

A Fulfilling Life: The Power of Friendship

By Rabbi Michael Schwab

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Sometimes the power of friendship is dramatic.

There was a beautiful, tragic and touching story that came out of the horrific events surrounding 9/11. When the tragedy occurred two *friends* were sitting in their office: a man named, Avremel who was 55, and his friend, Ed Beyea, who was 42. Ed, while still able to work, became disabled after a **d**iving accident as a young man and needed 24-hour nursing assistance. Both he and Avremel were program analysts who worked on the 27th floor of One World Trade Center. One was a Christian; the other an Orthodox Jew.

On the morning of September 11th, Ed's health aide had gone to pick up breakfast on the 43rd floor when the plane struck the tower. Ed, who needed assistance to descend, wanted to wait until he could be securely carried down by several rescue workers, as it was dangerous for someone with his disability to be moved. Avremel **would not** allow his friend to wait alone. So when everyone else was *fleeing* the building, he put his life on the line and he *stayed* with him. Both men called their families and from survivor reports it seems that with the help of others, they actually were able to make it down to the 21st floor before the building suddenly collapsed, claiming both of their lives.

When I hear that story, and others like it, what comes through to me most clearly and powerfully, is that with danger and chaos everywhere, the importance of the friendship, companionship and love between these two people, was the force that prevailed. The story, for me, therefore serves as a *striking* reminder of the power and importance of friendship in our lives. It highlights for me how crucial it is for human beings to have others who know and love them so deeply that they will accompany them wherever life may take them. It inspires me to know that this kind of love can, in fact, overpower other darker forces that exist in the world.

And this reminder is *especially* important to me at this period of time, as we set our priorities for the upcoming year. For I feel that so often our lives revolve almost exclusively around our careers and/or the duties we have to our families, which BTW are both incredibly fundamental and important parts of life. However, I think that we sometimes neglect the sacred significance of friendship, which we (especially men) see almost as a luxury. “If I have time” I will develop and maintain my friendships. “When I am not so busy with other commitments” I will be there for my friends.

Yet the rabbis in our tradition knew better. As our Mishnah says, “Come and learn—which is the [right] path to which a person should adhere? [Answer:] Possessing a good friend.” The Talmud then elaborates on this lesson in the famous and dramatic story of Honi the Circlemaker who awoke from a 70 year

slumber to find that everyone he knew, or could study with, was gone. The tragic last words to this episode are: “*O havruta o mituta*” – “Give me friendship or give me death”. For Honi, life without friendship was a life difficult to bear. And while perhaps overstated, clearly these teachings express the idea that friendship is part of the nourishment that *any* human soul needs to live properly. By this definition, friendship is not simply about having others with whom to make social plans but rather implies a deeper connection with other human beings that sustains our souls. Friends and family can cross-over, for sure. But whether friends are related to you or not, the *value* of friendship is absolutely necessary in our lives.

Evidence for this comes directly from the Torah. Echoing a classic interpretation, Rabbi Sharon Brous points out that when the Torah begins, God creates all of the incredible elements of our world and calls it *tov*, good. And human beings God even calls *tov me’od* – very good. The first thing that happens in the Torah that God finds “*lo tov*” rather than “*tov*”, *displeasing* rather than pleasing, is: *lo tov heyot ha’adam l’vado* – “It’s not good for a person to be alone in the world”. Before human beings even have a chance to wreak havoc on God’s majestic creation, bringing on the flood, God warns us about the prospect of loneliness; lack of friendship is raised as problem to be combated from the very beginning of humanity.

And now more than ever, we seem to be in danger of suffering the effects of friendlessness and lack of connection. For example, American families have never been smaller. While a woman's average number of children shrank *slowly* from 3.5 to two over 50 years, the average number of cousins a person has, actually *plummeted* from close to 20 to four. And this doesn't only affect relationships with family. Mental health professionals have pointed out that because introductions to friends and society often come through families, shrinking families also deplete *all kinds* of connections, making it harder for people to develop adult friendships as well. Further, people commute longer and stare at screen entertainment longer, neither of which contributes to relationship development. And thus, according to author and journalist Ted Fishman, one in four Americans now say they have *no one* to whom they feel they could relate their worries or successes in a meaningful way. Americans have clearly neglected the value of friendship.

