

Rosh Hashanah Day 2, 2019

Shana Tova to all and a special welcome to Rabbi Katz's parents,

If you had been here yesterday, you would have heard a wonderful talk by your daughter, but now, you're stuck with me.

Hinei Mah Tovu MaNayim, Shevet Achim Gam Yachad. (Sung)

Behold! How good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell in unity. (Please excuse the non-gender neutral text and the rough translation). This is from Psalm

133, by the way, one of the psalms that somehow didn't make it into the Siddur. It's too bad, because the entire psalm is only three verses long and could have replaced a longer one!

But why is it good to dwell together? To talk together. To be together? This tale illustrates the point well.

The story is told of the Rabbi who noted that a member of his congregation, who had come to services regularly and participated in other synagogue events, just stopped coming. So, after a few weeks, the rabbi decided to visit him. It was a chilly winter evening. The rabbi found the man at home alone, sitting in front of his fireplace, before a blazing fire.

Of course, the man welcomed the Rabbi and led him to a big chair near the fireplace and waited. The Rabbi made himself comfortable but said nothing. For a few minutes, in silence, the Rabbi contemplated the play of the flames around the burning logs.

After some minutes, the Rabbi took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth, all by itself. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. His host watched all this in quiet fascination.

As the one lone ember's flame diminished, there was a momentary glow - its fire was almost gone. The Rabbi jumped up, grabbed the tongs, and he picked up the nearly cold, dead ember

and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. The Rabbi put down the tongs and said simply, "It's time for me to go."

As the Rabbi reached the door to leave, his host said, "Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the sermon. I shall be back in shul this Shabbos."

I suppose the Rabbi could have just cited- Al Tirosh min HaTzibbur - "Do not separate yourself from the community" from Pirke Avot. But, instead, he illustrated the point with a beautiful example.

Hinei Mah Tovu MaNayim, Shevet
Achim Gam Yachad.

It seems to me that over the years there has been less personal togetherness, in the broad sense of the word. There is not as much interpersonal contact, fewer relationships. I'm not so sure this is a good thing. Let me give you some examples:

In the old days, you'd go to the brick and mortar store. A salesperson would ask if you needed help, and you would speak to that person and with the cashier also if you made a purchase. Now, you order on line, at home.

In the old days, you'd pay a toll and

thank the toll taker. Now, you have an “easypass.”

In the old days, there were no self serve gasoline stations and there was no self checkout at the grocery store.

You want a book to read? Instead of the library, you download the book to your Kindle or other similar device. Instead of going to the movies, you watch Netflix, Amazon, pay per view, or Hulu or some other such on-line service.

You want groceries? You don't have to go to the store anymore. You place an order over the computer and PeaPod and Amazon and other services deliver your order directly to your house. You want dinner? You call grub-hub, and the

dinner arrives at your home.

Of course, you still have to visit the dentist, and if, God forbid, you need an operation, that happens in the hospital or surgi-center. But the amount of human interaction with medical providers has gone down also, because a large amount of medical care is delivered by inanimate objects these days, whether it is kidney dialysis, MRI, EKG, EEG, Echocardiogram, CT scan, or pills. I heard of an instance recently where a patient was at the hospital emergency room and the ER doctor wanted the patient seen by a specialist. But, there was no specialist available at the hospital at that time. Into the ER came a “telemedicine” machine, and a television monitor showed the patient the doctor’s

face from some faraway place, and the doctor could see the patient's face, and the patient could speak to the doctor and the doctor could respond, and ask questions and so forth. This was the exam by the specialist who was many miles away from the patient.

I learned recently that close to 50% of the people who get prescriptions, get them delivered instead of in the old days, when you went down to the pharmacy and spoke to the kind pharmacist and called him "Doc." And if you call the doctor on the phone? Push 1 for prescriptions, push 2 for appointments, push 3 for billing push 4 for the fax number or email address, and 5 for directions.

If you want to speak to a friend----

Well, we used to call the friend on the telephone or even go to the friend's house and chat. Now, you text or email. Want to get a bunch of people together to show them your vacation photos? No... You just post them on your facebook page.

When I was younger, much younger, I'd tell my mother... "I'm going out to play." I'd be gone for hours, playing with my friends. Cops and Robbers, Cowboys and Indians, stickball, baseball, football, and so forth. By these in-person games, one learns to deal with other people. But now? It is estimated that youngsters spend as much as 8 hours per day on average interacting not with a person, but with a screen. TV, computer, I-phone, tablet, and so forth.

About 18 years ago, Rabbi Reisner wrote a lengthy Teshuva for the RA committee on laws and standards, on making a minyan over the internet. Of course, there are problems with time zone issues and so forth, and he concluded, that the minyan itself must be accomplished by having 10 people in the same place, basing on guidance from the Shulchan Aruch, which states:

“The ten (who constitute the minyan) must be in one place and the leader with them. If one stands in the doorway from the threshold and outward, that is, were the door closed, from the point where the interior face of the door rests and outward is treated as outside. If a few of them (that is, the potential minyan) are inside and a few are outside, and the

leader is positioned in the entrance he connects them (to form one minyan). But if part of the ten were in the synagogue and part were in the courtyard they do not connect (to form a minyan).”

