

Laura Schwartz Harari
Erev Rosh Ha-Shanah 5768
B'nai Israel, Amarillo, Texas

In the creation story in our Torah, we read that God completed the creation of Adam, the first human being. The very next thing God says in Genesis chapter two verse eighteen, is, “*It is not a good thing for man to be alone. I will make him a fitting partner.*” From the earliest days of human presence upon this earth, we are instructed regarding the centrality of companionship.

Fast-forward to the late twentieth century where we find that this statement in Genesis continues to reverberate in our subconscious. The Israeli poet Nathan Zach shares a “modern take” on this subject. Roughly translated it reads as follows:

*“It is not a good thing for man to be alone—
But man is alone nonetheless.
While he waits—he is alone.
While he hesitates—he is alone.
But he alone knows that
Even if he waits—companionship will come.”*

Growing up in America we live our lives with competing values “tugging” at us. In forging a path for our country our ancestors boldly took a stand on behalf of the individual’s right to self-determination. By the same token, they took steps to assure that living collectively as a society was a

meaningful and uplifting experience. From time to time the emphasis our culture places on either of these two poles shifts. For the past several decades, American culture has been increasingly focused upon the individual and individual gratification.

Examples of this trend in our popular culture abound. One need only examine the names of magazines and journals from forty or so years ago and from today to get a sense of this shift in focus. When I was a teen such magazines as *Life*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Family Circle* and *Sports Illustrated* were among the most popular. Today *Money*, *Shape*, *Lucky*, and the ever-popular *Self* grace the shelves of supermarkets.

If these examples haven't convinced you, we can examine advertising slogans over the same period of time. In the 1930's and 40's Coca Cola was, *the pause that brings friends together*. In the 1960's through the 80's, Hallmark invited us to *reach out and touch someone*, United Airlines extended an invitation to *fly the friendly skies and like a good neighbor, State Farm was*, and has continued to be *there*. **These** days Visa is *everywhere you want to be, nobody lays a finger on my Butterfinger*, a Pantene model says, *don't hate me because I'm beautiful* and Nike tells us, *if it feels good, just do it!*

Technological “advances” such as wi-fi internet access, email and I-pods only exacerbate the problem of isolation, and reduce our face-to-face contact.

When all is said and done, with the increased focus upon the cultivation of our individuality, we often find ourselves alone and feeling empty. Mitch Albom, author of Tuesdays With Morrie, wrote about the significance of companionship and community. He said, “*The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning*”.

Judaism, like our American culture, contains within it a concern for meeting both the needs of the individual and those of the collective. As we see from the example of the creation story, however, Judaism teaches us that the greatest potential for meaningful experiences as individuals is within our interaction with others. The Jewish paradigm for learning is the dyad. Text study in *hevruta* allows for learning partners to interact with the text and with each other. The Talmud says that learning partners sharpen one another and the text through their interaction. It allows for them to be both learner and teacher—to change and be changed by the interaction. How different this is from the “relationship” we have with our laptops!

It is no accident that the language of our prayer service, with only one exception, is phrased in the plural. It illustrates the value our tradition places on coming together to pray as a community. Even the most personal of journeys—toward *teshuvah* on Yom Kippur—takes place in the context of communal prayer. The words of the *vidui* –the confessional—are phrased in the plural: *ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu...we* are guilty, **we** have betrayed others, **we** have stolen.

Might, indeed, the entirety of the community be greater than the sum of its parts? Our sages certainly thought so. Hillel the Elder said, “*Do not separate yourself from the community*”, and Rabbi Israel Salanter said, “*True salvation can come only to a person who renders service to the community*”.

There is a story told of the rabbi who paid a visit to the home of one of his congregants who had not been to the synagogue for weeks. “David”, the rabbi said to him, “why have you not come to join us in prayer and study?” To this David replied, “Rabbi, since I have learned the service I have been praying and meditating at home, and I no longer need the congregation. I can do it on my own.” The rabbi spoke to David, saying, “David, I want you make a pile of coals and light it.” David, obliging the rabbi, ran and did just as he was asked. When the burning coals settled to a

glow of radiant heat, the rabbi spoke again. “David, now take one coal and set it aside.” Again, David did as he was asked. Soon, he observed that while the pile of coals continued to radiate warmth for quite some time, the single coal quickly ceased glowing and became cold. The rabbi had no need to speak further, for David understood the message he was trying to convey. From that day on, he returned to the synagogue and to his community.

During this High Holyday season may we take time to celebrate the many blessings of companionship and of community. Let us re-embrace the centrality of human contact instructed by our Jewish tradition. The connections we make with one another can be an antidote to our loneliness. They can sharpen our minds and enrich our learning. They can provide us with friendship and support in times of sorrow as well as joy; in times of sickness and in times of good health. It is my fervent wish that we continue to contribute to and be enriched by our Temple community over a lifetime of shared experiences and celebrations.

Keyn y’hi ratzon!