

Building a Network of Compassion

Rabbi Mara Young

Kol Nidre 5782/2021

Rutger Bregman is a Danish historian and writer. In his most recent book, *Humankind*, he digs into the archaeological record, travelling back to the dawn of modern humanity, when Homo Sapiens (that's us) edged out Neanderthals to dominate the sacred timeline of our species.

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, Homo Sapiens and Neanderthals were two species of human living in the Euro-Asian area. About 40,000 years ago, though, Neanderthals went extinct, fully replaced by Homo Sapiens.

There have been many theories as to why our early ancestors came out victorious. Some say Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens intermingled, with the Neanderthal genetic code assimilating into the human genome. Some say disease or a climatic event took Neanderthals out. More nefarious theories include Homo Sapiens committing a genocide against the Neanderthals.

But Rutger Bregman doesn't like any of these theories, especially the last one. For starters, he dismisses them for lack of archeological evidence. Secondly, if you closely adhere to the rules of Darwinism, Neanderthals should have won the day in any of these scenarios - disease, climate change, war, etc. Forget what you know from pop culture: Neanderthals were anything but stupid. Their brains were bigger; their bodies were stronger. They had technology and culture. Physically, and maybe even intellectually, they were better equipped hominids.

So what gives?

Homo Sapiens had one ironic advantage: our smaller brains and more feeble bodies made us more dependent on one another. Living in community was the only way to survive. And in order for these more complex communities to work, we had to endear ourselves to one another. We had to become friendly and emotive. Our uniquely humane personality was our evolutionary advantage. Bregman explains:

"Human beings, it turns out, are ultrasocial learning machines. We're born to learn, to bond and to play. Maybe it's not so strange, then, that blushing is the only human expression that's uniquely human. Blushing, after all, is quintessentially social - it's people showing they care what others think, which fosters trust and enables cooperation.

Humans, in short, are anything but poker-faced. We constantly leak emotions and are hardwired to relate to the people around us. But far from being a handicap, this is our true superpower, because sociable people aren't only more fun to be around, in the end they're smarter too."

Bregman provides this analogy: if Neanderthals were like wolves, then Homo Sapiens were like domesticated dogs - the puppies of the prehistoric world. Not necessarily as cunning, but certainly cuter! Our friendly nature is what caused us to proliferate more

than our wolfy Neanderthal cousins. Our broader networks and propensity for collaboration provided better shelter and protection than brute strength ever could.

Or, otherwise put: "If Neanderthals were a super-fast computer, we were an old-fashioned PC - [but] WITH wifi. We were slower but better connected."

If this is our genetic nature, then Jewish text, tradition and community is like a WiFi booster. Sure, all humans have the innate desire to care for one another, but organized religion can take that skill a step further, honing the ability.

When we gather, particularly on the High Holy Days, we ask: how may we support one another in the endeavor of being human?

The prayers we uttered tonight - Kol Nidre, Ashamnu - are all written in the plural. But this isn't the "royal we," some linguistic flourish.

The prayers could have as easily been written in the singular: "All my vows are void...I have sinned...I have betrayed," but we recite them together in an act of alliance. Repentance requires vulnerability. We allow ourselves to become vulnerable because we know we have physical and emotional support around us.

And we also know the harder truth: that within our community, we may be the cause of someone else's anguish. The person beside us, or a few rows back, could be the source of ours. A fractured community does nothing to help us, evolutionarily or otherwise.

Our prayers aim to mend the schism. Reason dictates that if we are the source of one another's pain, we can be the source of one another's reprieve. By engaging in communal atonement, we support one another in a vulnerable state *and* we engage in an act of communal forgiveness. The whole ritual restores communal trust. With this trust reinstated, we can carry on building relationships and expanding our protective network.

Religion didn't evolve as a form of control, folks. Religion is a vehicle for strengthening our biological inclinations and adaptive advantages.