In the Torah, the diagnosis for this problem comes with its own prescription: *Lo tov heyot ha'adam l'vado*. "It is not good for a person to be alone"; next phrase: *E'eseh lo ezer k'negdo* - I will make him an *ezer k'negdo*. These last two words are often translated as "partner" and thus God's response to loneliness might seem to be a bit like you would imagine your Bubbee's to be – get married, or perhaps phrased less traditionally – find "someone", meaning romantically. However, while finding an incredible partner can make a huge difference, because hopefully

your partner is indeed a true friend, that is certainly not the whole answer. Studies prove that people tend to need more than just strong spousal relationships to thrive. So how else can we understand *ezer k'negdo*? *Ezer* means “Someone who helps”; *K'negdo* means “across from him or facing him”. In understanding that term in a more literal, yet deeper way, perhaps it is saying that for people to feel whole, loved and not alone, at each moment in life we need a friend to stand with us and face us, *kneqdo*, no matter what. As Rabbi Brous further teaches, “Perhaps the Torah was referring to someone who steps into the darkest moments of our lives, often without saying even a word, and offers their presence and their love. A friend *can* be a sibling, a spouse - a even a rabbi – as long as it is someone who can remind you that even though she can't *fully* understand you or your situation, you are not alone because he is there”. A friend really *sees* you (through the rough and tumble disjointed staccato nature of life) and makes sure you know that *your* worries, *your* dreams and *your* fate, are of supreme importance.

What is more, it is not only during times of dramatic pain and challenge that we want and need such loyalty, connection and friendship. Those times in our lives just make the need for friendship more palpable and the absence of friendship more obvious. However, on an on-going basis we want true friendship, someone to celebrate the happy moments as well. We want a friend who does not treat our special moments cavalierly: that rare and empathic friend that also enters into our

joy, with full and genuine enthusiasm. Just about every family for which I officiate a *simchah* tells me how much their happy occasion is enhanced by the loving presence of those close to them. We want a friend that does not succumb to competition, jealousy or selfish motivations when greeting our triumphs. We want someone who will celebrate us as they would celebrate their own success.

And Jewish tradition teaches that this model of friendship is not only an ideal but an achievable reality for it holds that we are, fundamentally, relational beings; we were created to connect. The Sfat Emet, amongst others, teaches that we all carry in us a *Nekudat Dveikut* – a spark of connection to *each* person, inside of *every one* of our souls. It is through this spark, he writes, that we connect best with our own divinity, thus teaching us that our connection to *others* is *also* one of the main ways we connect with *God* and discover the best of who we are. In other words, to truly realize our best selves and connect to the Divine, we must develop our deep connection to our fellow human beings and relate to them with a full appreciation for their sacred, complex and divine nature. Humans are thus spiritually hard-wired for connection; it is a fundamental part of who we are. We *need* these relationships to thrive and through this connection we are raised to our highest *spiritual* potential as well.

Thus, beyond connection and support, friendship is also important as a way of engaging with another person on a deeper, more meaningful level. Friendship is

about truth and challenge within the context of love. As legend has it, sometimes the Rabbis of the Talmud would encounter the prophet Elijah while walking down the street and they'd get to ask him to shed light on some of the great mysteries and struggles of life. (BTW, whenever I read about that I always think to myself that I wish very much that this was still true!) As our tradition tells us, it once happened that R' Yossi bumped into Elijah and asked him what the Torah really meant when it said I will make him a partner, an *Ezer K'negdo*. Elijah answered: When a person brings home wheat, can it be eaten raw? If one brings home flax, can it be worn unprocessed? In other words, everybody needs someone to take the raw material of life and help them turn it into something useful. In this way, Elijah said, an *ezer k'negdo* illuminates the world for us – helping us to see beyond our own limited perspective. What the rabbis are saying, through the persona of the prophet Elijah, is that true friendship, the best gift we can give another, is to help others expand their perspective, to use our otherness to help our friends see and learn things they could not without us, to help them imagine that wheat can be bread.

