

Once upon a time, there was a young chassid, a disciple of a wise Rebbe. The youth was dutiful, coming to *minyán* every morning, helping regularly with reading Torah, and studied with the community every day for years into his young adulthood. One day, he wondered: maybe he'd spent enough time learning in this community? He certainly was capable of studying text independently and had inherited his Zede's library. Perhaps now was a good time to spend more time on his own, doing his own thing...?

He came to the Rebbe and announced, "Dear Rebbe, I thank you for all the years of training, learning and guidance. I think I am now ready to be **on my own**. I don't think I will be returning for minyan or study any longer."

Without saying a word, the Rebbe calmly got up and walked over to the fire that was warming the study hall. With a stick, the Rebbe jostled free one of the burning coals, removed it from the brilliant mound, and set it apart by itself.

Together, the Rebbe and student watched both the mound of blazing coals, and the singled out individual one. At first, they were both brilliant and blaring heat. But then, within a few minutes, they noticed the individual coal's hue was changing. Soon, it had lost the luster of its flame, and it began to turn dark. The student could also feel a just noticeable diminishing of warmth as the separated coal cooled while the pile of flaming coals continued to blaze and give off its heat. The Rebbe then nudged the now

cooled off coal back unto the mound, and almost immediately it erupted back to life, and the room grew warmer. Without a word, the Rebbe sat down at his table.

The student came back the next morning, on time, and every day after that.

As is so beautifully illuminated in this story, we are better **and more enriched** together. People matter to us. We matter to people. We have lost so much during the pandemic. So many have died, suffered with illness, and either lost or had to make radical adjustments to work and school. Even now it's a bit painful to talk about what was lost, and even complex to talk about what has been gained.

We have experienced the power of connection, and the challenges of isolation; the blessings of eliminated commuting, and the challenges of being forced to limit travel; the blessings and challenges of being forced to stay put with immediate family and neighbors; the blessings and challenges of having our worlds dramatically limited. Many of us grew closer with a much smaller group of people, and some of us were plunged into isolation from those who make us feel loved. It's been a bit of a flashback to the proverbial "gentler, simpler time" when we expected to spend most of our time in the neighborhood. There are some silver linings, but it's all been a bit too much.

It think it's fair to say we've been in a collective period of **grieving**. Understanding and honoring our grief is helpful as we think about ways to respond and heal.

You may be familiar with the theory made famous by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross on the 5 stages of grief: **Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance**. She originally identified these stages in patients with terminal diagnoses as they absorbed and processed their mortality. Later, she and others saw these types of stages were apparent in people suffering the loss of loved ones and other kinds of serious losses in life.

More recently, a colleague of Kubler-Ross, Dr. David Kessler, applied these stages of grief to us in **our response Covid-19**. He writes, "There's **denial**, which we saw a lot of early on: *This virus won't affect us*. There's **anger**: *You're making me stay home and taking away my activities*. There's **bargaining**: *Okay, if I social distance for two weeks everything will be better, right?* There's **sadness**: *I don't know when this will end*. And finally, there's **acceptance**. *This is happening; I have to figure out how to proceed*. **Acceptance, as you might imagine, is where the power lies**. We find control in acceptance. *I can wash my hands. I can keep a safe distance. {I can wear a mask} I can learn how to work virtually.*"

Grief is bigger than we are. Rosh Hashanah is an opportunity to make sense of it all. It's a time to look carefully at ourselves, reckon with our darker realities, and **look for ways to heal through our grief toward a repaired future**.

But, as the now famous Infectious Disease Doctor, Dr. Michael Osterholm has said, “We may be done with this virus, but the virus is not yet done with us.” We are in the middle of a frustrating process of figuring out how to move forward. In this moment of so much uncertainty, and with other intense challenges burning and flooding our country, how, exactly, are we meant to prepare for renewal for the coming year?

