

You Are Not Alone - Building Bridges of Connection
Kol Nidrei 5785
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Not long after I arrived in San Antonio, I started to create our Chesed- Caring Committee- a group of congregants and staff that would extend our pastoral reach and connect with folks who might appreciate some extra attention.

Many loving and talented people volunteered to be part of the project and were eager to receive training, make friendly phone calls and set up visits. Our staff rang our members who were 80 years and older to ask them if they would like to be assigned a friend. But to my surprise the vast majority of them politely declined. It seemed that many of them felt uncomfortable receiving attention from someone they didn't know...yet, even if they, too, were a member of Temple Beth-El.

Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. It's hard to ask for help. We might feel shy, embarrassed, or self-conscious. It can be the same when someone offers help, even if we know them well.¹ It feels safer to say, "no thank you."

So much has been written and said about the loneliness epidemic in America.² We may have the ability to 'be connected' like never before, but a lot of that 'connecting' can feel superficial. Our Facebook and Instagram posts share only what we want people to see- the best pictures, the happiest moments. And we are more likely to reach out by text or email rather than a phone call or a face-to-face visit. It's more convenient, but it's also less intimate and less satisfying. Gone are the days when everyone in a community knew each other and the business of caring for each other unfolded in an organic way.

Brene Brown affirms that "we are psychologically, emotionally, cognitively and spiritually hardwired for connection, love and belonging..."³ So why are we so lonely? What has happened that makes us so reluctant to take a chance and let others in?

Political polarization is partly to blame, so is economic inequality, but most damaging is an American cultural assumption that it's every person for themselves.⁴ It doesn't have to be this

¹ "Why didn't you just ask?" Underestimating the discomfort of help-seeking - ScienceDirect.

² <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>

³ Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead* (New York: Avery, 2012), 68, 10

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/13/magazine/robert-putnam-interview.html>

way. In a recent documentary about his life's work, *Join or Die*, political scientist Robert Putnam emphasizes how essential being a part of even one group, one club, one community can be to our emotional and physical health. By creating a strong bond with others, we are strengthened ourselves.

This idea has always been a core value of Judaism. We are taught our whole lives *v'ahavta l'rey-echa k'mocha*—to 'Love thy Neighbor as thyself,' and the Talmudic teaching, *Kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*—all of Israel are responsible for each other, links Jews around the world wherever they may be. We have an innate obligation to be there for each other.

What could emphasize these truths more than our High Holy Days, especially Yom Kippur. Each year at this season we reorient our secular individualistic lives and commit to coming to Temple to be with each other, partly by custom, partly by obligation but also by a desire to be something more. For the next 24 hours, as we sit in our sanctuary next to family, near friends, or with total strangers we are united by a desire to better understand who we are, as we imagine what we might yet become⁵, not only as individuals but together as well. A sacred community dedicated to the cultivation of greater mutual concern and shared purpose. A congregation whose members are willing to be vulnerable with each other, and be honest with themselves and an interconnected family that understands that God's presence is felt most authentically when we truly see each other, as we need to be seen.

Commented [GU1]: themselves?

In the Mishnah, the first written collection of Jewish oral traditions, we find a description of the pilgrimage rituals, when hundreds of thousands of people would come to Jerusalem to ascend the Temple Mount and offer their sacrifices of well-being. "All who entered the Temple Mount entered by the right," they wrote. They would circle counterclockwise around the courtyard before exiting close to where they had entered. All except for those to whom something had happened. Those people entered and circled left. Scores of Jews would be streaming into the Temple all moving in the same direction. But those who were suffering, who were grieving, or lonely or sick, walked against the tide for all to see. And every person who passed them was meant to stop and ask: *Mah Lach?* What has happened to you? And they would reply, "I have lost my mother." or "I am ill," or, "I feel alone." And those who walked from right to left would respond, "May God comfort you." Or, "May God give you strength to persevere." Or "May you find peace in our community once more."⁶

⁵ Brous, Sharon, *The Amen Effect*, New York, Avery, 2024, p. 24

⁶ Ibid., adapted.

The rabbis understood, that when we are in a dark place when we might prefer to self-isolate and shut others out, this is just the moment when we *should* show up to be seen and to be heard so that others can see us, feel our pain and offer the comfort we need.

An echo of this ancient custom still exists today. In traditional synagogues a mourner observing shiva (the seven-day period after they have buried a loved one) comes to Friday night services but does not join the congregation until the last verse of Lecha Dodi is sung. Then, as the congregation rises for Boi-Kallah and faces the entrance of the sanctuary... they enter. This is partly because it's seen as inappropriate to partake in joyful activities while one is in mourning, but more importantly the delayed entrance allows them to be seen by others--so that community members know who to approach with a kind word and a hug and who might need a friendly check in call or a meal dropped off for them.

I think this custom sounds so powerful, but I also know that for many of us the thought of being so exposed, so seen, feels deeply uncomfortable. We don't like being looked at, at least not in a moment of grief or vulnerability. But that's because we lack trust. Trust that people will be kind rather than judgmental. Trust that people will be able to empathize with our suffering. And trust that they will be there when we need them, not just when it's convenient but when we require their presence most.... even if we don't know how to ask.

So how do we cultivate this trustworthiness in ourselves and find it in others? Robert Putnam would say it starts with showing up regularly. In his 2000 best seller, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and revival of American Community*, Putnam not only emphasized how important joining a club is to our physical and social health and happiness but also, how these affiliations help us "learn that you can trust other people, and learn...what you need to do to maintain trust....You learn that you can care for people and people can care for you, even people that are different (from you)...."⁷

Putnam is famous for popularizing the idea of social capital as a way to describe the value of relationships between people and how they can help a society or community function. And he differentiates between what he calls bonding social capital and bridging social capital.

