

Together, Again?
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5782
September 6, 2021

Friends, it is supposed to be a moment of joy, to celebrate the new year. I want to reflect for a moment, though, on the month we have had in the world around us. The pandemic peaking when we thought it would crest. California and the West aflame again. Record-breaking heat and rainfall alike. Flooding from Louisiana to Boston. Subways shut down in New York. Insanity and insurrection in civic life. The traumatic end of a seemingly unwinnable war – and with it, moral dilemmas everywhere in the wake of our withdrawal, including a chilling future for Afghani women, and the question of our commitment to so many who were there for us. And, even now, Larry howling a bit to the northeast, a Cat 3 which thankfully passed us by. And this morning an island wide outage that looked like it was going to last a long time.

It's... a lot. Let us pause for a moment, to think of those who have lost homes, or health. Let us take a moment to feel a sense of connection to everyone and everywhere, and be thankful for what we do have.

“Why do we call it the High Holy Days?” asks one Jewish comedian. “Because,” she says, “people go up to each other and say ‘Hi, how are you? What’s it been – a year?’”

This year, though, it was not a matter of choice which kept us away – from here, or from each other. Right now, it is even hard to see to say “hi,” or even to recognize one another, behind these masks. Disease and distancing remind us of the need, the importance, and the power... of being together.

A college friend was – is – a wry commentator on the absurdities of daily life. One of his riffs was on the exuberant tone of promotional material, the contradictions of assertive advertisements. He mocked the supposed sophistication of wine tasters, who came up with comments like: “subtle, yet robust.” My favorite line of his may be when he poked fun of an imaginary pair of musicians in a combined concert: “together, again, for the first time.”

And yet, there is something to that statement this year. Here we are, together, again, yes. In part. In person, yes, but in a new way. And connected beyond this place, beyond this sacred space, potentially, with an entire world. It is, then, “here again.” But it is also, as something new, “for the first time.”

My friends, I would like to speak with you about what it means to be together, about connection and the human condition, and how – even with deep and real loss – we somehow might come out of this crisis healthier and happier than we were. Or, if that is too much to hope for, how we can work towards a somewhat better place, out of all this upheaval.

Years before the dawn of modernity, with machines and electricity and a seemingly magical power unimaginable in the Middle Ages, our sages asked a prescient question, pushing the boundaries of the imagination beyond anything possible at the time.

Consider the *golem*, the artificial anthropoid, the massive lump of clay animated by the divine name, inscribed on its forehead by those who dabbled in the mystic arts. The golem is best known from its probably inaccurate attribution to Rabbi Judah Loew, said to have created the creature to defend the Jews of Prague in the 16th century. Echoes of the legend reappear with the tale of Frankenstein, and, indeed, even in “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.”

Once imagined, of course, rabbis hearing the story just have to ask arcane and annoying questions of Jewish law which could only have occurred to them. So, Mr. Golem, hanging around the shul. Mystical power, shmystical power – it’s time to daven! Would a golem... can an artificial human being... count in a minyan?

Let’s go to the more familiar world of Star Trek. Let’s say Commander Data converts to Judaism. So, nu? What about him? Would he count in that minimum quorum we need, to engage in communal prayer?

One of my children is involved with this world of robotics. And many of us are intrigued by the promise and peril in this emerging field of artificial intelligence.

The moral dilemmas are real, and they are here: we already have unmanned drones. Might decisions of when to fire, and at what target, be outsourced to a machine, beyond the human hand and heart?

This is real. Someone I know, from here, just had surgery at the Cleveland Clinic in Florida, entirely performed by a robot, with doctors giving orders from another room!

But we haven't, quite, gotten to a fully functioning android. The screening we do at the door now is for shots, not basic DNA. (And anyway, sometimes we are sufficiently short of a minyan that I have considered counting not only a Torah, which is allowed, but also our iguana.)

