

More People to Go With

Allow me to rewind. It is now March 2020. The world, our lives, and our community changed in unimaginable ways. When COVID-19 became our new reality, I immediately jumped into crisis mode. My military training taught me that when faced with an emergency, you act quickly and decisively. And that is what we did. Immediately cease all in-person activities. Pivot to virtual platforms. Reimagine prayer, teaching, community, holidays, everything. This was a time for pastoral care on steroids. Everyone was hurting. Everyone was in pain. Every phone call was emotional. Over the next 12 months, I officiated at 22 funerals, supporting and grieving with hundreds of community members and their families. As a point of comparison, prior to that point, I had officiated at 22 funerals in the previous three and a half years!

The rest of congregational life centered around Zoom links. Who has the link? Do you have the link? Where is the link? Someone send me the link! Let's go outside. I think the weather is OK. Quick, tell everyone it might rain! Never mind, just get sunburned sitting on the scorching asphalt. Finally, we can return to the building. Masks on. Masks off. Masks optional. Masks required. Vaccine cards. Vaccine registration. One shot, two shots, booster shots. Social distance. Skip rows. Sit where you want. Put the tape back up. We are in the clear. Oh no, Delta is now here. Omicron? What's that? Here we go again.

The flood of grief and pain soon mixed with contentious decisions about vaccine requirements, mask mandates, kiddush, school, and many other new sources of stress. We needed to protect older and immunocompromised members. We needed to be sensitive to the hearing-impaired, isolated by the use of masks. There were members living alone and struggling with depression. There were children who desperately needed social contact and in-person learning. For

some, anything online was impossible and a non-starter. Others with specific health needs felt abandoned when we returned to in-person. For some, no kiddush meant going to another shul. For others, if we had kiddush, they would go to another shul. There were those who irrationally denied the severity of Covid, and there were others who were at low risk and vaccinated but remained irrationally afraid of Covid. And through it all, I needed to continue loving and caring for those who disagreed vehemently and vocally. I struggled with balancing my own personal needs with the needs of the community, struggled to meet the community's needs with evolving technology, struggled to make decisions quickly enough and then struggled again when those decisions had to change. The responsibility I felt, and the lack of physical proximity with each of you, took a tremendous toll on my soul. The world around me was on fire, and I was stuck preaching in an empty room. There was little joy, and there was no end in sight. By August 2021, I realized that I wasn't fully present. A part of me was missing. I had succumbed to the effects of an epidemic, and that epidemic was not Covid.

When Dr. Vivek Murthy began his tenure as the 19th Surgeon General of the United States, he expected his primary focus as the “nation’s doctor” would encompass issues like cancer, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and addiction. Turns out there is a greater threat to public health, and it isn’t Covid – it’s loneliness. In a national study conducted by the Harvard School of Education, 36% of American adults reported serious loneliness—feeling lonely “frequently” or “almost all the time.” This included 61% of young people aged 18-25 and 51% of mothers with young children. 43% of young adults reported increases in loneliness since the outbreak of the pandemic. About half of lonely young adults reported that no one in the past few weeks had “taken more than just a few minutes” to ask how they were doing in a way that made them feel like the person “genuinely cared” (Harvard, *Loneliness in America*). These last few years have exposed wide holes

in our social fabric and made many Americans keenly aware of how much our daily well-being hinges on the ongoing warmth and care of others. Overwhelming evidence suggests that for the sake of our happiness and well-being, we need each other. The time seems ripe for concerted efforts to reimagine our relationships.

This year marks the one-hundredth anniversary of Martin Buber's best-known and most influential book, *I and Thou*. The book itself is quite obscure. Even Walter Kaufman, who translated it from German to English, said that most German speakers don't understand what the heck it's about. Nonetheless, *I and Thou* became a best seller, a manifesto for existence, and a must-read for theologians of any faith tradition. None of this would have ever happened if it wasn't for a tragic and life-changing incident in the summer of 1914. Buber later explained: "One afternoon, after a morning of "religious experience," I had a visit from an unknown young man. But I wasn't there in spirit. I was certainly friendly. I treated him politely as I did all his friends who were in the habit of seeking me out about this time of day for advice. I conversed attentively and openly with him – only I failed to guess the questions which he did not put. Not long after, I learned from one of his friends, for he himself was no longer alive, the real content of these questions. I learned that he had come to me not accidentally but brought by destiny, not for a chat but for a *decision*. He had come to *me*. He had come in this *hour*" (Buber, *Between Man and Man*).

How many of us have been here before? Moments when our spirit just isn't there. Someone is sitting in front of you, and your head is in the major presentation you are about to give. Your head is at home with your kid who isn't feeling well or maybe an ailing parent. Your head is at the meeting yesterday where you got roasted. "What do we expect when we are in despair and go to someone for help? Surely a *presence* that lets us know that, whatever happens to us, life still has meaning and worth" (Ibid). This tragedy was a turning point for Buber. As a result, he made a firm

commitment to be as attentive, actively curious, and responsive as he could when talking to someone – to be in a relationship that acknowledged the infinite worth of every individual.

