

People make all kinds of deathbed requests, but one of the more unusual ones came from an elderly woman who never married. She insisted that there be absolutely at her funeral there be no male pallbearers. She explained, "They wouldn't take me out while I was alive. I sure don't want them to take me out when I'm dead." Just a joke, but it reflects a deep truth about us as humans. We are social beings. We yearn for connection. All our lives we seek bonds with others, and even after we die we want to know that we are not alone.

This insatiable desire to be connected lies at the root of the exponential growth of social media. Consider Facebook. At the end of 2004 there were one million users; by August 2008 some 100 million. Today, nearly half of all Americans have a Facebook account. In a few weeks there will likely be 1 billion (with a "b") users – one in every seven people on the planet! A couple of months ago Twitter reported that people are tweeting some 400 million tweets every day. (Heck, there's probably a dozen of you probably adding to that total at this very moment! Just tweet that you like the sermon so far!) The debate rages about whether all this "connection" is broader than it is deep (I mean, c'mon ... just because they are on your Facebook profile, do you *really* have 1285 friends?!), but it is a mirror of us as social beings.

The means by which we connect may be different, but the yearning is as old as humanity itself. Twenty centuries ago Hillel expressed connection to the collective as essential to Jewish continuity: אל תפרש מן הציבור "do not separate yourself from the community."<sup>1</sup> The Talmudic sages established a minimum for worship – a *minyan* – not because God needs ten people to hear one's prayers. After all, God heard the prayer of Hannah, who ached for a child, and prayed alone in silence.<sup>2</sup> A *minyan* is not for God – it is for us.

That woman who wanted the right pallbearers yearned – like all of us – for human relationships. Why this insatiable thirst to be linked in? Why do we want someone (or many "some ones") in our lives? It is because when we are

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<sup>1</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:5

<sup>2</sup> I Samuel 1:13

connected to others our life becomes richer, more meaningful, and open to a legacy that lasts even beyond the length of our days.

Every year I take our fourth grade students and parents to the cemetery. Lots of parents choose not to come. I wish they would reconsider. First, because children are curious about what happens in cemeteries, and once they go, they find it is less scary than they imagined. Second, at the cemetery they see that grief can be softened by memory, that the good of our lives outlives the pain of loss. Finally, Jewish kids should know that we believe that a life well lived has meaning long after someone dies. Kids want to know about this stuff ... and the sooner we help them start thinking about, the better they can cope as adults.<sup>3</sup>

You think people aren't dealing with these questions? Consider this – there is a Facebook app called "If I die." I kid you not! Look it up (no, not now! Put your phone away). This app describes itself as a "digital afterlife Facebook app." It is "the first Facebook application that enables you to create a video or a text message that will be published after you die."<sup>4</sup> Less technologically inclined? Don't worry. There's ifidie.org (Honest! Who can make this stuff up?!), which provides free delivery of notes that will be delivered after you meet your Maker. OK, it is a bit creepy. But it all boils down to wanting to have a life that means something. Of course, writing our own eulogy, building our own monument, or trying to pre-determine how others will recall us is a bit like catching soap bubbles. You and I may *think* we can ensure how we will be remembered, but we can't. Rather, it is the life we lead that is our legacy.

The Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel discovered this truism when he awoke one morning to his own obituary in the local newspaper. It read, "Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before. He died a very rich man."

Actually, it was Alfred's older brother who had passed; a newspaper reporter had bungled the information. But the account had a profound effect on him.

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<sup>3</sup> For recent thinking on bringing children to funerals see:  
[www.nytimes.com/2012/09/20/garden/letting-children-share-in-grief.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/20/garden/letting-children-share-in-grief.html)

<sup>4</sup> [www.ifidie.net](http://www.ifidie.net)

Given the "gift" of seeing himself as others truly saw him, of seeing what his legacy would be, he was devastated. He decided he wanted to be known for something other than developing the means to kill people efficiently and for amassing a fortune in the process. So he initiated the Nobel Prize, the award for those who foster peace.

Nobel said, "Every person ought to have the chance to correct his epitaph in midstream and write a new one."

Yom Kippur forces us to face the truth each of us knows, though we rarely talk about. There is no "if I die" – and no app, no matter how many friends download it, can change that. There is only "when I die." Instead of fearing it, however, Yom Kippur reminds us that a life of spiritual depth, repentance and righteous living give us a power greater than any note or video that we leave on Facebook. In truth, we are given the opportunity that Alfred Nobel had every day of our lives. At any moment we have the opportunity to make the connections that matter, to look truly and honestly at our life, to reflect on how others might see it and correct our epitaph in midstream.

So ... how do we do it? Let me suggest three ways to get started – one, ask yourself big questions; two, whatever life brings, feel worthy; three, find a friend.

### **Ask Big Questions**

A life of meaning, of purpose and direction begins by asking important questions, real questions ... ones that matter:

Why I am here?

