

Dependence and Inter-Dependence: On Each Other and With God

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As many of you know, my father Harold (z"l) passed away just before his 89th birthday a little over four months ago. Until that time, I **thought** I knew a whole lot about death and mourning. After all, I was an expert in the wisdom of Jewish ritual and Jewish mourning practices. But here's what I have learned since: Many of the things that I thought I knew about death and mourning and the beauty of Jewish rituals around death were things that I knew from a distance. It turned out that **being** the mourner was a far different experience than **accompanying** others through the mourning process.

My process of grieving was made infinitely more bearable by a myriad of actions and gestures—many of them made by members of this congregation and of this community. And as I experienced myself as the recipient of those acts of *hesed*—those acts of kindness—I learned something that I will never forget: each and every one of these gestures mattered. From the hugs; to the meals; to the notes; to the donations of *tzedakah*; to the visits during *shivah*; to the gentle questions of: “And how is your mom doing?” They made a difference. Each and every one of them. So as we begin a New Year together, let me thank you for the love and support I have received from this community; it continues to be a source of comfort and strength.

And so in these past few months I have been reminded about how much community matters. And I have learned that communities that support and nourish one another are places that build bonds of loyalty, cohesion and strength.

There is a new term for this desire for communal solidarity and it speaks to an ancient concept: **tribe**. In fact, **Tribes** is the title of a brilliant new book by Sebastian Junger—a work of history, psychology and anthropology that explores the deep appeal of tribal culture throughout history.

Tribes opens with Benjamin Franklin's observation, decades before the American Revolution, that more than a few English settlers were “escaping into the woods” to join Indian society. Franklin noticed that emigration seemed to go from the civilized to the tribal, but rarely the other way around. White captives of the American Indians, for instance, often did not wish

to be repatriated to colonial society. Sometimes the Indians tried to forcibly return the colonials in a prisoner swap, and still the colonials refused to go. In one case, the Shawanese Indians were compelled to tie up some European women in order to ship them back. After they were returned, the women escaped the colonial towns and ran back to the Indians.

It is indeed astonishing that so many frontiersmen would have cast off the relative comforts of civilization in favor of a way of life that had barely changed in 15,000 years. So what was the attraction? From Junger's perspective, colonial life could be both difficult **and** isolating. In contrast, Junger suggests that the intensely communal nature of an Indian tribe provided a deep sense of **belonging**.

There is a great deal of contemporary evidence to suggest that **belonging** and feeling connected to something larger than ourselves is correlated with mental health and well-being. A study that was published this summer out of the University of North Carolina definitively links the *quality* and *quantity* of social relationships with concrete measures of well-being and overall physical health. The study shows that aging adults live longer if they have more social connections affirming that social connections reduce health risk in each stage of life. It turns out that we live better lives when we are more connected to one another, and when we can depend on one another and feel that we belong.

Indeed, human beings crave a sense of **belonging**. This crucial idea is at the heart of the thinking of one of the 20th Century's most important Jewish theologians: Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan. Kaplan believed that the key to Jewish survival and our ability to flourish over the centuries was a result of our tradition's ability to create that sense of **tribe**—that deep sense of **belonging**.

Kaplan was well-known for illustrating this point using an analogy from grammar and distinguishing between **dependent** and **independent** nouns. **Independent** nouns don't need anything else to be what they are. A blade of grass is just a blade of grass; it is not defined by any other blade of grass surrounding it. And a table is just a table; it might sit in a kitchen or a dining room or a cafeteria. But it is still a table. A fence can just be a fence.

But a **dependent** noun only exists in relationship to something else. A daughter cannot be just a daughter in general. A daughter is the daughter of a particular parent or parents—adopted or biological. A President cannot just be a President. A President—like Arthur Frankel—is the President of something—in this case, of Beth Sholom Congregation. A teacher is not a teacher unless that teacher has students.

