

**Acquire For Yourself a Friend- The Sacred Nature of Friendship**  
**Rosh Hashanah 5783/2022- Rabbi Mara S. Nathan**

At a recent bat mitzvah celebration, I had the opportunity to sit down to lunch with some long-time members of our congregation. I quickly discovered that these four women had known each other most of their lives. Now in their 80s, they were still teasing each other, helping each other out, and thoroughly enjoying each other's company.

Maybe in a place like San Antonio, a big city that feels like a small town, this isn't so unusual. But sharing a meal with a group who has managed to maintain relationships with each other for 60 even 70 + years, made me think about the state of *my* friendships, both those I have cultivated since I arrived here and the ones that I've had for longer. Why do so many friendships fade into the background while others staunchly stand the test of time?

It's worth paying attention to the state of our friendships, because according to Gallup, friendship in America has been in decline for decades. Back in the early 1990s only 3% of Americans said they had no close friends. But by 2021 an online poll put it at 12%. A year into the pandemic, without built in opportunities to see each other at the club, school, gym, a house of worship...and fatigued by the effort of phone calls and zoom meetups 13% of women and 8% of men ages 30-49 said they had lost touch with most of their friends.<sup>1</sup>

This isn't just sad, it's unhealthy. There's a whole lot of research that points to the health benefits of having and keeping friends. From aging well, to lessening anxiety, even depression, heart disease and stroke, our friendships aren't only good for the mind and soul, they nourish our bodies too! And despite what the social media gods want us to believe, we don't have to have thousands of them, because it's not the quantity, it's the quality of our relationships that determines the quality of our lives<sup>2</sup>.

Dr. Esther Perel invites us to think about our friendships as love stories. They are the first relationships we choose for ourselves. (we're born or adopted into our families), they tend to revolve around shared interests, things we inherently have in common and the fun we have together.<sup>3</sup> But most importantly, like *any* committed relationship they require attention, honesty, trust, and forgiveness if they are to last.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.insider.com/americans-no-new-friends-2021-7>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tenpercent.com/podcast-episode/esther-perel-464>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tenpercent.com/podcast-episode/esther-perel-464>

The rabbis of the Talmud thought friendship was special too: As Joshua Ben Perahiah advised: appoint for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge all people with the scale weighted in their favor<sup>4</sup>.

## קִנְיָה לְךָ חֵבֵר

Acquire for yourself a friend....

Each new year, we are encouraged to tend and mend our most cherished ties. To strengthen our bonds with family, with God, with ourselves *and* our friends. So, Rosh Hashanah is the perfect moment to consider why these chosen relationships are so precious.

It's easy to find examples in our tradition of loyal and loving friendships. In the first book of Samuel, we read of an instant connection between David and Jonathan. Immediately after the famous David and Goliath battle, David is brought before King Saul. Jonathan is there too. And from the moment they see each other, they know they will be friends forever: As we read: "When [David] finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself. Jonathan and David made a pact, because [Jonathan] loved him as himself."<sup>5</sup>

Love at first sight is not only a romantic notion. Sometimes the bonds of friendship can feel just as strong. You laugh at each other's jokes and finish each other's sentences. You burst with pride when they get a promotion or conquer that marathon. You are there with a hug, a cup of coffee, maybe a well-mixed cocktail when they need a sympathetic sounding board. You know you can speak the truth, even when it isn't easy to hear. And through it all, your lives, your stories become interwoven, as your relationship flourishes for its own sake.

The Jewish moral discipline of Musar holds up this sort of intense platonic friendship as an ethical ideal<sup>6</sup> referring to it as *dibuk chaverim* or 'cleaving to friends,' including it among such virtues as fear, awe and humility.

Why is friendship so important to the rabbis? Because like *Terumah* - the free will offering the Israelites were invited to give when it came to building the holy tabernacle itself— with true friendship our hearts are moved on their own accord. It compels us to look beyond ourselves, willingly put the needs of others first in a voluntary way and build something sacred together.

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<sup>4</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:6

<sup>5</sup> (I Samuel 18:1-3)

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musar\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musar_movement)

However, loving they may be, our relationships with members of our family can be complicated. A good friendship is usually less so. And because we expect less, it's easier to feel delighted by the love and attention we receive. It feels like a gift freely given. A relationship that speaks to an openness of heart and a generosity of spirit. We all benefit from the sort of love that good friends provide.

Dr. Anna Akbari, a sociologist who often writes about friendship suggests four key questions to consider as we cultivate our closest circle of friends.

**Whom do I learn from?** Do my friends model behavior I admire? Are they generally thoughtful in the choices they make?

**Who challenges me?** Do my friends help me make good decisions? Do they follow through on promises? Do they inspire me to be better and do better?