Since I *am* here, how do I make the time I have worthwhile?

What of me lasts? What of me do I *want* to last?

When I am afraid, how can I be strong? When I am strong, how do I use that for good?

What difference can I make – with my loved ones, in the community, in the world?

Who do I care about, and who cares about me?

It's no a surprise that the three great monotheistic faiths all began in the wilderness. There is something about the silence of the desert and its great expanses, seeing the night sky filled with the Milky Way that humbles us enough to ask the questions we avoid in our cities and climate-controlled cars.

Some of you have commented to me that it's uncomfortable when I ask you to stop checking emails or texting during services. But it's much more than about what you do here. I just worry that we all fill up our lives, avoiding the true, inner reflection that is necessary for a purpose-driven life. There are many reasons people pray. Surely one of them is to give ourselves the luxury of stilling the soul. The prayers we say on Yom Kippur challenge us to face the truth about who we are. Use this day, however, as a catalyst. If you take time daily or weekly or (minimally) monthly to think deeply, read something challenging, discuss ideas with others, do you not think you would have a life more intentional, with a deeper sense of meaning? Ask yourself: Where am I in my life? Where do I want to be? Who am I? How do I want to be remembered? What did I take from or learn today? What did I give back?

You can find plenty of people who will assure you that taking a particular path will lead you to have a meaningful life. Buy this CD. Just read my book. All you have to do is follow this teacher. Jewish tradition suggests, alternatively, that there is no quick fix. Study, prayer, righteousness – these things help us gain some perspective and find the right balance between work and play, self and others, taking in and giving back – but they are ongoing and fluid. There is no one answer – at least no one answer that lasts a lifetime.

In the few minutes I have it would be foolhardy to suggest all the ways our traditions suggest will give us a meaningful life. Instead of answers, I suggest the place to begin is with questions. One good way to start is with the "Spiritual Check List" you have at your seat. Please – don't leave it here. Take it home. Put it on your message board or fridge. Don't try to answer all the questions. Just try focusing on one. But really chew it over. Don't just make a living, ask ... and start really living.

On Yom Kippur we read the story of Jonah, a man who thinks he can avoid God's call. He flees for Tarshish, the ancient equivalent of the end of the world. Then, swallowed by a fish, he is taken to the depths of the sea. Jonah discovers, however, that no matter how much he tries to abandon God, he cannot. Jonah's story is, of course, our own.

For him, and us, life catches up to us – and we are forced to confront the big questions. The questions on the “Spiritual Check List” are always before you and me. So – stop running. Stop filling up your time with vain pursuits that neither profit nor save.<sup>5</sup> Look to the heavens; look to the heart within. And start asking.

### **Broken or Whole, You are Worthy**

Let me ask a strange question – how many of you know how a lobster grows? OK, how many know what a lobster tastes like?! Getting back to how a lobster grows ... when it gets too big, and its outer skeleton constricts it, it sheds the old one and grows something new. In short, the pain of growing forces the lobster to unburden itself from the old for something that gives it the space to be who it is now. Wow! Now what if we could do that – not to tranquilize ourselves from feeling pain, not to pretend we are happy, not to find things to distract us from the things that hurt – but to find a way to use the pain as a stimulus to grow?

Just before going into a funeral with a family, as we stand together for *kriyah* (to tear the clothing or a ribbon) I usually share a teaching from the Kotzker Rebbe. He once taught, “the only whole heart is the broken heart.” His words speak to the truth that no one can go through life – with their heart open to laughter and love – and not feel bereft when the things held dearest are lost. The Kotzker’s student, Simcha Bunam, was troubled by his teacher’s words. Do we not believe in a God who heals? How can a broken heart be one that is whole? He answered his own question. God may heal, but even God cannot take away the shattered sense of loss we feel. What God can do – and we pray it happens soon to all broken hearts – is take away the sadness. The goal is, paradoxically, a “broken wholeness”, our pain no less than our ability to overcome it, thereby giving us the understanding of what it really is to be alive.

As much as we yearn for connection, it is elusive. Dr. Brené Brown, a professor of Social Work at the University of Texas, has spent much of her career focusing on human connection. She discovered something counter-intuitive in her research. “When you ask people about love, they tell you about heartbreak.

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<sup>5</sup> Rambam, Mishneh Torah, “Laws of Repentance” 3:4

When you ask people about belonging, they will tell you their most excruciating stories about heartbreak. When you ask people about connection, they tell you about disconnection."<sup>6</sup> What, she kept asking herself, feeds this negativity? She more she studied, the more she found that it boiled down to one thing – a feeling of shame, of being unworthy. This is at the heart of Yom Kippur. On this day we are forced to confront our failures and missteps, our betrayals and lies. We have been unworthy.