Rabbi Kaplan taught his students that at our very essence, we human beings are **dependent nouns**. We might be able to **exist** simply by eating, drinking, holding a job and providing for our basic needs in the way that most animals provide for themselves. But to experience the fullness of our humanity, we can **only** do so in relationship to others. We become fully human only by virtue of families and friendships, and through the ways that we interact with one another in a meaningful way. Our humanity is expressed when we experience the uniqueness of each other souls. We need each other—and **depend** on each other—to be fully human.

Whether we know it or not, that is one of the things that we are trying to do for each other by coming together as part of a synagogue community to start a New Year. Not all of us **here** are deep believers. Not all of us here are people who come to synagogue all that often. But today, we feel the pull to be here. Somehow we understand that starting a New Year is not something that do alone. With all our doubts and with our skepticism, we want to be here because we want to feel that we **belong**. That is why Rabbi Kaplan was famous for saying that **belonging precedes believing**. We can be certain that **what** people **believe** will be all over the map—even in this room—I know there is a wide range of commitments to Jewish ritual and practice—and how, or if-- we understand the existence of God. And yet each and every one of us in this rooms feels a need to **belong**.

Now if we are honest, not all of us do feel that we **do belong**. Increasing numbers of Jews are feeling disconnected from this **tribe**. And there is a sermon for a different day on what we might do to reach them. Yet whether they are here or not, the Jewish people—and indeed, all human beings—have the need to feel connected to something larger than themselves.

That is what we are learning as this 21st Century unfolds. We now have a myriad of ways to express our **individuality**. We have personal trainers, personal nutritionists and personal

coaches. We can post Selfies anywhere. Amazon already has customized suggestions for our next purchase. But there is an emptiness at the heart of it all. We can have more space and bigger homes and more autonomy, and yet we are increasingly lonely—increasingly atomized. According to the World Health Organization, wealthier countries have a rate of depression that is eight times that of people who live in poorer countries. We may treasure our individual choices and our privacy, and yet our well-being is more highly correlated with connection to community.

That is why Rabbi Kaplan taught that the fullest expression of **self** takes place in the context of community. Which is why we Jews join together to enter a baby into the Covenant; and why a young adult is welcomed into the larger community as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah; and why the walls of a *huppah* are open because this couple is **not only** in relationship to each other and their families of origin; they create a new home among the people of Israel. And so the essence of Jewish tradition is extremely counter-cultural in this 21st Century: We are **dependent** upon one another in order to experience the fullness of our humanity.

But Jewish tradition adds an additional element of sanctity to our mutual inter-dependence by expressing that relationship as a Covenant. A Covenantal relationship is one in which both parties to the Covenant pledge themselves voluntarily into a binding relationship. A Covenant contrasts with a **contract** which becomes null and void if one agreeing party does something that violates the contract. The he signers of a contract agree to uphold their ends **only** as long as the other signatories uphold theirs as well.

With a **Covenant**, both parties agree to uphold their ends *regardless* of whether the other party keeps their part of the agreement. A violation of a Covenant by one party does not matter as far as the other party's responsibility to continue to do what they agreed to do.

And so on Rosh Hashanah, we come to remind ourselves of our **Covenantal** relationship: of our **dependence** not only upon one another, but of our **dependence** on God—and God's dependence on us. Even if we have been distant from God—and even when we have been far away from the Jewish people—the message of this day is that we are still welcome here. **This** people is still **our** people. This God is still our God. And we can come home because the relationship is **Covenantal**—it can never be broken.

Rabbi Harold Kushner has a beautiful interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden that illustrates our inter-dependence with God. Most of us have learned the story of Adam and Eve as one that testifies to human weakness, or the human tendency to disobey authority.