Judaism has been around a long time. Its genius has been in how it has **helped sustain our people** even through cataclysmic events in history. And its wisdom speaks to this moment:

I hear the gentle teaching of our sage Hillel, perhaps the same one that guided our Chassidic Rebbe: ***Al tifrosh min hatzibur / Do not separate yourself from the community.***

**The Presence of people help and heal the soul.** For so many of us, it has been the loss of people, the loss of being and feeling connected to community, that has taxed our spirit the most. In this moment of reflection and prayer for rejuvenation, let us consider renewing ourselves by **committing to showing up for community.**

A “community” is a group with whom you share values, a calendar, and goals. But it is also a group you feel **obligated to show up for**, and with whom you build reciprocity—that human instinct of give-and-take. With reciprocity comes security. With security comes trust. With trust comes connection. And connection is **medicine.**

Just as when the lit coals are congregated together on the pyre they burn bright and hot, so too do **we** when we come together in community. In community, we keep one another **lit and alive**. When we **show up** for each other, we create a very human healing magic.

Jewish culture and tradition are filled with examples of the magic we bring when we show up for each other at the more sensitive moments in life. And the reason is simple:

**You count. You matter.**

- You count and you matter at a wedding. Showing up fulfills the mitzvah of *l'sameach chatan v'kallah* / *making the Bride & Groom **happy***. Our presence brings a smile to their faces. Sharing in their joy is a gift to both the couple and their families, and to the guests as well.
- You count and you matter at a hospital bed, where we have the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim* / *visiting the sick*. The Talmud teaches that when we visit the sick, we remove 1/60<sup>th</sup> of their illness. Our presence brings **healing** of spirit and is a healing statement: you do not have to go through this alone.
- You count and you matter at a funeral. The mitzvah is *le'va'yat ha'met* / *accompanying the departed*. This mitzvah is what is called a *chesed shel emet* / *a most sincere act of kindness*. When we show up and accompany our departed to their final resting place, we humanely provide **dignity** to their human form.
- And, of course, you count and you matter at *Shivah*, at a House of Mourning. The mitzvah is *nichum aveilim* / *comforting the bereaved*. When we show up for a member of the community suffering loss, our **presence** brings **comfort**. Not our words, just our presence.

In none of these situations are we meant to have the right thing to **say** to fulfil the mitzvah. A well-crafted letter will never deliver the power that is simply your presence.

**Showing up** brings the joy, the healing, the dignity, and the comfort.

*Al tifrosh min ha'tzibur. Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not separate yourself from **the people**. We are meant to share our lives with others.*

I wish I could say this teaching comes to rescue us only in a time of pandemic. Unfortunately, we've been witnessing a gradual decaying of community in America for some time.

Robert Putnam's 1995 essay "Bowling Alone" created a stir as it observed American society was trading in group commitments and activities for solitary recreation. As people progressively abandoned bowling leagues, where people honored obligations to show up weekly for their teams and bowl together, there was a commensurate decline in other forms of civic involvement. The less time people share with community, the fewer bonds people enjoy. The fewer bonds people share, the more people feel separate, and eventually, lonely. **Loneliness is a malady that deserves its own sermon.**

Separation and isolation are increasingly the norm, and not just because of the pandemic. We each have a technological wonderworld in our pocket that alleges to "connect us" but more readily succeeds in keeping us apart. Whether it's gaming, social media, or trying to become an "influencer," technology creates an obsession with faux-contact that delivers exposure to toxic

connections with people, and virtually none of the nourishing benefits of human presence. If anything, social media is more like feasting on sugar. Eventually, it makes you sick.

**The more we separate from groups that serve social connections, the less happy we are, the lonelier we become, the more often we get sick, and the earlier we die.**

At its core, Judaism is about creating soul-quenching spiritual connection. This is symbolized in Jewish prayer, where even our private and personal prayer is meant to take place in the context of a *minyan*, a community of 10 Jews. We pray to ourselves while committing to a group.