When we feel drawn to people who are like us, whether it's because we share similar beliefs, or similar interests, or we are at the same phase of life, we're investing in bonding social capital. But Putnam sees particular value in *bridging* social capital— creating connections with people of a different generation or a different gender or a different religion or different political views.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/13/magazine/robert-putnam-interview.html>

What the differences are is not that important, it's that you invest in other people who help you think about the world in different ways and learn to trust others even if you disagree on many things. It's the ability to be in meaningful relationships with people who *are* different from you, that strengthens society as a whole, making us all more resilient in our diversity.

How wonderful then, to know that the Hebrew word for trust is Emunah- which can also be translated as belief or faith. Not just faith in God, but faith in each other.

Part of cultivating trustworthiness is the willingness to be honest with others and ourselves. Just a few weeks ago, I was greatly moved by part of a d'var Torah given by Evan Rosenberg, one of our bar mitzvah students.

He wrote:

"Everyone has situations where we tend to ignore what is going on around us. Maybe because it makes us sad or uncomfortable, but Torah reminds us that no matter what, we can't look away....When I come to Temple...I see several unhoused people on roads and highways... I have generally looked away from these people and ignored their reality because I feel really badly for them and it makes me feel uncomfortable. I feel like I am not able to do much to change their lives. However,...the Torah tells me that I must not remain indifferent. Even a smile, which is a small gesture, may seem like nothing, but for them, it is more significant, and makes them feel acknowledged. I have made it my goal to not look away and try to find ways to help others in need...." Wise and courageous words from a 13 year old.

It can be so challenging, not to walk away, not to avert our gaze. It can feel very uncomfortable to reach out when we know someone is struggling, or suffering. Because we aren't sure what to say when we know that they are not in a good place. And when someone casually asks, "how are you doing?" It can feel scary to admit "I am not okay." It's awkward to be honest and takes real courage to accept help.

Commented [GU2]: maybe reverse these two lines?

But what if we acknowledge our own discomfort, and then make eye contact anyway, or pick up the phone to check in, or commit ourselves to giving someone our full attention? All we truly have to say is "I see you" or "I hear what you are saying."

And what if we gave other people the benefit of the doubt and truthfully acknowledged where we are, and what we are experiencing? When we show ourselves to be open it's easier for them to *offer* connection and consolation. We may hope others will show up for us, but we also have to be willing to let them in. When we are present for each other, when we are vulnerable

with each other, we demonstrate our trustworthiness and build bridges of connection that benefit us and those around us.

Julia Louis-Dreyfus of Seinfeld and Veep fame, has explored this truth with her podcast “Wiser Than Me.” Each week, she has funny, touching, personal conversations with iconic older women who are willing to share the wisdom that only comes with age. She’s spoken with Jane Fonda, Rhea Perlman, Diane von Furstenberg, Carol Burnett and Sally Fields among others. And by highlighting their stories, self-realizations and advice Louis-Dreyfus shows how much we gain when we take the time to really see people...to listen to how they observe the world especially from an angle that is completely different than our own. Through her podcast, Louis-Dreyfus takes the responsibility of expanding her bridging capital seriously. And invites us along for the ride.

I’ve always loved having older friends. When I first became a rabbi and before I had children I didn’t really know anyone my own age at the Temple where I worked. I felt so lucky to be embraced by a group of women (and men) who were almost 20 years older than me. Not only did we enjoy each other’s company, but we each expanded our friendship circles, cultural literacy & social awareness.

25 years later these remain some of my most cherished friendships. And I am grateful for all that I learned from them, as they raised their children, took care of aging parents, and navigated middle age, including me in their lives with open minds and hearts, despite the difference in our age.

These days, when I find myself as that “older friend” to a younger person, I have to smile. First, because I still find it hard to think of myself as ‘an elder’ but also, because it’s such a pleasure to be able to serve as a trusted mentor after others so generously invested in me. I recognize better now how those who befriended me may have felt vulnerable too, as we began to recognize trustworthiness in each other.

Whatever the relationship, each person has to have confidence in the value of their life experiences and each person must be willing to share the good and reveal the bad. To present themselves as the imperfect person that they are who nevertheless is capable and worthy of trust and love.

In Temple times of old there were established rituals that strengthened circles of connection. Sometimes knowing where to go and what to do, helps us move forward when we aren’t sure

what our next steps should be. And though we don't have those same practices today we can still show up in meaningful ways to see and be seen.

Whether this year we enter from the right or the left, from a place of strength and happiness or vulnerability and despair we should recognize the circular nature of life and the certainty that we will not always find ourselves where we are today.

If this year you are in the position to say, "Mah Lach?" What has happened to you? Then listen with an open heart. And if this is the year that you must walk in from the left, against the tide may you find strength in the support of a loving community that makes you feel comfortable enough to share your pain, and trusting enough to enable others to offer you solace through their presence, through their wisdom and through their love.

Yom Kippur is only once a year. Don't let the power of this moment remain here in the sanctuary left behind in a space full of good intentions and hopes. Instead, let us each commit to listening better and sharing more. To open our hearts and to let others in. So that when the shofar is sounded tomorrow night at Neilah we are ready to be more present for each other. In good times and hard times, in the big moments and in the quiet moments in between. In this way we will lift up that *emunah*- the faith, the hope, the trust we wish to build together...as we continue to create a community of chesed-of caring and connection...of trustworthiness deep enough to support us all. **AMEN**