This also goes beyond physical protection and the tangible payoff of a spiritually united tribe. By joining a supportive community, we also find an identity and purpose.

According to Rav Kook, "the soul of the individual is drawn from ... the community, the community bestowing a soul upon the individual. One who considers severing [oneself] from their people must sever [their] soul from the source of its vitality. Therefore each individual Jew is greatly in need of the community."

But you know this, right? No one is really going to argue that "community is bad."

Yet it is hard to speak of the value of the “Broadband Homo Sapien network” when we are living in a time of shrinking social circles. We have all set limits on who we are willing to engage - either physically and emotionally. Our souls are more cut off than ever, making vitality, self-actualization and moments of transcendence more elusive than ever.

First, I’ll state the obvious: our physical distancing has led to social-emotional distancing. The COVID vaccine seemed like a light leading us into a field of gathering and abundance. Just as we started to reunite with family and friends who we had cut ourselves off from, the Delta variant and its unpredictability has driven us back into our caves. We’ve tightened our circles again and a shadow of distrust has spread over all of our interactions. Even tonight, our community is not physically present with one another because of this fear.

Who is safe to be around? It’s hard to know. Every playdate, every BBQ, walking into a store feels like a risk. I send my two unvaccinated children to school everyday, just praying that they stay safe and don’t bring anything home with them. Everyday is a gamble. (For those who don’t know, my children are both under the age of 12, and therefore cannot be vaccinated yet).

But we all choose our own risk factors, trying to live life in community when it’s not very safe to do so. This anxiety is much too much for us to bear and yet we continue to carry the load, now almost 2 years going.

All that said, I would argue that while the Delta surge has made it stressful to plan the High Holy Days from a pandemic perspective, these Holy Days have come at the perfect time this year - Jewish ritual WiFi booster if we ever needed one! They cut through the pandemic and say “we will find a way to gather nonetheless: online, in-person, wherever!” They have never felt more life-affirming to me.

Exit this sacred space, though, and you’re going to find a fractured world, full of distrust. I’m talking about more than our COVID-related withdrawal from one another. Take a step into the broader Jewish community, for example, and you’ll find intense polarization. The most recent Pew study exposes a cavernous rift between progressive Jews and orthodox Jews - a family that sees no resemblance in one another. We feel like strangers.

Expand from our Jewish circles to the American people as a whole. Whereas once it was just a political aisle that split us, now we have retreated into our political caves, so deep and so dark that we don’t even know how to describe the people outside of them as anything less than a nightmare. For most of us, if we do an accounting of how many friends we have of another political party, or race, or socio-economic status, we’ll find we come up very short.

Our caves of distrust have extinguished healthy debate and leave little room or opportunity for remorse, regret and apology. We think that our stone-honed chamber will

offer us protection, but it prevents us from doing the thing we humans are supposed to do: re-connect, repair, and renew our relationships.

The Talmud (Gittin 55b-56a) tells us that losing sight of one another's humanity, and neglecting our need to connect even with our so-called "enemy," leads to terrible things - even the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The rabbis tell this story:

There was a certain man who had a friend named Katzma. This same man had an enemy named Bar Katmza. This certain man planned a large party and said to his servant: go bring this invitation to my friend Kamtza. The servant went out and mistakenly brought the invitation to Bar Katmza.

The day of the party came and the host saw his enemy, sitting among the distinguished guests at the feast table. "What are you doing here?" he raged. "Get up, get out and leave."

"I'm already here," Bar Katmza replied. "Please don't embarrass me by making me leave. I'll pay you for whatever I eat and drink."

"No. Leave."

"I'll pay you for half the feast! Just don't embarrass me."

"No. Leave."

"I'll pay for the whole feast! Just let me stay."

At that point, the man took Bar Katmza by his arm, stood him up, and threw him out the door. After being cast out, Bar Katmza said to himself, "The sages were all sitting there and did nothing to protest my treatment or to reduce my humiliation. They must agree with what he did."