There is, though, a question before us. With caution – and we hope it is enough! -- some of us are here in person. Other are here online. It may be through flickering images or momentary freezes or voice replications over an omniscient sounding speaker, but you are “here.” The question is: **what does it mean, in our world, and in our lives, to come together?**

I am not sure I have the words to really capture what we are all going through. We feel history unfolding! We know, even as it happens, that this is something we will tell our grandchildren about many years from now.

But we are... just... worn... out. A colleague said he felt like a shofar, a hardened shell on the surface, and hollow on the inside.

There is a threat to our bodies. But this time also tears at the soul. Along with lost lives is a kind of pervasive underlying sense of what else we have missed: graduations and weddings, hugs and holding hands, just being “with” others.

The President’s refers to “empty seats at the table.” That is obviously the worst, of course. But even beyond that, this is just overwhelming. Cancelled plans and constant adjustments and incessant judgement and clinging anxiety and the crazy workarounds pile on to sap the spirit. There is no respite, no safe space, no sense of anything steady or reliable or consistent in our lives.

And the ride, the roller coaster ride. A miracle, a medical miracle – shots in the arm with the promise of progress, relief, reconnection -- only to be slammed back by derision, division, and Delta alike.

A lot is at stake here. Our very lives depend on getting this right. But no one is sure what is the right thing to do. And everyone seems completely convinced that what others do is wrong. More than just tempers flare; fists fly and bullets explode. Our collective frustration has reached a boiling point. What a stew! It is ripping us apart.

Late last year, Dr. Vivek Murthy, now in serving for the second time as Surgeon General of the United States, published a book called *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection*. An Author’s Note at the beginning

addresses ways in which the pandemic exacerbates the issue, but the manuscript was finished before the virus hit.

He writes of how his training focused on physical ailments, only to find the state of the body was intertwined with heart and soul and mind. One of his first patients had won the lottery and followed the fantasies you might imagine. He quit a job he no longer needed, left a neighborhood where he once felt at home. In doing so, he lost connections, community, and a sense of purpose in his life.

Shortly after he was first appointed as Surgeon General, Murthy went on a listening tour. What he found, in neighborhoods of different colors and class, across all other lines, was a pandemic which preceded COVID. It was a pervasive feeling of... loneliness.

It has been 25 years since the original essay form of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* first appeared. He pointed to the loss of leagues and the decline in people doing things together as a red flag for communal ties, fraying and fading fast.

Since then, we have learned that staring into screens – something some of us are doing at this very moment, a vehicle we thought would offer us the world – has the potential to create bubbles of isolation as well.* To reach out to the great beyond through a box held in your hand... you literally have to tamp down on the attention you pay to your own peripheral vision, that which is physical and present and real all around you.

And the explosion of niche news, targeted media, information sorted and distributed by algorithm, this highly touted freedom of choice, poster child for infinite options -- instead of bridging differences and building ties, all this merely gathers in one place those of overlapping outlook and opinion.

To me, literally on an island, living far from friends and family, technology has been a blessing and a gift, maintaining ties, even enabling an expanding circle of connection. Services, study and other experiences this past year draw “regulars” from St. Thomas, but also, to name just a few places, St. Croix, Puerto Rico, Tortola, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia and Washington DC, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Maine, Connecticut, Arizona, California, Washington state, Ohio, Illinois, Canada, Israel... and Australia. It is amazing! It is a miracle! It is wonderful! And I expect much of this form of connection to continue!

And yet, when we sing “*yitgadal, viyitkadash, sheih rabbah*” and the response is either dead silence -- everyone is on mute -- or cacophony, because the tech can’t carry all voices at once, something is missing. And to hear, now, call *and response*... Look, don’t get me wrong. Zoom has been a lifesaver. But personal presence is also... essential. It is a basic human need.

There is a reason why we have the concept of a minyan. There is, indeed, a minimum threshold of personal presence to transform ourselves, from a collection of individuals into a community.

People are different, of course. Meyers-Briggs tests tell us that if we did not know it already. But I truly believe that, while even extroverts can be drained from too much interaction... even introverts can feel lonely. For all of us, in varying amounts, some level of human connection is a necessary nutrient for a healthy and happy life.

