

Opening the Door: Beth Am *B'Yachad*

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These days, the world seems like a cold, dark place and, I don't know about you, but often I feel powerless to do anything about it.

A quick scroll through the headlines on my phone panics me—crying children, locked in cages, left neglected at the border. Another mass shooting in a place I visit every day, a shopping mall, or a school, or a house of worship. And it's not just the gun violence in a place like Poway or Pittsburgh that scares me, it's that anti-Semitism rages on, and *my* family, *my* community may be the next target. Meanwhile, our mother planet is burning up, as refugees escape another storm, or another natural wonder verges on destruction. I scroll through my phone just to zone out, and even that fills me with uncertainty. As I scan through social media where everyone else always seems to be on vacation, I wonder: Who's tracking this quick visit online and what are they going to do with my data?

Given the state of the world, seeing all of you here fills me with awe. Truly. The very act of gathering is an act of courage. With one voice we chant our prayers, expressing our age-old values. We realize that Judaism doesn't deny how cruel this world can be, yet neither does it submit to the world's terror. Today, together, *b'yachad*, we hear the shofar's blast and affirm all that makes life meaningful.

Our learning theme is inspired by Psalm 133: *Hiney mah tov umanayim, shevet achim gam yachad*, how good it is to dwell together as one. We say we are Beth Am *B'yachad*, and we're living that truth right now, as we enter the High Holy Days. But do we know how to create this feeling of being *b'yachad*, one community throughout the rest of the year? When the grandeur of this moment subsides, will we remember just how much we need each other?

It calls to mind the story we read today of Abraham and Isaac.¹ Early one morning, the father, filled with dread, and the son, filled with questions, set out to climb a distant mountain. As they make their way, father and son are consoled by the presence of the other. Twice, our Torah tells us they made the journey up the mountain *yachdav*, together, as one. Then, a voice is heard, a ram appears, and the boy's death is averted. Father and son head down the mountain, but this time, for some unstated reason, they go separately. As they scaled the heights, they brought comfort to each other; on the descent, they are estranged.

Will we follow Abraham and Isaac's path? After we descend from the heights of these High Holy Days, and return to the valley of our everyday life, we, too, are in danger of forgetting the power of being together. Somehow, the knowledge of how to be in communal relationships is slipping away from us. Not just here at Beth Am. Not even just in the Jewish community. But, in our country, too. Our nation is suffering from an epidemic of isolation and despair. Experts tell us that a lack of social connections leads to our declining health, our political polarization, our

¹ Genesis 22

venomous public discourse, the rise in hate groups, and the plague of opioid addiction.² We're a country divided, filled with citizens who suffer from profound loneliness despite the hyper-connectivity of our online lives. As Ben Sasse, a Republican Senator from Nebraska, has written "partisan tribalism is statistically higher than at any point since the Civil War. Why? Because the local human relationships that anchored political talk have shriveled up."³ I agree. The social fabric that has held us together until now is in danger of being irrevocably torn.

The situation is not hopeless, however. *We can* mend the frayed ties that bind us together:

We begin with ourselves, by allowing opportunities for solitude.

We also ensure that we inhabit spaces where we can be vulnerable and authentic in our relationships with others.

And, we strengthen our communal bonds by embracing those who are different than we are.

We ascend the heights of these Days of Awe to remind ourselves that when we return to the valley of our everyday lives, no matter how cold or dark the valley may be, there's no need to be overwhelmed. Through self-reflection, genuine relationships and reimagining our community we can bring healing to ourselves and the world.

Almost two centuries ago, Walt Whitman wrote:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
...observing a spear of summer grass.

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)⁴

Had Whitman not taken that quiet moment alone with that single blade of grass, we would never have his ode to the universality of the human spirit. Before we reach out to each other, we must reach within, to feel the depth of our emotions—we *are* large, we *do* contain multitudes.

