

My husband and I just celebrated 40 years of marriage, and our daughter, the comedy writer, joked that it's good that we got together thanks to the 1970's equivalent of J-Date. Actually, we met in shul. But imagine if we *had* met on something like J-Date. My honest dating profile might have gone something like this:

Single Jewish female seeks mate, object matrimony. Loves music, nature, and long walks on the beach. I'm not very domestic, so I'm looking for someone who likes to cook and is handy around the house. I'd love to have a large family, but I'm not very organized, so I'm counting on you to keep me on track. Oh, I'm kind of extravagant, so I hope you're a saver. Also, I'd love it if you can teach me Hebrew!

Come to think of it, it's probably good that we met in shul.

Rabbi Howard Stecker recently taught a group of rabbis in New York about the Jewish value of *arevut*, mutual interdependence. He says that it's ironic that we act like independence is our main attribute while seeking a partner, and our main goal for our children. In reality, we live in a world where spouses need one another, kids and parents need one another, older and young generations need one another.

Rabbi Stecker points out that the modern Hebrew word for Independence, *Atzma'ut*, does not even exist in Biblical and Rabbinic tradition. The only reference to "independence" in the Hebrew Bible is a negative one, criticizing as hubris those who say "*Kochi ve-otzem yadi asa li at ha-hayil hazeh*," "By my own independent power I have achieved success." (Deut. 8:17).

What does exist in abundance in our tradition is the idea of *Arevut*—**interdependence**. Rabbi Stecker says that we should "own that interdependence is the reality of how we are constituted as a species: the source of our transcendence, deliverance, and success." Or to quote a favorite saying of Reb Zalman, "The only way we can get it together is together," for "we need other people to share our tears and our joy."

But today many people feel more alone and isolated. In some ways we feel more connected because technology enables us to keep in touch with people, yet studies in the US and Europe show that many of us feel lonelier. Most of us don't know or interact much with our neighbors. Young people who seem to have every advantage deal with painful isolation, anxiety, and depression. The fabric of close-knit rural communities has frayed, leading to maladies like drug addiction.

This atomization is felt strongly in the world of religion, including Judaism. Rabbi Hayim Herring says that the “commanding community” has given way to the “sovereign self.” Churches are shuttering, synagogues are merging, and our own community has struggled with decline in membership over a number of years. Many people seem to have a more transactional feeling toward religion today, it's a matter of paying for a service rather than being part of a community.

There's a tradition that Yom Kippur, also known as Yom Kippurim, is “Yom Ki-Purim,” a day like Purim! Rabbi Shai Held's take on this is that on Purim we put on masks and on Yom Kippur we take off our masks. If we can't take off our masks, it's not a real community. So tonight I take off my mask, just a bit. I can't pretend that being a rabbi is easy in today's world. And it's not because I am asked to do too much; rather it's that people don't seem to need rabbis very much. You can get your Jewish information online; and perhaps you only “need” a rabbi for high holidays and life cycle events, or maybe not even then.

Earlier this year, while relaxing at home on a rare Sunday morning without Hebrew School, I got an urgent call from a local hospital. A young mother was facing a very sad situation and at first she hadn't wanted a rabbi to come, but then had changed her mind. And I was the only rabbi that the hospital chaplain could reach. So I got up, got dressed, and went to see a her and her family, people that I didn't know and might never meet again. I did not bring them theology or platitudes, but I brought them a listening presence, a wealth of life experience, and 3,000 years of Jewish wisdom. I wasn't their therapist or their social worker—there were others to do those important roles—but I was a vessel of tradition with a caring heart. With their permission, I shared a ritual and provided prayers and meditations they could use later if they needed to. I know that our interaction was very healing to them at a very delicate time, but it was also very healing to me.

It reminded me why I went into this profession in the first place. Not to be an occasional figurehead, but to be there for people, to be part of one another's lives.

And I have also been on the receiving side of interdependence. When my husband Avraham had a serious stroke seven years ago, our local Jewish community in California supported us like an army of angels bearing meals and doing favors. But for someone who is by nature and profession a giver, it can be desperately hard to change roles and receive from others, and even harder to ask for help. My wise daughter Shira told me that if I refused to receive from others or ask them for help, I would deprive them of the opportunity to do good by stopping the cycle of giving.

Kabbalah teaches that the universe exists only because of the interplay of giving and receiving. It doesn't really matter which side of the equation we are on—the mitzvot can only happen if one person is ready to give and the other to receive. The spiritual teacher Ram Dass, formerly a nice Jewish boy known as Richard Alpert, suffered a massive stroke a few years ago and discovered that the role of receiver is just as important because it enables another person to give, and thus allows the flow to continue. He writes, "When we look at incarnation from the Soul view, we see that our human interactions aren't just...about care-giving or care receiving. They're about mirroring each other's hearts."

Tomorrow morning you will hear from Susan Friedman, chair of our caring committee, about the many things our community can offer you in times of need, from a hot meal to a social worker. I hope you will consider both being part of her committee and also receiving what we can offer. And that you will know that it's not "bothering me" as the rabbi when you come to speak of your soul searching, your big questions in life. It's the most important and rewarding part of my work.

To build a community, we also need facetime, sitting, and talking, breaking bread together. We need to show up on Friday nights when a family is celebrating a bat mitzvah and help them to rejoice, even if they aren't our personal friends. To attend Pride Shabbat even if we don't identify as LGBTQ. Since I came to PCS, I've invited the community to events in my home and to kiddushes that I sponsor, and I wish more people would come. This sukkot you are invited to our home sukkah, for dessert on Columbus Day and I would love to spend some time with you then and many other times over the year.