He also ruled that anyone else can join the minyan electronically, by phone, or other device, but you had to have 10 people in the same place initially to properly constitute the minyan. Besides the shulchan aruch, Rabbi Reisner emphasized in his ruling the importance of community and of personal contact. That was in 2001. These days, many conservative and reform synagogues “live stream” their Shabbat services, so that people don’t have to go to shul and can watch. Of course, this does benefit those who are infirm and can’t get to

shul.

It benefits the remote relative who can't come to the shul from thousands of miles away for a family Bar or Bat Mitzvah or wedding. But, I suspect it probably discourages local people from attending in person.

Now, it is the custom/halacha on Rosh Hashana to ask forgiveness from your friends and colleagues for any insulting thing, or transgression you may have committed against them during the year. Can you do this by sending an email out to all of the contacts in your address book, marked "Undisclosed recipients" - Sorry for the bulk email, but please forgive me if I have wronged you during the year? And, do not reply as this email

is not set up to receive responses?

Hinei Mah Tovu MaNaim, Shevet
Achim Gam Yachad.

Well, what's wrong with isolation?
Why not live a hermitic life, other than
for an occasional visit to the dentist?

Psychologists nearly universally agree
that in order to better understand other
people, and to work with them toward a
common goal, you have to see them in
person, and discuss. We've all seen how
email, devoid of inflection, can be
misinterpreted.

Psychologists agree that the large
amount of time that people, not just kids,
spend on their electronic devices, is not

good for working together for a common good, and indeed, may psychologically interfere with one's ability to communicate and reason and work out differences, and therefore, leads to increased polarization of opinions and ideas, more depression, anger, anxiety, more of an "Us vs. Them" mentality, and even suicidal tendencies.

For sure, our Jewish tradition is NOT screen based. Our tradition is to physically come together to pray, to learn and to discuss. The same psychologists who tell us that too much screen time and exposure to social media is bad for one's mental health advise that attending religious services is one of the best things for one's mental health.

Coming together to discuss things?
That is what Talmudic discourse was all about. Now, I realize that the sages in Talmudic ages didn't have the possibility to text each other. There were no I-phones and no androids. They HAD to get together. In doing so, while they argued with each other, they learned to have enormous respect for the other person's view.

Since it is Rosh Hashana, let me give you an example. (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah, 11a)

“Rabbi Eliezer says: From what Bible source do we know that the world was created in Tishrei? It is said: “God said, Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed-bearing plants, fruit trees each

bearing its own kind of fruit containing its own seeds” (Genesis 1:11). In what month does the earth sprout vegetation while the trees are full of fruit? You must say that it is in the fall month of Tishrei:

Rabbi Yehoshua says: From what Bible source do we know that the world was created in Nisan? It is said: “And the earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind and trees [beginning to] make fruit each with its own seed” (Genesis 1:12). In what month is the earth full of vegetation while the trees are beginning to produce fruit? You must say that it is in the spring month of Nisan.”

Now, each of these Rabbis was certain of his answer. They each had a

“proof-text”— a verse of Torah which they argued supported their position. We know today that Rabbi Eliezer’s view turned out to be the prevailing view, because, right after we blow shofar during Musaf on Rosh Hashanah, we say, “Hayom Harat Olam.” Today is the birthday of the world.” But we don’t obliterate the minority opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua. We don’t ridicule him for expressing his view. Rather, we preserve his opinion and give him credit for it and we study his opinion. Because, you know, it could be that he was right, but above all, it is important to treat the other person with respect and to value a different opinion. This is why, to me, it is disturbing when, on college campuses, which used to be the places where the First Amendment was held in highest

regard, that speakers are shouted down, attacked, and invitations to speak are withdrawn because people can't bear to listen to a different viewpoint, or to let others listen.

Yes, our tradition says, “Hinei Ma Tovu MaNaim, Shevet Achim Gam Yachad.”

And so, as we come together to pray and to fulfill the obligation to hear the blowing of the Shofar, we really should draw on the great verse in the Amidah for the High Holidays. It is the true bipartisan verse of our davening. We are so much better than the politicians. In the Rosh Hashana and Y”K Amidah we say, in the U’vecheyn paragraph....

Va'ye'asu kulom, aguda achat, la'asot retzoncha, b'levav Shalem. We should all come together, as one congregation, to do God's will, with a full and complete heart.

Now we all know that the Hebrew word for heart is Lev. Spelled with two letters only. Look at the front of the Siddur. Lev Shalem. But in this particular prayer, written in around the 3rd century, we say "Levav." Why the extra Vav? The rabbis say that each of us, in our hearts, has a Yetzer HaRah, and a Yetzer HaTov. An evil inclination and a good inclination. Each vav represents one of these inclinations. Our hope and prayer, on Rosh Hashana, is that the good inclination in our hearts can be motivated through teshuva to

predominate over the evil inclination, to swamp the evil inclination with goodness, and to relegate it to the tiniest and most insignificant part of our humanity. Indeed, let us come together and continue to be together.

Hinei Ma Tovu MaNaim, Shevet
Achim Gam Yachad.

G'mar Chatima Tova.