

Dwelling *B'Yachad* Means Bumping into Each Other

Rachel Zerrell's Talk at the Yom Kippur 2019/5780 Discussion Service

The thing about dwelling together – especially dwelling together like siblings – is that we bump into each other.

People talk about the importance of “Third Places” – where we encounter other people outside of home and work – to a healthy civil society. We decreasingly spend time in Third Places as our lives are increasingly curated bubbles. I've also been learning more neuroscience in recent years, particularly about how there is no substitute, neurologically, for physically being together, face-to-face, *panim-el-panim*, in our tradition.

One of the things that I value about being at Temple Beth Am is that I meet people that I would never meet in my social circle, and I bump into people I know in an unplanned way. I grew up at Beth Am and rejoined as an adult. So, I get the sweetness of acquaintanceships that have built up over decades. I also get to see my students grow into young adults, like I see my own childhood teachers.

However, that sweetness can also be awkward sometimes. I'll recognize and say “Hi” to a teacher that I had 25 years ago, and they don't necessarily remember my name. Anyone else had that experience? I've been on the other side of that, too – where someone greets me, and they look familiar, but I can't place them and feel so bad that I kind of try to bluff my way through the conversation. Apologies to people in the room that I've done this to. Anyone else had that experience?

That's the thing about dwelling together is that we *bump* into each other, and it can be uncomfortable. My siblings are some of my best friends, and I miss having them here and part of my daily life so much. But when we dwelled together, we also fought over the TV. It wasn't all sweetness all of the time. But with that occasional friction comes all of the wonderful spontaneity and intimacy of dwelling together. They're a package deal. If we really dwell together at Beth Am, then we're going to bump into each other sometimes.

The *Akedah* – the binding of Isaac – is one of those captivating texts where I learn something new every year. I read that it's like a shofar for the soul – because it's so messed up. The narrative's lack of concern for Isaac's feelings and for the relationship between father and son is painful for me. Something new struck me this year: right before Abraham follows through on the sacrifice, a divine voice tells him to stop, and he looks up and sees a ram to sacrifice instead. He looks *up* – and the image that came to me is that if he looked up to see the ram, then when

he was hearing that divine voice, he was looking down at Isaac. He could hear that divine voice – that divine truth – and respond “*hineini*” (“I’m present”), because he was being present and face-to-face with Isaac.

That’s where the neuroscience and the Torah agree: we can’t deny our shared humanity when we are *panim-el-panim*, face-to-face, with each other. That’s why, in increasingly polarized times, I come to Beth Am not only to meet people who are like me but also people who are different from me. People of different generations, different hobbies, different ideas about what’s best for our country, and different ideas about what’s best for this community. I come here not just to encounter the existence of different people, but to see them – to see you – face-to-face.

Reading the *Akedah* makes me wonder: who are the Isaacs in our community, whose voices are not heard in the stories that we tell ourselves about this community? For example, Rabbi Jason R. Levine’s Rosh Hashanah sermon talked about the ways Jewish institutions exclude Jews of Color and that makes me wonder how People of Color feel at Beth Am. I know how I *want* People of Color to feel at Beth Am; I know they are a vital part of our community, and I want this community to be a fantastic place for everyone who experiences marginalization in our society. However, if I let my own desire for that to be *the* story dominate my thinking, then I’ll miss hearing the realities of people’s experiences. Especially because the things I don’t want to hear are the things I most need to hear.

One of the things that breaks my heart about the *Akedah* is that Abraham and Isaac don’t speak on the way home – they don’t seem to stay face-to-face. One of my hopes for all of us in the New Year is that we can follow through on our *teshuvah* together, *b’yachad*, and not let our shame or awkwardness keep us apart or keep us from really hearing each other.

Since I want the sweetness of dwelling together here, I need to be braver and more humble and more present with the people that I bump into. I’ve been trying to figure out how to do *teshuvah* for the times that I’ve forgotten people’s names, given that, let’s be real, I am always going to do that sometimes. What I can do *teshuvah* for, though, are the times that I’ve let my embarrassment create more distance. Next time I run into someone and can’t remember their name, I’m not going to bluff my way through it, I’m going to own my lapse and ask you to remind me of your name, so we can keep getting to know each other better.

We’ve come here to say *vidui* together, to atone together, because that’s powerful and meaningful even when we don’t know each other yet. We can dwell together when we don’t

know everyone's name, but we can't really get the sweetness of dwelling together while avoiding being face-to-face.