I cannot tell you the number of times members of this community have come to me for counsel, and I simply did not have an answer. No strategies for how to deal with an issue. Sometimes, I can't even figure out the problem in the first place. And then, at the end, they smile at me and say, "You don't know how helpful you have been." Why? Because you were present. Because you listened. Because you accepted me. Because you communicated to me non-verbally that I matter, that I have some worth in the world, and I'll figure out how to solve my problems on my own.

One hundred years ago, Buber's monumental contribution forever changed how we think about relationships. I'll spare you the read and share his two basic ideas. Number one: Individualism is a lie. There is no I *except* the I of *I and Thou*. We are who we are in our relationships, and our relationships are what define us. The only way to gain a sense of personal meaning, personal value, and redemption from our existential loneliness is to bring the fullness of our authentic selves into dialogue with another, a relationship called I-Thou. Number two: The inverse of I-Thou is I-It relationships – transactional, guarded, and with limitations.

I've personally thought a lot about this as a rabbi. There are some who see me as a rabbinic persona, a visible reminder of the holy, and that is where the relationship remains. Being such a vessel gets awfully lonely. But there are others who see me as a human being, a person with beauty and warts, accomplishments and challenges, forever striving to lift us all. Those are the relationships that bring *me* personal redemption. So, do *you* treat people as an *It* or a *Thou*? What about your friends? Your romantic partner? Strangers? The great challenge of modernity is that modernity privileges the I-It and leaves no time, space, or encouragement to nurture I-Thou

relationships. The power of Judaism, and I would add the power of this community, can only be found in the sacred space between *I* and *Thou*.

There is a great story about an American investment banker who was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large, yellow-finned tuna. The banker complimented the Mexican on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them. The Mexican replied: "Only a little while." The banker then asked why he didn't stay out longer and catch more fish. The Mexican said he had enough to support his family's immediate needs.

The banker was puzzled and asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?" The Mexican fisherman said, "I sleep late, swim a little, play with my children, take a *siesta* with my wife Maria, and stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my *amigos*. I have a full and busy life."

The banker scoffed, "I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and, with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat, you could buy several boats. Eventually, you'll have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman, you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing, and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then Los Angeles, and eventually to New York, where you will run your expanding empire."

The Mexican fisherman asked, "But how long will this take?" To which the banker replied, "15 to 20 years." "But what then?" Asked the Mexican. The banker laughed and said, "That's the best part. When the time is right, you will announce an IPO, sell your company's stock to the public, and become very rich. You would be worth millions!"

"Millions! Then what?" The banker smiled and said, "Then you would retire, move to a small coastal fishing village, take a *siesta* with your wife, play with your kids, and stroll to the village in the evenings where you would sip wine and play your guitar with your *amigos*."

Don't wait until retirement, or dare I say, until it is too late, to spend time each day with those you love and the people with whom you are in community. On Yom Kippur, we read the prophetic words of Isaiah, reminding us that our fasting has to do not so much with our saying sorry to God but with unlocking the yoke of poverty and not allowing another to go hungry. In most years, our focus here is on social justice and our responsibilities towards one another. This year, I want to suggest that there is more to Isaiah's exhortation than a reminder to deliver food, clothing, and shelter to those in need. On this most sacred day, Isaiah reminds us that Godliness is not found in the vertical relationship between us and God. God's true presence is found in our horizontal relationships with the people around us – both those in need of physical sustenance *and* those in need of our spiritual and emotional presence.

This summer, I attended a conference for Jewish Military Chaplains in Miami. First of all, I now know why conferences in Miami are cheaper in August! More importantly, we had the opportunity to learn from Gather Inc., an offshoot of a DC-based organization training leaders in the Jewish community to bring a relationship-centered approach to every aspect of their work. Translated for our community, relationship-based engagement is an approach to building connection, trust, and belonging. It is the act of reaching out to others, getting to know them based on their interests, ambitions, and passions, and then weaving together a community where everyone is seen and uniquely valued (Gather, Inc).

There are four core principles of relationship-based engagement that I believe must be at the heart of this community. One: Meaning-making happens best in relationship. We find deep

meaning, true learning, and spiritual fulfillment when we are in relationship with each other. Two: We don't need more programs; we need more people to go with. It's not about the class, concert, lecture, or service; it's about the person you are sitting next to and the friendships cultivated while you were here. Three: Prioritize relationships over participation. Metrics for success are not measured in the number of people walking through the door but in the number of relationships you have when you walk out. The truth is, every one of you that is having Shabbat dinner with another member of this community on Friday night instead of coming to shul...Thank you. *You* are doing the sacred work of building community. Four: Genuinely and authentically care about people. Returning to what I said on Rosh Hashanah, this is what sold me on moving to the Agudas community. *YOU ALL* genuinely and authentically care (Gather, Inc).