So what can we do to – to borrow a phrase – build back better?

When I was a rabbi in Erie, Pennsylvania, I encountered an old tradition, from a distant predecessor. At the dawn of summer, at the end the religious school year, he would gather the kids and he would say: “*kinderlach*... children. This summer I want you to do three things. I want you to take a long walk. I want you to read a good book. And I want you to make a new friend.”

I later learned this was not unique to Erie. Apparently, it was a widespread custom in many synagogues. But this call, for attention to the physical, the mental and the social remains important, even now.

Some of us have been taking walks. And some have been reading, when not binge-watching Netflix. It is the social which presents the greatest struggle. And it is the core of my message for you now.

Make a new friend. That was easy to do, for most of us, in an intense and immersive setting – camp, or college, eating and learning and playing and together. It gets harder, however, the older we get. Here, at least, are a few suggestions. Some are obvious, and these are things you already do. This is meant as a reminder to me as it is aimed at any of you.

- **Reach out online.** All these new people we meet in our virtual lives. Send a private message, set up a time, get to know someone better.
- **Find a circle of similar interests.** Group activities are still essential, when safe: a Book Club, a sewing circle, Mah Jongg, wine tasters. The Chili Cookoff, King of the Wing. There were monthly game nights in Red Hook, here – until the pandemic came, and the family who organized it left the island. Group activities of any kind are important – those which consciously or easily mix ages and family structures are best.
- **Be a good host; be aware of guests.** Once we are back, a reminder: it will be so easy, so tempting, to catch up and be caught up in a closed circle of current friends. We literally stand in such a way to block others out. This is hard, here, with so many tourists, times when visitors here for the first time outnumber our own congregation. But the first and most important rule of building a community: every time you see someone new, approach, reach out, connect! The danger of smothering someone is far less... than the risk, the danger...*the sin...* that someone new should come, and no one but the rabbi or cantor talks to them!
- **Finally, open your heart – and your home.** Going “out” is good – but it is neutral ground. This may be uncomfortable. And this is hard on an island with steep hills, ever-present potholes, and no place to park. Plus, we all have different means, different abilities to do this and different kinds of space. But deeper bonds grow not just by going out. They come, even more, even more, from letting “in.” I hope, once we feel safe doing so again, I hope we can do more than meet up at a restaurant. I hope we can open our doors -- our homes – to one another.

It occurs to me, with all of this, that I do not even know all my neighbors.

After four years here, I have not yet met those who live next to and around me!

Two Hebrew terms come to mind, both a challenge at a time of COVID. The first, the Torah’s phrase for close connection, is *panim el panim*. Intimacy, and relationship, really being with another is called, as in English: “face to face.”

And then, in Modern Hebrew, a sense of being physically close and socially connected, is the term “*arba aynayim*.” “Four eyes,” looking at one another. Looking, as it were, into one another.

In the book of Genesis, we encounter Jacob, isolated and afraid on a long journey home. It was night, and the text even says, “Jacob was left alone.” And at the moment when the dark begins to fade and a hint of dawn is in the sky, the moment when Jacob is transformed into Israel, the name he bears and shares with all of us as a collective whole, we read the following words:

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֵנִי כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר וַיֹּאמֶר לָא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָּ כִּי אִם־בְּרַכְתָּנִי

This is usually translated as the force which drags Jacob down, which is weighing upon him, demanding: “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” And Jacob responds: “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”

There are times, I know, we do need to let go. That is a great lesson.

But I want to suggest a new take on an old story. Perhaps for you, for me, for us, for now, blessings flow *from* hanging on. From holding. From *not* letting go of one another! Hang on. Hold on. We are all in this together.

These modern tablets, the machines, the robots, the tech in our hands, these are tools, and we use them as best we can. But they are not replacements for the real, the personal, the human.

With all the challenges before us, let us not wait a year, or years, to see each other again. For our own sake, let’s find the ways, now, to commit, to connect, to find new friends, and to make community real.

L’shanah Tovah.