Yet there is a way out. Brené Brown discovered that the one thing that gives people a sense of love and belonging is feeling they are *worthy* of feeling being loved and belonging. That's it. People who live whole, full and meaningful lives make mistakes. They are buffeted by life's unfairness and misery just like anyone else. But instead of being debilitated, they feel worthy of love and joy and hope.

A mature and nuanced religious sensibility does not demand certainty. Rather, it is open to life's inscrutability, messiness and struggle. Who will live and who will die? There is no algorithm of faith, no matter how masterfully calculated, that can guarantee a life without brokenness. But fate is not fortune. Even when we are the source of the pain, we can redeem ourselves and restore our relationships. Yom Kippur reminds us that feeling worthy is not being invincible. In fact, it gives us the courage to be imperfect and the humility to accept that our vulnerability makes us less judgmental, more forgiving and more driven to bring meaning even to a world that all too often seems bereft of it.

### **Acquire a Friend**

Just out of interest - how many of you have a Facebook account? Who has discovered old friends on Facebook? And how many have old friends you wish had never found you online who now want to 'friend' you on Facebook?

We live in a time when everyone, it seems, is a friend. There is, in fact, a kind of strange new understanding of just who a 'friend' really is. When we here at the synagogue first began using Facebook, we had to figure out who we would accept friend requests from, and from who we would not. Kids under the age of

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4Qm9cGRub0>

Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Easy. Not a 'friend'. But what about teenagers who wanted to be our 'friend'? And what if we see something posted we feel their parents should know about? Social media sites have developed ways to group our 'friends' to limit what others see, but there is still something strange about having hundreds, if not thousands, of 'friends.' After all, I have enough trouble keeping up with a few dozen – and most of us have very few close companions.

Once, when I was going through a rough passage in my life, someone asked me, "Who are your anchors?" I did not understand what she meant. "You know, the people who keep you from drifting, who keep you 'grounded' and honest." What she was asking me, in so many words, is "who are you true friends" – the ones who do not tell what they think you would like to hear, but who know you well enough to say what you *need* to hear. Her admonition was a reflection of the advice in the ethical treatise *Pirkei Avot*: עשה לך רב וקנה לך חבר, "make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend."<sup>7</sup>

Friends really are our anchors in life. Just as an anchor keeps a boat from being set adrift, so a good friend helps us when we are buffeted by failure, disappointment and despair. In the Talmud we are taught that the person who is ill needs others to help them heal because "a prisoner cannot free him or her self from prison."<sup>8</sup> No one is so perfect that they do not have something in need of being made better. A true friend is not someone who is around just to have fun with in the good times, but holds you fast to what is decent, true and right. Thus, a good friend, through loving reproof, helps us be more spiritually whole.

A Jewish understanding of friendship is founded in a methodology of study called *חברותא*. In place of frontal teaching of teacher and class, or of the Socratic model of tutor and disciple, a *חברותא* is two people reading, analyzing and questioning a text together. It is "partnered learning", where learners use debate and critique as the way to find meaning. My best friend is my wife (thank God for her!). But I have also been blessed that I have had a *חברותא* partner for

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<sup>7</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:6

<sup>8</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 5a

the past 24 years. He has helped me grow, loved me, urged me to be my best and, in the process, become one of my dearest friends, one of the anchors in my life.

This year I will be offering a course that will focus on this partnered learning as a way to develop a richer, more meaningful life. The class is called Ayeka – after God's first question in the Torah: "Where are you?" It will likely be different from any class you have taken. Yes, there will be text to study, but the material will simply be the catalyst to ask big questions. And here's the "catch" (or, as I prefer, the challenge) - you cannot come alone. You can participate only if you have a "spiritual partner" – a חבֵרוּתָא to join you on the journey.

Find yourself a friend. You don't need dozens, much less hundreds. Just a few – even one – is enough. Without such a friend, however, no matter how rich your life, it will be lacking. As our rabbis were wont to say או חבֵרוּתָא או מִיתוּתָא - "Friendship or death" ... which is just a more elegant way of saying, "If they won't take me out in life, they for sure won't take me out when I'm dead."

A closing thought. One of great movies of this past year, "Beasts of the Southern Wild" tells the story of a world that is, quite literally, torn apart by life's storms. The central character is a 6-year old named "Hushpuppy." She, like everyone around her, faces heart-wrenching devastation. In the end, mythic creatures – emblematic of chaos and the enigmatic questions of life – face her down. Hushpuppy does not, however, hide or run or turn from them. She confronts them head on. And – facing them – they kneel before her.

We are all as small and vulnerable as Hushpuppy. Life is a whirlwind that blows – like it or not. But we can be whole in the broken places. We can take the hand of those we love, asking deep and important questions, shaping the outlines of our legacy. There is no "if I die", only when I die. But right now I live. You live. So ... live. "Choose life", and embrace a life rich with meaning.

*With thanks to Evan Mallah, whose questions led me to offer these reflections.*