Just as the Jewish holidays are cyclical, pushing us to go deeper within ourselves and our community each year, so too is the cycle of building relationships. The cycle begins with *meeting* people where they are. Get out into the world and start connecting with others. Introduce yourself. Invite people to coffee. Be the fat penguin and break the ice! *Listen* to people and ask open and honest questions. Learn their story. From an individual's story, we can *connect* them to specific opportunities and facilitate additional introductions. Be a *network* weaver! Notice who you are and aren't in relationship with, and connect with people who may be uninvolved or have been excluded or made to feel unwelcome. *Co-create* experiences that speak to what you have learned and meet the needs of our community. *Deepen* the relationships you have made. Follow up and continue learning people's stories. Show them you miss them when they don't show up. This is what it means to build relationships. And do you know who's responsible for doing this? ALL OF US.

I can certainly caffeinate myself with many 1:1 coffees, but a true relational community is not built on how many people know *my* favorite brand of socks. It is built upon a foundation of

community members cultivating and deepening relationships with each other. Every single person here has access to our synagogue directory. Imagine what it would feel like if you picked one person a month that you don't know and reached out, inviting them to have coffee, lunch, or even a Shabbat dinner. Imagine what it would feel like if you walked into this space for the first time and immediately someone invited you to join them for kiddish, a Sunday afternoon walk in the neighborhood, or an evening out. Imagine if the word on the street about Agudas Achim is that if you walk in these doors alone, you *will* walk out with a new friend. As Emerson once said, "The only way to have a friend is to be one." If we did all of this, we would all have more people to go with.

A few weeks ago, Jodi and I began streaming the hit show *The Bear*. For those who haven't watched the show, it rests on a simple premise: An elite New York City chef, Carmy, returns home to Chicago after his drug-addict older brother dies by suicide, leaving him the local family sandwich shop. Of course, Carmy doesn't just inherit the sandwich shop; he also inherits its employees, a collection of individuals who interact with high intensity and aggression. The most interesting of all the characters is Richie. Just as you are about to write him off as the villain of the show, you realize that Richie is in immense pain. He just buried his best friend. He's estranged from his now ex-wife. He spends too little time with his young daughter. He's lost so much. People are drawn to Richie because we *know* him. We know people *like* him. In some ways, we might even *be* him – especially if we've suffered profound loss. What makes his character and this show so powerful is its reminder that every individual, especially those of us in pain, will not be left behind. Everyone has a place where they truly belong (NYT, 16 July 2023). Agudas Achim can be that place.

I close with the story of Navy Aviator LT Roy Cash. Cash was the first F-4J pilot to shoot down a MiG in the Vietnam War. Four years later, the Vietnamese returned the favor. Cash was coming over the Gulf of Tonkin towards a little island thought to be uninhabited. Turns out it was loaded with anti-aircraft artillery. Cash's plane was shot. His F-4 turned sideways, his stick froze, and he had no choice but to eject. As soon as his shoot opened, he hit the water. And then, the mechanism that's supposed to release the parachute failed. It was Father's Day 1972, he had a two-year-old son at home, and his parachute was filling with water, primed to pull him down to the ocean floor. With water up to his neck, Cash heard the sound of a chopper. A search and rescue swimmer jumped in the water. There was blood everywhere, the blood of the rescue swimmer cutting himself as he was cutting the lines of Cash's shoot. Following a near-death experience, that rescue swimmer successfully brought LT Cash back to safety aboard the USS Kittyhawk.

I share this story because this is where so many people are right now. People are in the water, and they are drowning. They are up to their neck, and they feel alone. More than ever, they need a friend, a member of the community, someone who cares to jump in the water and grab their hand. I learned the story of LT Roy Cash directly from his son, the current Deputy Chief of Chaplains for the USN, at that conference in Miami. You see, when you reach out and offer a hand, not only does it bless an individual, but it blesses generations to come.

Two years ago, after nearly 18 months of spiritually feeling alone, deprived of the eye contact and warm embrace of this community, and feeling like I had nothing left to give, *I* was that injured pilot in the water. I was drowning. And then, little by little, we came back together. We hugged again. We shook hands. We gazed into each other's eyes. We had meals together. We learned together. We grieved together. We celebrated together. We traveled to Israel together. Each and every one of you, in your own small way, pulled me out of the water. And for that, I Love You.

The community we want and the community we need is within our grasp. All it takes is a commitment to seeing the humanity in every person and cultivating deep relationships. Together, we are creating a place where the greatest epidemic in America finds its greatest cure. Remember, we don't need more programs to go to. We just need more people to go with...and those people are YOU.