Interdependence begins at home, but extends far beyond. On the national scene, we need each other, too. Leaders and opinion push us apart, when our hearts tell us that we have to be together. Again, Reb Zalman: “The only way we can get it together, is together.” Antisemitism would seem to be the ultimate tool to makes us feel isolated, defensive, different. But I still hold that the best antidote to the rise of anti-Semitism is *interdependence*—acknowledging and cultivating our connections with others, especially with other targeted minority groups. As I said in my sermon about “If I’m not for myself who will be for me,” as Jews we must stand up for ourselves, *and* work for civil rights, welcome, and equality for all people. This is what the Torah demands in the mitzvot to love our neighbor, love the stranger, and pursue justice. At the same time, by working for a more tolerant and loving society, we benefit ourselves, too.

In the wake of the Pittsburgh shooting, there were interfaith prayer vigils around the country. Muslim groups raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to help the Pittsburgh Jewish community. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette printed the opening words of the Kaddish in Hebrew on its front page. These interfaith connections took decades to build, and require tending and nurturing. They cannot be taken for granted. I urge those of you who are able, to join me in November for the annual Thanksgiving Diversity Breakfast sponsored by AJC, and for other interfaith gatherings. You will be delighted by the connections and relationships you make.

Finally, our interdependence extends beyond our own society and even beyond our species. Our separation from nature is an illusion. We have been operating as if we can control nature, but we *depend* upon it for our human survival, and in this Anthropocene age, nature depends on us. Our success as a species has led to massive extinctions and global climate change, and a more harmonious coexistence with our planet is the greatest task of our age.

Consider the role of pollinators, like birds, bats, small mammals, flies, beetles, butterflies and bees. Almost 90% of plant species need them to reproduce. A third of our world food supply, half of the world’s oils, fibers and other raw materials, many medicines, clean water and the very oxygen we breath, depend upon 200,000 species of pollinators. We need other creatures, and the birds and fish and trees need us, too. Interdependence is truly global.

Jewish educator Devorah Steinmetz says that Jews are experts on interdependence. The seminal lesson on this topic comes in the story of Judah and Tamar. Judah, one of Joseph's older brothers, was the classic "Good Old Boy" as we would say in Texas. He was the one who had saved Joseph from being killed by his jealous brothers...but then suggested selling him to slavery.

After Joseph is carried away to Egypt, the Torah makes a sudden and somewhat mysterious detour. We learn that Judah has a daughter in law, Tamar. When two of his sons die childless while married to her, Judah promises to marry her to their younger brother, but never fulfills his promise. Tamar takes matters into her own hands. In a passage you probably never learned in Hebrew school, she dresses as a veiled harlot in order to get Judah to solicit her services and father the child she desires. When Judah offers to pay, Tamar asks him for a pledge. He leaves his ID, or shall we say the biblical equivalent of seal, chord, and staff.

A few months later, Judah is told that his daughter in law is pregnant by harlotry. Judah, as all-powerful tribal chieftain, orders her summarily executed. Tamar, unfazed, doesn't even accuse him. She calmly shows him his "ID," his seal, chord, and staff. And what was the Hebrew word for this ID in the Torah,? *Eravon*, which has the same Hebrew root as *arevut*, interdependence. Judah realizes that it was he who selfishly did wrong to her all along, so he frees her and treats her with respect from then on. Tamar eventually gives birth to twins, one of whom becomes the ancestor of the Davidic line of kings.

Years later a more mature and wiser Judah must go down Egypt as the only way to save the family from starvation during a famine. He must appear and plead before the official second in command to Pharaoh, not realizing it is his own brother Joseph whom he long ago sold into slavery. And most difficult, at Joseph's orders Judah must bring their youngest brother Benjamin down to Egypt with him, an act which might kill their father Jacob if anything happens to him.

Judah has now grown as a person thanks to his experience with Tamar, He calms his elderly father before the trip, promising that Benjamin will return safely, with the words, "*Anochi e-ervenu*—I will be his pledge—again that same root as *arevut*, interdependency" When the Judah and his brothers arrive in Egypt, Joseph employs a ruse to keep Benjamin there with him. Judah refuses to sell out another brother, but volunteers to be a prisoner in his place, because he cannot break the

promise to his father to return the lad home. He tells the high Egyptian official who is really his brother: I promised to bring this son back to his father, because I am his pledge, *ki avdecha arev et ha-na'ar*, again that word of interdependency. This courageous act of being responsible for one's brother finally opens Joseph up to reveal his identity and reconcile with the family.¹ The rest, as they say, is history.

We are all the children of Judah, *Yehudim*, Jews. The Torah's message of interdependency and mutual responsibility is for all of us, in the words of our sages: *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh la-zeh*, we are all interdependent with one another.

In Tuesdays with Morrie, author Mitch Albom quotes his beloved dying professor Morrie, as saying: "In the beginning of life, when we are infants, we need others to survive, right? And at the end of life, when you get like me, you need others to survive, right?" His voice dropped to a whisper. 'But here's the secret: in between, we need others as well.'

Or in the words of Albert Einstein:

"Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to a divine purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: That we are here for the sake of others —above all for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends, for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day, I realize how much my outer and inner life is built upon the labors of people, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received and am still receiving."

We are all interdependent and mutually responsible: lover to lover, parent to child, members of a synagogue community. Whether building bridges among diverse communities, or protecting our future on the planet, only this realization will move us forward. We need each other. We are *arevim*, pledged and responsible to one another. Let's not turn away or deny it. Let's use it to make a better life for all. Amen.

¹ Yes, the Bible has some great narratives! Definitely worth reading and discussing in Shul. 😊