

Temple Emanu-El
Kol Nidre 5781 Sermon
Rabbi Max Miller

Shana Tova

Just over four months ago Rachael and I were sitting in the recovery room filled with every emotion imaginable. We were filled with joy, with awe, with fear, and with anxiety—the emotions likely every parent has felt in the early days of holding that new life. Up until March of Rachael's pregnancy, we assumed our baby would immediately become a fixture at Temple Emanu-El: cooing downstairs at the MJCCA Schiff Pre-School; being passed between teens and adults on Sundays at the Diamond Family Religious School; and, just generally becoming a part of the fabric of the building. In our imagination, in the before-times, grandparents were coming in and out of the room, friends were seeing Zohara and us in the hospital, and there would be a baby-naming celebration in the sanctuary. We would be surrounded by constant love and attention in Zohara's first weeks.

I don't have to tell you what changed. We learned of Zohara's congenital heart defect two weeks after her birth. After the pandemic hit the image of our family being physically surrounded by our community quickly changed. All our plans changed. We weren't the only ones. Your weddings, your b'nai mitzvah, your birthday parties were canceled—as though simcha, happiness was put on hold. More than that, funerals were made un-attendable, shivas went virtual, and when we needed the physical presence of our community most we could only have a socially distant air-hug or blow kisses to one another.

Under normal circumstances, our Jewish tradition teaches us that it takes a village to raise a child, to celebrate at a wedding, to comfort the mourner, to pray with the sick; however, in these physically distant, global pandemic times, that village, that tribe, that community that Rachael spoke of in her Rosh HaShanah sermon takes on all new definition and importance.

The biggest challenge I believe we have faced and will continue to face is the ways we maintain our friendships, the core of our community.

We often tell the story of Honi the Circle Maker, I know my 9th and 10th-graders know all about him from my class on Sundays. Honi the Circle Maker is a famous man in the Talmud. However, when we tell Honi's story, we don't usually tell the *actual* ending of the tale. The story goes like this:

One day, Honi was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Carob is like very, very bitter chocolate. Honi said to the man: How many years will it take for this tree to bear fruit? The man said to Honi: One carob tree take seventy years to produce edible fruit. Honi said to him: Do you believe that you will live another seventy years?!? Do you expect to benefit from this tree? The man said to Honi: when I was born, I found a world full of carob trees. So, just as my ancestors planted for me, I plant for my children, and their children.

This is usually where we stop telling the story. A lovely tale of planning for the future: A story about investing in the fruit of our labors that we will never see. However, the story doesn't end here, the story goes on and teaches an even bigger lesson. [After talking to the man planting the carob tree] Hōni sat and ate a really big lunch. He was so full from that lunch that he took a nap more intense than any Thanksgiving nap ever taken. He slept for so long that rocks and dirt started to form around him. He disappeared from sight so that none of his family could find him. He slept for seventy years. When he woke up, he saw a man who looked oddly like that guy who was planting the carob tree from before Hōni's took his nap. Only this man was gathering the carob pods from the same tree that was only a sapling seventy years ago when Hōni went to sleep.

Hōni asked the man: Are you the one who planted this tree? The man said to Hōni: I am his grandson. Hōni said to himself: have I really slept for seventy years?!? Hōni looked around and to his surprise he saw that the orchard around him was filled with all kinds of fruit growing from the trees where before there had only been tiny, tiny little saplings in the ground.

Hōni was worried and went to his home. When he opened the door he asked the first person he saw, "Is the son of Hōni the Circle Maker alive?" They said to Hōni: His son is no longer alive, but his grandson is alive. Hōni, in shock and surprise said to them, "I am Hōni the Circle Maker!" but no one in his house believed him, not even his grandson! So, Hōni went to the school where he used to learn and teach. When he opened the door to one classroom he heard the teachers say amongst themselves, "No one in our school is as smart as Hōni the Circle Maker, for when Hōni would enter the study hall he could answer any question that anyone had. At that very moment Hōni entered the study hall and said to them: I am Hōni! But they did not believe him and they kicked him out of the school. Hōni became very upset and depressed. Hōni prayed to God for mercy and died.

This is where the story of Hōni truly ends. The Talmud adds a moral, a lesson, to the end, like any good story has, to teach the phrase, "give me friendship or give me death," *chevruta o'mituta*. "As friendship is what makes life worth living."

Hōni's time travel sheds light on something we know all too well today. Months upon months of quarantine, physical distancing, and mask-wearing have the all-too-easy potential to be isolating and leave us feeling like we are adrift, or maybe quarantined for months under a proverbial pile of rocks, even when we are literally at home in our community. We shouldn't underestimate the strain that loneliness has played in our physical and mental health these many months.

A few weeks ago when we had our Diamond Family Religious School Drive-Thru Party, I remember being overwhelmed with emotion as family after family came through to say hello, as the teens filled the campus with their usual energy, and as everything *looked* almost normal. While my heart swelled with love for our Temple Emanu-El families, I was aching that an invisible six-foot barrier and masks kept us apart. What occurred to me that day was how greatly I had taken for granted the power of living in a community.