**Whom can I confide in?** Can I be vulnerable and honest? Do my friends inspire trust?

**With whom do I find joy?** Do we laugh together? Do we enjoy each other? Do my friends add genuine happiness to my life?<sup>7</sup>

These criteria are actually very Jewish. From the rabbinic perspective a friend inspires you to succeed in Torah study. They help you improve your ethical behavior because as it says in the Talmud: “good friends feel free to offer constructive criticism to one another.” And they are people who not only give you good advice, they keep your secrets.<sup>8</sup>

It’s pretty rare to find more than a few friends who are able to fulfill all these criteria. And if you find that you have some friends that meet none of them, it could be an indication that it's time to let them go. But a lack of perfection doesn’t mean a friendship isn’t fulfilling, meaningful and fun. I discuss this with my children often. Because when we expect our friends to be everything, chances are they are going to let us down.

Recently I was exploring this idea with Miriam, who is in 7th grade. She was complaining that her closest friends don’t share her musical tastes. So, I told her, “You are lucky to have best friends, who stand by your side, but they don’t necessarily have to share all your interests.” Maybe you have one friend who loves hip-hop the way you do. They could be your concert buddy. Maybe *you* have a friend who loves musical theater. You can bond at the Majestic.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/smarterliving/how-to-be-a-better-friend>

<sup>8</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/sacred-texts/learn-about-middot/cleaving-friends-middah-dibuk-chaverim>

Maybe the thought of seeing your gym friends is what gets you up and out of bed every single morning.

That's the way I feel about the people I know at CrossFit. This is the most diverse space in my life. My friends range from people in their 20s to their 70s. They are office workers, doctors, military, stay at home parents, retirees. We talk about our families, our travels, our weekend plans and work out hard- for 60 minutes cheering each other on, and then we get into our cars and go on with our day.

There is genuine affection and connection between us, but because our commitment to each other is limited in time and space, it is also uncomplicated, there is something very special about these niche kinds of friendships too.

But whatever level of relationship we seek, we can't have good friends if we aren't good friends ourselves. So, from time to time, it's good to self-assess. In the same way these days of repentance require us to grant forgiveness and ask for forgiveness, we could all benefit from asking ourselves, "what kind of friend am I"?

How am I there for my friends?

How have I shown up?

Am I the one who is argumentative or always talking about myself?

Do I say or do things to diminish my friend's joy?

Am I too demanding? Judgmental? Emotionally unavailable?

No one is a perfect friend all the time. We all have our moments. But a solid friendship is one where both people can bounce back from intentional and unintentional slights. "It's not the lack of conflict that determines a relationship's success," said Mahzad Hojjat, a professor of psychology who studies friendship "It's how the conflict is resolved."<sup>9</sup>

This rings true when I think about both my closest and longest lasting friendships. At times we've all acted selfishly or been neglectful. We've been jealous and ungenerous. But we've also been endlessly patient and super attentive. And even if we aren't able to be together as much as we'd like, when we *do* get the chance- it's usually as if no time has passed at all. All the times we've cried together, laughed together and shown up for each other; the stories of our lives together remain strongly intertwined and so it feels natural- to want to do the work required- to keep the love alive.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/01/well/family/curate-friends.html>

In her book the Art of Gathering, Priya Parker writes movingly about the most powerful ways to gather friends together. At her parties, she invites her guests to each answer the same question with a personal story or insight that lets people into their lives. Not only does this create an interesting evening (as long as there is someone who keeps everything moving along), it also fosters a sense of connection and deeper knowing among everyone. It helps strengthen existing friendships and even sparks new ones.<sup>10</sup>

For me the most compelling part of this practice is the opportunity to connect story to story- life to life. It enables each person to be heard and seen and also feel valued. It's like a microcosm of how best to cultivate our friendships and keep them strong-- showing people definitively how important they are to you and your life.

Rabbi Mordechai of Lechovitz taught: Friendship is like a stone. A stone has no value, but when you rub two stones together properly, sparks of fire emerge.<sup>11</sup> The amount of time we have known each other, the interests we share, the proximity of our lives-- they're meaningless if we do not make the effort to express through our words and deeds why is it that we are drawn to each other.

If friendships are like love stories, then we should treat them with care.

## קִנְיָה לְךָ חֵבֵר

To acquire for yourself a friend takes more than affinity. It requires us to be thoughtful, vulnerable, forgiving and present. To give of our hearts and be willing to open our lives to another. When we are fortunate enough to find that person or persons, we see how added sparks of love and light fill our lives.

So may we each be blessed with deep and meaningful friendships as we aspire to be friends worthy of such special love.

AMEN

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<sup>10</sup> Priya Parker, **The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters**

<sup>11</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/sacred-texts/learn-about-middot/cleaving-friends-middah-dibuk-chaverim>