoni the Circle-Maker. One day, Ḥoni was walking along the road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Ḥoni asked him, "How long until this tree bears fruit?" The man replied: "It won't produce fruit for seventy years." Ḥoni said to him: "Do you expect to live seventy more years and enjoy the fruit?" He replied to Ḥoni: "I myself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants."

Ḥoni sat down and ate a meal. Sleep overcame him. A cliff formed around him, and he disappeared from sight and slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw someone gathering carobs from a tree in the same spot where he had seen a man planting a tree before he had fallen asleep. Ḥoni asked him: "Did you plant this tree?" The man replied: "No, my grandfather planted it." Ḥoni said to him: "I think I've been asleep for seventy years!"

Ḥoni went to his house and asked the people there: "Is the son of Ḥoni the Circle-Maker alive?" They replied: "Ḥoni's son is no longer with us, but his grandson is alive." Ḥoni said to them: "I'm Ḥoni the Circle-Maker." But they were frightened and didn't believe him. Ḥoni left and went to the *Beit Midrash*, the study hall, where he heard rabbis talking about a particular scholar, saying: "her teachings are as enlightening and as clear as in the years of Ḥoni the Circle-Maker, for when Ḥoni would enter the study hall, he would resolve for the sages any

difficulty that they had.” Ḥoni said to them: “That’s me! I’m Ḥoni!” But they just looked at him incredulously, and proceeded to ignore him. Ḥoni became very upset. He prayed for mercy and died. This story is summarized by an ancient Jewish folk saying: *o ḥavruta o mituta* - either friendship or death.<sup>1</sup>

The predominant meaning of the word *ḥavruta* in modern usage is a study partner. A true friend, then, is someone who learns with you and from you and who teaches you. The most famous pairs of study partners in rabbinic texts, such as Hillel and Shammai, are not those who always agree. On the contrary, the most famous *ḥavruta* pairs were those who came from opposite backgrounds, who had long-term passionate disagreements, debates, and conflicts, and who still remained in relationship with each other. They recognized and honored both their differences and their interconnectedness.

The root of the word *ḥavruta* is *ḥibbur*, which means connection. The story of Ḥoni teaches us that connection gives us life, isolation can be life-threatening, and that we are dependent on each other for survival. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it has taught us that we are all inextricably interconnected.

Even before the pandemic, researchers knew that isolation is harmful and that connection is important for our well-being. They also knew that everyone and everything is interconnected. And yet, our world seems not to have learned this lesson, even though we’ve been watching this truth play out on a global scale. I myself had accepted the fantasy of separateness. I never thought that some illness in China called “the coronavirus” would ever make its way to America. When the virus was confirmed in the U.S., I never thought that my own grandfather and

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<sup>1</sup> Based on *Bavli Ta’anit* 23a

step-grandmother would contract it and die. But here I am, personally directly affected by the pandemic, **because we are all interconnected.**

Being interconnected does not mean that we all have the same experiences and face the same challenges. As the latest version of the saying goes, same storm, different boats - that is, we are all weathering the same storm, but we are not all in the same boat. In our own community, some people have lost their jobs or taken pay cuts. Some have suffered the death of family members. The consequences have been worse for people who were already marginalized and vulnerable. Even as we recognize the inequities in our world, we also know that we're all interconnected.

This is about something both simpler and more complex than the conventional concepts of *havruta* or friendship. It's about the recognition that our interconnectedness creates responsibility for each other.

A friend recently said to me: "I've been out of the loop, and I like it that way, because once I'm in the loop, I have responsibility for the loop." But the truth is that **we are all in the loop.** We know what's going on in our communities, in our country, and all over the world. We know that the pandemic has not been managed well by our leaders. We know about ongoing systemic anti-Black racism, antisemitism, and other forms of discrimination and oppression. We know that climate change is causing devastating natural disasters. We know that all of these things have led to suffering and death. And we know that division only worsens things, while connection helps.

We are all responsible for our part in the loop. As the Talmud puts it, "Whoever can protest against their household but does not is held responsible for the sins of his household; if

they can protest against the people of their town but do not, they are held responsible for their sins; and if they can protest against the sins of the whole world but does not, they are held responsible for the sins of the whole world.”<sup>2</sup> This is a provocative statement. What does the Talmud mean by protest here?

Protest is often viewed as divisive, and it can indeed be used to polarize. But what if we viewed protest as a relational tool? What if we held each other accountable for our actions through honest yet supportive feedback, reminding each other of our core values? What if our relationships were so strong that we trusted conflict as an opportunity for growth?

This is made difficult by the stigma our society places on vulnerability and imperfection. But none of us is perfect, and each of us will, sooner or later, need help of some kind. We need to be able to ask for and receive help. In the words of the late Bill Withers, “please, swallow your pride... for no one can fill those of your needs that you don’t let show.”