What Whitman understood—and what we can rediscover—is that there is a difference between solitude and being alone. In 2019 true solitude can be elusive. MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle writes: "These days, we see when people are alone at a stop sign or in the checkout line, they seem almost panicked and reach for their phones. We're so accustomed to being always connected that being alone seems like a problem technology must solve. But [we're at risk because] if we're

² John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008)

³ Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal*. (St. Martin's Press, 2018), p. 13

⁴ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*.

unable to be alone, we're actually more lonely. And if we don't teach our children how to be alone, they will only know loneliness."⁵

On an airplane we're instructed to fix our oxygen masks before we help others. Solitude is the soul's oxygen. Having some quiet time every day, unplugged and alone—gives us an opportunity to return to ourselves. It helps us find our center and gives us the space to pay attention to what really moves us—what inspires or hurts, what brings pain or delight.

Certainly, Jewish prayer and being in synagogue offers us this opportunity for reflection. The High Holy Days draws us here because it's a time for introspection and taking stock. And yet for many of us, it's still not easy to fully disconnect from our devices even in this sacred space. To help us, we have a gift for you as you leave services—a bag for your cell phone when you want to unplug, here or anywhere else. The intention is to help us resist the urge to mindlessly check our phones, to let us sit with ourselves uninterrupted. With the gift comes a challenge: Can we place the phones in the bag for *all* of Yom Kippur? Can we take one entire day to reflect and say, as Whitman did: "I exist as I am, that is enough."

Solitude replenishes us; it helps us return to the world of relationships. Alas, our phones, which get in the way of self-reflection, also can inhibit the spontaneity and depth of our connections with others. When texting or posting on social media, we control *everything* about our contact with the outside world: what we read, how we appear, with whom we communicate. It's been called the Goldilocks Effect. We don't get too close, nor too far—we stay at *just* the right distance from each other.⁶ Unfortunately, this means that our moments online often leave us feeling empty. These interactions offer the illusion of companionship without the actual demands or gratification of friendship.⁷

But our time online is just the symptom, not the disease. We must acknowledge what we're doing when we escape to our screens. Or to alcohol. Or to food. Or sex. Or prescription drugs. Or partisan rage. Or work. Or, or, or...to anything that we might use to numb ourselves. We're trying to push back pain and disappointment. That feeling that we're not good enough, or successful enough, or thin enough, or young enough, or smart enough, or, or, or... We're protecting ourselves from the feeling of being alone and lonely and unlovable. That's the raw truth. That's the seed of our discontent and disconnection from each other.

When our body shows signs of hunger, we find something to eat. When thirsty, we drink. But for some reason, when we're lonely, we deny it. There's no shame in wanting to be in relationship with others; we're human, that's how we're hard-wired. In order to fulfill our need for belonging, we must let ourselves—our most authentic selves—be seen.

There's a story told about Isser Zalman Meltzer, the rebbe of Mir. Reb Isser Zalman always opened the door himself whenever anyone came to his home. Given his stature, as a scholar, a leader, and a man, this was unusual. Once he was terribly sick and couldn't get out of bed. It was a bitterly cold night, when suddenly there was a knock at the door. One of his students ran over and asked, "Who is it?" Reb Isser Zalman called to him excitedly, "What are you doing? On a cold night, after midnight, one doesn't ask who's there. One opens the door immediately!"⁸

⁵ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age*, (Penguin Books, 2015), p. 10

⁶ Turkle, p. 21

⁷ Turkle, p. 6

⁸ *Itturei Torah, Parashat Re'eh*

The world we live in feels like that cold, dark night. The hour is late; the wind blows harshly; we just need someone to open the door and let us into the warmth and comfort of company. The rebbe recognized how hard it can be for someone bracing himself against the storm outside; how exposed that person behind the door might feel; how fearful she might be that she might not receive shelter. It takes courage to let ourselves be vulnerable in that way.⁹ Courage to take a risk and not be totally in control. Courage to recognize that we need each other. Courage to knock on the door. Courage to open the door and let each other in.