In many cases, we define Judaism as a personal journey, but we do so at the risk of losing the most powerful value of being Jewish—thriving in community. Even in our most basic texts in the Torah, we have the tradition of the minyan. From the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, God would have spared the city for ten righteous people—a minyan. Through the centuries and millennia, the importance of a minyan is embedded in Jewish culture. In prayers for joyous times and in times of sorrow, we need a community. A Jewish community cannot exist without a people who come together!

In the 12th century, Maimonides commented on a famous command in rabbinic literature “*k’neh l’cha chaver*,” to “acquire a friend for ourselves.” Maimonides says that friendship is *the* most important because we process life’s joys and oys through the lens of our friendships. Basically, whenever we laugh or cry, it’s always more powerful, poignant, and purposeful with a friend.

Unfortunately, COVID has erected plexiglass walls between friends. While we still might be able to laugh and cry with friends, we lack the all-important factor of touch, of holding a hand, wrapping an arm around a shoulder, or giving a hug. Friendship under COVID is evolving just as the Jewish community under COVID evolves. With some combination of Zoom rooms, Facetime calls, text messages, and socially distant gatherings, our relationships almost seem normal. We might feel a lot like Hōni. Exasperated at only seeing our friends, our colleagues, our family, but not truly feeling like we can have the relationships of before.

This feeling reminds me a lot of the classic Rodgers and Hammerstein musical Carousel. Twice during the show, the characters sing “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” First, when the leading female protagonist, Julie Jordan loses her husband, Billy Bigelow, Julie is comforted by an old friend with the words of this song.

When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark

As the musical ends, Billy is given the opportunity to redeem himself by returning to Earth for one day before going to heaven, the entire cast sings these inspiring words one last time.

Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone

The words are meant for Julie, Julie’s daughter Louise, and all of us to remember that throughout adversity, we do not journey alone. No woman or man is an island. When we are divided by physical distancing and even by the afterlife, we are always accompanied by our community.

At the very beginning of the Torah, when God creates the first human, God calls the human “good” just like God describes the previous 5 days of Creation. In this version of Creation, the first human isn’t male or female, in fact, “Adam” in Hebrew just means human. After God creates this good Adam, this good human, God realizes that something is imperfect with this creation. Adam is alone. In order for Adam to truly be “good” Adam needs a partner. *Lo tov heyot adam l’vado*, it is not good for a human to be alone. From the very core of our Torah, B’reisheet, in the beginning (!), partnership, friendship, and relationship are all key to our definition of self. If this is how God intended human beings to live, with friends, family, spouses, or in a community, then it should come as no surprise when Hōni despairs in deep loneliness. The same can be said for Julie Jordan and her daughter Louise. Losing a husband, a father, a friend is *lo tov*, not good, BUT that is why we are given the gift of community. And if the song is to be believed, we are never truly alone.

Maybe you’ve lost someone or lost an opportunity that you were eagerly awaiting over the past six months. Maybe you’ve found a solution for shaking the loneliness that works for you. In my quarantine I’ve found three actions that work for me: make time, pick up the phone, and actively learn.

Make Time to see your friends safely. That might mean gathering outdoors for a meal, a walk, or just to sit at the edge of a driveway and talk. This isn’t only good COVID advice, this is every year and any-time advice. However, especially because our days tend to blur together under COVID, making time for community is what will help us thrive.

Pick Up the Phone the phenomenon of loneliness is ironically happening at a time when we are more connected than ever. I can Facetime with friends from around the globe, but it won’t happen if I don’t first make the time and then simply reach out to say “hi.” We will maintain or grow our most valued relationships when we use our phone to call the people we care about most.

Finally, **we should all be actively learning.** At the end of the Hōni story, Hōni becomes most exasperated when he enters the study hall and is actively unwelcomed by the students and teachers. Nothing deepens a relationship, makes us more vulnerable and builds friendships like learning together. Had Hōni found a friend in the study hall, our story would have ended differently. Hōni, a man lost in time, might have adapted to his new reality, found love within his new family, made new friends, and lived to enjoy the fruits of his labors. Instead, he found the future and his life have little meaning without friendship, without love, without a community.

These three, making time, picking up the phone, and actively learning, are not only important during this time under COVID. But God-willing, one day we will live without the fear of a global pandemic and these three actions will remain ever relevant. In fact, they come right from our sages of old who distilled the most important actions a person can take in a slightly different way. They say we should take a long walk, read a good book, and make a new friend. No matter the age or the era, the most important Jewish advice has been to feed our mind, body, and soul and do so in the comfort of community.

In the ethical will of Asher ben Yehiel, the 13th century German and Spanish scholar, he left his community these enduring words: "Do not raise your hand against your neighbor. Never be weary of making friends; consider a single enemy as one too many. If you have a faithful friend [or even friends], hold them close. Do not let them go, for they are a precious possession.

Being Jewish means that we are never alone. Even virtually, even if we must quarantine by ourselves in our homes, we are not truly alone. Our Temple Emanu-El community is ever-present and will always be there for us when we call out. Let's all sing that song we used to sing from way back when. The song to remind us to keep our head held high when we face a stormy sky. It takes a community to survive and to thrive, and as Jews we have our community around us no matter where we are. Truly, we never walk alone.

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