

Rabbi Jeremy Master

Rosh Hashannah 5779-September 10, 2018

The Need for Companionship

In ancient times, there were two rabbis who had an especially close friendship, Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish. In his youth, Resh Lakish was a master thief. One day, Rabbi Yochanan was swimming in the Jordan River when Resh Lakish jumped in to steal from him. Rabbi Yochanan persuaded Resh Lakish that his energy should instead be given over to Torah study. Resh Lakish gave up his criminal activities, studied with Rabbi Yochanan, and became a highly respected scholar. Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish soon became an inseparable pair with Resh Lakish marrying Rabbi Yochanan's sister. When either one would fall ill and could not come to the house of learning to study, the other would visit and the visit would lift up the sick one from the sickbed. Their affection for each other was so great that a visit would help heal the sick one. Once while studying, Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish disagreed and Rabbi Yochanan insulted Resh Lakish by reminding him that he once was a robber. Shortly thereafter, Resh Lakish became sick and his wife went to visit Rabbi Yochanan, her brother. She pleaded with him to visit again and lift him up from his sickbed, but Rabbi Yochanan refused and Resh Lakish died. Rabbi Yochanan grieved so much for Resh Lakish that he no longer joined the other scholars to study. His other friends

were so worried they sent Rabbi Eleazar to look in on him. They started to discuss a topic, when Rabbi Yochanan exclaimed, “You are not like Resh Lakish. The way we would study together was so important to me.” Rabbi Yochanan then stood up, rent his garments and bursting into tears, cried out, “Where are you Resh Lakish? Where are you Resh Lakish?” He kept crying in guilt and anguish until he too died.

This story provides an illustration of a rabbinic proverb that states: “*o chevruta o mituta*, Give me companionship or give me death.” Rabbi Yochanan became so close with Resh Lakish, that no one else could take his place. When Resh Lakish died, Rabbi Yochanan experienced intense feelings of loneliness. We can hear the anguish Rabbi Yochanan felt as he cried out for Resh Lakish. This loneliness led to a deep depression which broke Rabbi Yochanan’s heart, killed his spirit, and led to his physical death. Rabbi Yochanan needed the companionship of Resh Lakish so much, that he could not bear to live without his friend and death became a mercy to him. This story shows us that companionship is an essential part of our spiritual and emotional wellbeing.

The story of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish serves as an example of the fellowship circles that were at the core of Rabbinic life. These fellowship circles were an essential aspect of their spiritual lives as they showed deep affection for each other, learned together, and shared joyous and sad occasions with each other.

Rabbinic tradition is replete with statements referring to the importance of friendship. In Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of our Sages, we are taught, “Get yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend to study with.” A commentary on this passage explains that a man is to get himself a companion “who will eat with him, drink with him, read Scripture with him, sleep next to him, and reveal all of his secrets to him in order that his companion will be there to support him in all his endeavors.” These passages illustrate the psycho-spiritual truth that we are social animals who need companionship to find fulfillment in our lives. We need people who will break bread with us, enjoy the pleasures of life with us, and with whom we can discuss our most intimate feelings and desires. In addition, the support of a friend can help us become the best people we can be. We need friends who we can share our lives with in order to live purposeful and meaningful lives.

Today as we celebrate the New Year, we join together in the spirit of fellowship that is a core value of our spiritual tradition. The importance of fellowship in Judaism is illustrated in the word synagogue which literally means “house of gathering” as the most important role of the synagogue is to serve as a place for us to come together in sacred community. As I have been attending coffee meet and greets and I have talked with people, I have asked people to reflect on the meaning of Sinai Temple in their lives and I have heard from so many people that they have found companionship within the Temple. On this day

celebrating the creation of the world, it is important to reflect upon how significant these personal relationships have been to our lives.

And yet, the reality is that the spirit of community throughout the country has been on the decline. While the Jewish community has been racking its brain to try and figure out how to draw more folks in, the reality is, according to social scientist Robert Putnam, the type of companionship that adds value to our lives has decreased significantly throughout society. The decrease in social relationships has affected every aspect of our society including political participation, civic participation, volunteering, religious participation, connections in the workplace, and even informal social connections. Even something like the frequency that families and friends have dinner together, which has nothing to do with joining a group, has decreased significantly. According to Putnam, we spend only two-thirds as much time on socializing with family and friends than we did forty years ago. As a faith that states *chevruta o'mittuta*, companionship or death, we should all be deeply concerned by the decrease in community within our entire society.

The spiritual insights of Jewish tradition are not the only reason for us to seek companionship. According to Putnam, studies indicate that “social connections make us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy.” When considering the effect of fellowship on the individual, loneliness has a powerful negative effect on a person’s health. If we

just look at depression, medical studies show that social connections inhibit depression. The average teenager today spends three and a half hours alone each day. Teenagers spend more time alone than with family and friends so it should be no surprise that the depression rates among teenagers today is ten times higher than it was among teenagers just forty years ago. As a result, we see that over the past four decades, life satisfaction among adults has declined steadily. While certainly there are other factors in this change in happiness, the decrease in social connections has had a negative effect on our society as a whole. These health statistics literally show that we have a choice, o chevruta o mituta, give me companionship or give me death, because if we choose social isolation, it is likely to have a negative effect on our health and happiness.

In the face of the daunting challenge of the decrease in fellowship over the past forty years, what can we do? The ancient Rabbis already made it clear to us what we need to do. We need to acquire for ourselves friends who will eat and drink with us and with whom we can share our souls with. We need to turn off the many different forms of media that suck us in and we need to leave our houses to find each other. Sinai Temple is one of the best places in our community to find fellowship. In fact, studies have shown that the social bonds at a house of worship are of a different quality than making friendships in other places. People who are engaged in community at a house of worship are on average happier and more

neighborly. These same studies show that, while the belief systems and altruism of religious traditions do have an effect, the higher levels of happiness and good neighborliness in houses of worship result largely from the quality of the relationships that people make within a house of worship. In a country where the percentage of people saying they are lonely has doubled in the past 40 years, we can say to people that Sinai Temple is the place where you can find companionship. Here at our synagogue, our house of gathering, you can find life giving personal connections.

As we face the challenges of decreasing social connections, we need to consider what actions we can take to fight the loneliness in our world. As rabbi, one of my major goals is to focus on this re-emphasis on social connections. There was a time when people would come into a synagogue and relationships would organically occur, but in our contemporary world we can be more intentional in how we develop community. I want to help facilitate the development of meaningful relationships within the synagogue. In the past I have invited congregants to my own house to develop and I plan on continuing that custom here at Sinai Temple. But I don't want to just be inviting people to my house, I want to inspire and facilitate all of you to invite each other to your houses to share in meals together. One of the messages I am going to continually emphasize is the importance of social connections. As you spend time reflecting this Rosh

Hashannah, take a moment to reflect in a world where social connections have changed so tremendously over the last forty years, how can you transform the world by bringing people together in life enriching community?