Today we suffer from an epidemic of loneliness because in the digital age we've lost many of those spaces where we can relax, and breathe, and be valued for who we really are. The synagogue can be such a space. This is where we can tell our stories and hear others' stories and learn how our story continues the lineage of our ancestors. This is where we learn how the customs and teachings of Judaism can render life meaningful. This is where we can safely forge new and genuine friendships. The trick is, in the 21st century, we can't "do" synagogue the same way we've always done it; we must reconsider how we gather as a congregation.¹⁰

This year, we'll focus on fostering environments that allow us to open doors for each other. Whether it's through Beth Am *B'Yachad*, a collection of small groups, led by congregants, designed to bring together people who might not ordinarily cross paths. Or through rethinking how our families in the religious school can forge real connections with each other. Or through ensuring that our lay and professional leadership embody our synagogue's mission as we engage in our sacred work.

Temple Beth Am is here to help us deepen relationships with each other and to Judaism. That's it. That's the only reason we exist. We're here to open the door and be together in a warm Jewish space that offers each of us shelter from a sometimes cold and dark world.

We'll never know for sure why Abraham and Isaac came down the mountain separately. Maybe the trauma of the near-sacrifice created a gulf so wide that they failed to see their common humanity. We can walk down a different path; but to do so we must *really* see each other—not just what unites us, but, more importantly, what differentiates us.

Part of creating a community where we can be our most authentic selves means that we must be willing to withstand the discomfort of discussing our differences. Opportunities abound to draw near to someone unlike us. At Shabbat services a young person of color sits next to an Ashkenazic retiree. In a SEED parent meeting, a cis mother and a trans mother express concerns about their toddlers. In our Torah study, people on either side of a partisan divide explore the moral values underlying our most sacred text. Emanuel Levinas teaches that when we gaze into another's face, we're drawn towards them *because* they're different from us.¹¹ We feel, suddenly and inexplicably, the pull of responsibility toward them. In that moment, empathy is born, and we become fully human.

It's not always easy to be in a congregation with people who are different than we are, but it *is* necessary. In fact, Judaism considers it a mitzvah. In Torah, we're commanded to be kind to strangers because in Egypt each of us acquired a *nefesh ger*, the soul of the stranger.¹² This means

⁹ Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* (Random House, New York), p. 23

¹⁰ I am indebted to *The Art of Gathering: How to Meet and Why It Matters* by Priya Parker. (Riverhead Books, 2018.) [And a special thank you to Rabbi David Fine for the recommendation.]

¹¹ Emanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, (Duchesne University Press, 1969.)

¹² Exodus, 23:9

everyone is an Other; everyone is a stranger to someone else; everyone is worthy of empathy. And as a Jewish community, we're morally obligated to bring this empathy out into our broken world. Yes, it's cold and dark sometimes, but it is we who bring the warmth and light. This is the privilege, and this is the power of being a congregation *b'yachad*.

Like everything else, we must re-envision the concept of community in the 21st century. Historian Carole Balin will be our Scholar in Residence to help us understand where we've come from and where we're going as a Reform congregation. She'll explore how the American Jewish community has been shaped by race, class, gender and the impact of interfaith families. We'll welcome Dr. Balin in just a few weeks, at the beginning of November. This means that right after the High Holy Days have ended, we'll have the opportunity to be together again, face to face, *b'yachad*.

Let's take a different path down the mountain than Abraham and Isaac. Let's begin this new year together.

Standing on the heights of Rosh Hashanah, looking off into the new year, our congregational vision is clear—in 5780 we'll inspire each other and heal the world through powerful Jewish experiences.

No matter how cold or dark the night, we will open the door, and our souls will be replenished by solitude; our loneliness will be healed by relationships; and our humanity will be deepened by each other.

Heenay mah tov/How good it is to dwell together, b'yachad.