Bar Katmza then went and told the Romans that the Jews were mounting a rebellion...and the rest is Jerusalem-destroying history.

There are so many levels of failure here. Had Bar Katmza found a way to suffer his humiliation without violent retaliation, Jerusalem would have survived. Had the sages spoken up to temper the humiliation, Jerusalem would have survived. Had the host allowed Bar Katmza to stay, even seen the mistake as a Divine intervention - a happy accident that could have mended their animosity, Jerusalem would have remained.

To call out an enemy without any opportunity for teshuva, to designate someone an eternal adversary without any opportunity for like-mindedness, is to cause destruction with our own hands. Our tradition and evolution is clear: separation is death.

Yom Kippur is all about opening ourselves and opening our community up to the possibility of teshuvah - the true turning of our souls. Tonight, we stand before heaven as complete equals. We shed our titles, our political affiliations, we humble ourselves in such a way that we are guided back to one another. We stand vulnerable, with no choice but to huddle together and support one another's humanity - speaking of "we" and not "I."

If we homo sapiens are to survive at all, we must reconnect with the primitive puppy within us. Indeed, this type of "drawing closer" could positively impact the environment, poverty and war. If we could just care more about others, draw ourselves spiritually and physically closer to them, we may care enough to make different choices, ones that may not benefit us, but could change the life of another.

Our sociability - our compassion - is our superpower. Jewish tradition has many words for compassion, and we hear them again and again on these High Holy Days as names for God: *Adonai, Adonai. El rachum v'chanun. Erech apayim v'rav hesed v'emet*. God of compassion and mercy; slow to anger and plentiful in kindness.

We don't describe God for God's benefit. God knows very well what God is. And we know that God is already all of these things too. Yet we still enumerate these names of compassion, reciting the litany as charge to ourselves: just try to claim one of these titles this year. Can you call yourself a person of compassion? Merciful? Slow to anger? Kind? Choose one and make it describe you, you Homo Sapien.

It's in our DNA. But like anything in the genetic code, it is not expressed unless called upon.

First, we start with taking our own temperatures. We need to get a handle on the vitriol in our own hearts...the decision many of us have made that there are two sides to everything and the other side is wrong. As Covid closed our circles and everything became political, distrust and disdain for the other side has grown. Pick one area of your life where you're going to allow compassion to transverse that wall. Just one.

Unetaneh tokef, the quintessential prayer of the High Holy Days, reminds us how small, how fleeting, how vulnerable we all are. Who shall live and who shall die? Despite all our efforts, we humans cannot stop time or fate. Who by fire? Who by water? Despite the great advances of medicine and technology, we are still at odds with nature. We need each other just as much as our early hominid ancestors needed each other.

Will we live? We don't know. It's an impossible question. How will we live? Well that is most certainly within our control.

Unetaneh Tokeif explains: Through tefillah - prayer, therapy, teshuva - repairing relationships, and tzedakah - sharing wealth and resources, we can withstand the harshness of existence. Through these three outward, social actions, we can withstand the harshness of a world still in its archaeological infancy. By drawing into relationship with each other, we become more fully human.

CLOSING PRAYER

The anthropologist Margaret Mead was onto compassion as an adaptive trait long before Rutger Bregman. When Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization, she did not mention fishhooks or cave drawings or grinding stones. The first sign of civilization in ancient culture, she said, was a femur that had been broken and then healed. She explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you're dead. You cannot run from danger, you can't get to the river to drink and you can't hunt or search for food. You are prey to prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

A healed femur, though, tells us that another person has taken the time to stay with the person who was injured. They cared for the wound and carried that person to safety, tending to them through recovery. That process is where civilization started.¹

Adonai, Adonai, God of compassion and mercy, help us to be like you - slow to anger, plentiful in kindness, so that we may find our way back to each other and back to you - the Eternal Source of Life. Amen.

¹ The analysis of Ira Byock, American physician and public advocate.