One of the most grounding practices of Jewish life, one that poets proclaim has been the key to our survival as a group, is Shabbat, the Sabbath. Of the myriads of people I have encountered whose lives are deeply touched by Judaism, including myself, everyone has a story about a transformative moment that happened at a Shabbat table. It's a simple magic trick: **You invite people to your home.** That's almost all it takes.

The rituals of candles, *kiddush*, and the meal sets a tone of holiness. Then, it's about the sharing of food, singing, and conversation. Observance of Shabbat frees us from the tyranny of things and salvages precious time spent with people.

Want to envision what I'm talking about? Imagine a conversation with other adults—or your children—**without iphones at the table!** Studies galore demonstrate that

**literally whenever** a smartphone is visible or even present at a meal, people report being **less happy**. If you experience me splitting my attention, *or even imply my willingness to split my attention* by having the phone visible, then I'm not really there, and we both suffer.

When we commit to Shabbat as a practice, we inherit the freedom that comes with knowing we have nowhere else to be, and we're gifted more time for one another. Good food, good wine, good conversation, and a little L'chayim. Repeat. Shabbat gives us the gift of **quantity time as well as quality time**.

I know I'm not alone when I say it was the years of prioritizing shabbat with my synagogue and community that helped heal and fortify my own soul. I may be literally preaching to the choir when I look to our chazzan-Noam, because his parents Rabbi Shawn and Tom Fields-Meyer and I have spent untold numbers of shabbatot and holidays together, both in the US and in Israel. Those hours of connection are a big reason why I'm standing here today.

I wish I could invite you all over for Shabbat this week! We are not yet free from this pandemic, so it may be a touch premature... but let's start planning!

In the meantime, consider making Shabbat a priority. Showing up to our zoom services Friday night as a quick pre-game to dinner shared with family, or friends—even if the meal is shared over zoom. Or showing up to our services on Shabbat morning and making plans to meet at the beach afterwards for a walk and a picnic.



The time we spend together at meals and in conversation helps us stay lit, and inspires connection that probes, illuminates, and heals. **The point is that we show up for people, and they show up for us.**

The great Victor Frankl describes in his epic work, “Man’s Search for Meaning,” that in Auschwitz, he realized what helped him and others survive the atrocities and indignities perpetrated by the Nazis, was when he **switched from thinking about himself to thinking about others.** That a will for meaning came not from the perspective of what “I expect from life,” but rather from “**what life expects of me.**” That I have others to live for, who expect me to show up for them.

In his brilliant book on depression called “Lost Connections,” journalist Johanne Hari accentuated Frankl’s insight when talking about his own struggle with depression and what he’d learned when researching his book: “Now, when I feel myself starting to slide down, **I don’t do something for myself—I try to do something for someone else.** I go to see a friend and try to focus very hard on **how they are feeling** and making **them** feel better. I try to do something for my network, or my group—or even try to help strangers who look distressed. I learned something I wouldn’t have thought was possible at the start. **Even if you are in pain,** you can almost always **make someone else feel a little bit better.**”

On this point, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, shared a beautiful story of the first time he went to visit the Lubavitcher Rebbe when he was in high school. He writes, “As I was waiting to go in, one of his disciples told me the following story. A man had recently written to the Rebbe on

something of these lines: 'I need the Rebbe's help. I am deeply depressed. I pray and find no comfort. I perform the commands but feel nothing. I find it hard to carry on.' The Rebbe, so I was told, sent a compelling reply without writing a single word. He simply ringed the first word in every sentence of the letter: **the word 'I'**. It was, he was hinting, the man's **self-preoccupation** that was at the root of his depression. It was as if the Rebbe were saying, as Viktor Frankl used to say in the name of Kierkegaard, **"The door to happiness opens outward."**

*Al tifrosh min ha'tzibur. Do not separate yourself from the community.*

These recent years have felt very long, and our souls are thirsty. May we be blessed to know the healing of vibrant and warm connections with community. And may our energy, light, and presence become a valued part of one another's life. May we all be inscribed for a sweeter, healthier, and more safely-in-person year. Shannah Tovah.