But Rabbi Kushner has a different take on Adam and Eve and the consequences of eating from the fruit. From his perspective, the eating of the fruit in the Garden was intended by God all along. According to Rabbi Kushner, it was only when the first two humans ate from the fruit that **conscience** could develop—a trait that only we humans have. It was only as a result of eating the fruit that we human beings would ever know the difference between right and wrong; between good and bad. And the key to Rabbi Kushner’s understanding is one Hebrew word from the story: **Ayekha: Where are you?** Here are his words:

Adam and Eve hear God coming for them and they assume that God is coming to punish them for doing something God had told them not to do. They try to hide. God calls out to them **Ayecha**, “where are you?” which I, and I suspect most of us, had always understood to mean: “Where are you hiding? What makes you think you can hide from Me?” But maybe Adam and Eve really are **not** trying to hide from God. Maybe God is calling to Adam and Eve and asking: “Where are you,” because God **needs** them. Without them, God can be the Creator of the world but God can’t be a God of relationship. God is as **dependent** on Adam and Eve as Adam and Eve are **dependent** on God.

If that is correct, the Torah’s message would be: God created human beings with the unique ability to know the difference between Good and Bad, because only with creatures who share that ability with God can have a real relationship. God must have known that we human beings would get a lot of things wrong, because the challenge of living morally is so complicated. But it would defeat God’s purpose if we should feel disqualified from a relationship with God because we get some things wrong. Or feel that we have not been good

enough to warrant a relationship. Or feel that we are being hypocritical if we're just popping in for the High Holidays.

That is why when we avoid coming into God's presence because we are afraid of being judged; or when we feel uncomfortable reciting prayers in the synagogue because we haven't been here in a while and are feeling hypocritical, that's when God comes looking for us, calling out "**Ayekha?**", where are you? Don't hide from me because you've done things you think I won't like. It's not news to me, God says to us. And that's especially true as we begin a New Year. You don't have to come in feeling like you need to apologize or to make excuses. You can be here because this is a New Year and this can be a fresh start. Because we Jews are part of a **Covenant**. Which means *not only* that we need each other; it means equally that God needs us as well.

Today on Rosh Hashanah we come together to re-affirm that Covenant. On Rosh Hashanah, we renew our sense of collective loyalty, our sense of belonging, and we affirm that we have a collective home with—and for—each other. And as much as we need God, God needs us as well.

I want to conclude with a story that shows the power of a single act of inter-dependence. It is a story that was told by the late Rabbi Gerald Wolpe (z"l), the former Senior Rabbi of Har Zion Temple. The story illustrates how a relationship that emerges from a place of Covenantal responsibility has the power to change a life—and therefore, to change the world.

The story takes place during Wolpe's boyhood; he was just 11 years-old when his father died. Every morning he got up at 5:30 to say Kaddish at the synagogue before going to school. One morning, during the second week, a man appeared at his front door just as he left his house. Gerald recognized him as Mr. Einstein from the morning minyan. Mr. Einstein explained, "Your home is on my way to the synagogue. I thought it might be nice to have some company. That way, I don't have to walk alone."

Each morning, he was there. Mr. Einstein held young Gerald's hand as they crossed busy intersections, as they trekked through snow, rain, sunshine, through all the seasons of the year of his mourning. Wolpe remembered treasuring those times and how much he looked forward to walking to *minyan* each day with Mr. Einstein.

Years later, Rabbi Wolpe came back to his hometown with his wife and new baby, and called Mr. Einstein, who invited them to visit. Rabbi Wolpe describes what happened next: “I drove in tears as I realized what [Mr. Einstein] had done. My home was not on the path to the synagogue; it was completely out of his way. He had walked for an hour to my house so that I would not have to be alone each morning. He took a frightened child by the hand and led him with confidence and faith back into life. [Ever since then, wherever I have gone], Mr. Einstein has been holding my hand.”

Like Rabbi Wolpe when he was a boy, there’s someone out there who could use a hand. Right now it could be you. Sooner or later it is going to be me. And God’s presence will be found—and God’s gamble on having created us on the first place—will be vindicated when we reach out and grasp that hand—and help that other person to know that he or she, too, belongs.

May we find many hands to grasp in the coming year.

Kein Yi’he ratzon. So may it be—*Shanah tovah Tikateivu*—May you be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life