This is where Sarah and Hagar went wrong in this morning’s Torah reading. Sarah thought that she could make her son Isaac the exclusive heir of Abraham by exiling Hagar and Ishmael. And Hagar herself believed that Sarah had the power to cut her off when Sarah banished her and her son. But their interdependence was binding. Here we are today, and not much has changed. The spiritual descendants of Isaac and Ishmael have still not yet learned how to live as neighbors in peace. We are still in denial about our interconnectedness.

Thankfully, there have been moments in history from which we can learn. In the darkest of times, there were always those who affirmed the truth of interdependence. Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist who continued practicing his profession at Auschwitz. In his

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<sup>2</sup> *Bavli Shabbat 54b*

classic book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl argues that what most affected a prisoner's survival, beyond chance, was having something to live for, whether a person to love, a creative work to complete, or an awareness of the meaning of suffering. Frankl's conclusions are applicable to any life at any time: what matters most in life is not individual success, but meaning and connection. In other words, not independence, but interdependence.

On some level, we are all in denial about interdependence, because we live in a society that is obsessed with independence and individual rights. A colleague of mine was watching the news a few months ago and heard a woman in Oklahoma asked why she wasn't wearing a mask out in public. She responded: "That's what's so great about America. If you don't want to do something, you don't have to do it."

I myself fell prey to the illusion of independence and separation this summer during the pandemic. Spending time on webinars and studying Jewish texts seeking personal hope and inspiration that I could have spent building connection and relationship within our community. Because I draw hope and inspiration not only from Jewish text and tradition - my hope and inspiration also comes from all of you. In the spirit of these days of repentance and returning to our best selves, I hope that you will forgive me, if I have missed an opportunity to connect with you in this collectively disorienting time. And I hope that you will join me in forging stronger and deeper connections in the new year.

What if we could transform our society so that it was built on *havruta*, connection, support, and mutual aid, in which we embrace and utilize our interdependence? What if our nation's discourse focused not only on our individual rights but also on our responsibilities to

each other and to the world? I'm describing a type of community building that is long-term, but we can - and must - start now.

How do we use the knowledge that we are interconnected to help get us through this time and build something stronger for the future?

We can lean into our interdependence by cultivating emotional and spiritual connection, even while remaining physically distant. This means recognizing that our actions affect others, and vice versa. It means asking for help when we need it, and offering it when able. We must have faith - not only in God - but also in science and human resilience and relationship. We must trust medical experts and scientific consensus about how to keep risks low for ourselves and others, and we must follow the guidelines and best practices, including wearing masks and keeping our distance - even when we feel like we just can't take it anymore. **Connection - friendship - *havruta*** - does not require being physically together in the same room. What it does require is communication and relationship building in the ways that we can - on the phone, online, through delivering gifts, and in small, outdoor, physically distant gatherings.

Screenwriters Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole put it powerfully in the film *Black Panther*, which Gabriella and I rewatched recently in memory of the lead actor, the late Chadwick Boseman: "Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe."

Thankfully, the next generation understands this. As 19-year-old Jewish climate activist Jeremy Ornstein said, “our fates are tangled, and my survival and dignity is wrapped up in yours.”<sup>3</sup>

During times like this, it’s easy to get stuck in the mindset of independence and self-reliance. And when we feel isolated and divided, we fall into rhetoric of us versus them, friend versus foe. But we cannot escape our interconnectedness and interdependence. It is our vulnerability and, simultaneously, our opportunity for healing, growth, and meaning. Ultimately, all we have is each other. <sup>4</sup>

Let’s close where we started: with the character of Ḥoni, who asked that man why he was planting a tree that wouldn’t bear fruit during his lifetime. Like the planter in the story, we too must plant now to create roots of intentional interdependence - for our descendants, and for ourselves.

Why are trees so strong? Artist and activist Naima Penniman explains that oak trees can withstand hurricanes because “instead of digging their roots deep and solitary into the earth, the oak tree grows its roots wide and interlocks with other oak trees in the surrounding area. And you can’t bring down a hundred oak trees bound [together] beneath the soil.”<sup>5</sup>

Today, we must plant the seeds of *havruta* - friendship and connection, creating resilient networks of support in our community and beyond. I encourage you to spend some time this High Holiday season thinking about which relationships in your life need strengthening, what

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<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/jeremyornstein/status/1063819397658226688?lang=en>

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Alan Lew, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, p. 112

<sup>5</sup> Adrienne Maree Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, pp. 84-85.

your responsibilities are from your place in the loop, and what you can do to celebrate our interconnectedness this year. *Shanah tovah.*