It is in this likeness that the rabbis created the study model of *hevruta*, the Jewish methodology of studying text in pairs. The very word *Hevruta* means fellowship or friendship, implying a deep connection through study. The most famous *hevruta* partners, who served as a paradigm for the rabbis, were Resh

Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan. As the story goes, Rabbi Yochanan would say something and Resh Lakish would raise 24 objections. Which would force R. Yochanan to create 24 rejoinders and the cycle went on and on. Through this process of challenge and debate, the rabbis said, truth and superior ideas emerge.

Think about a person with whom you have that relationship- someone who is honest with you and will take the time to turn over an issue, again and again, in order help you make the very best decision. Think about how valuable that person is in your life. That was how Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish saw their relationship; this is how a friend can be even more than a support and a presence but also a living partner in the improvement of the self and of one's life. As the Talmud says: "I *have* learned much from my teachers, but from my *friends* even *more* than my teachers".

It is with this understanding that the rabbis even include "friendship" (*re'ut*) as one of the components of *marital* joy, proclaimed aloud in the wedding liturgy. They understood that true connection needed to go beyond, a commitment to monogamy, physical attraction and romantic love. This centrality is further reinforced today, on Rosh Hashanah itself, through the way we blow the shofar. One of the notes we blow is called *tru'ah* – the long staccato blast broken into nine notes. In the Talmud the rabbis ask the meaning of this word. The classic answer, of course, is that it means "blast" -- as in the blast of a shofar or trumpet. However

the other answer on record, which the great sage Rashi relates, is that it comes from the same root word as *Re'ah*, friendship. Interpreting *tru'ah* in light of this teaching, we understand that when we blow the shofar today, on Rosh Hashanah, we are literally trumpeting the centrality of friendship. Thus, on the very first day of the year, in the midst of our incredibly important efforts to improve ourselves and the world, we highlight friendship as the key. And just as the *tru'ah* sound is a long staccato of individual notes, so too is friendship a purposeful attempt at remaining connected through the staccato notes of our lives as we move from one stage to the next, in and out of each other's existence. On Rosh Hashanah when we blow the shofar we proclaim that friendship is at the center of our efforts to make our lives, and the state of the world, better.

And if Jewish wisdom wasn't enough, scientific studies also tout the importance and benefits of friendship. For example, as author *Ted Fishman* points out *scholarship* shows that friends are every bit as important to our health and well-being as family, romantic love and just about anything we deem central to our lives. It turns out, for instance, that one theory in cognitive science holds that much of our *personality* builds from the qualities we first copy and then absorb from our friends. Smarter friends make us smarter; more social friends make us more outgoing; healthy friends make us more health conscious. Who *they* are becomes part of *us*. As Fishman wrote, "While I was researching a book on aging

I talked to men and women nearing 90 or 100, and in the midst of nice conversation tears flowed down their cheeks. I asked why? I heard the same answer in Japanese, English and Spanish: "My friends are gone." I think that late in life, they knew how much of themselves was shaped by friends, witnessed by friends and depended on friends. Clinical and academic research continues to show how friendship — and its absence — steers the course of our lives.

Recent findings suggest, too, that friends have life-sustaining practical benefits. A main conclusion of the Grant Study at Harvard, for instance, which followed its subjects for 75 years, was that strong relationships are the most important ingredients to well-being over a long life. What's more, friendship alone is a kind of wealth. Kids who have close friends in school *earn* more later in life than those without. In his book, *Social*, renowned psychologist Matthew Lieberman concludes that adults who have a friend they see on most days add as much to a their overall well-being as making an extra \$100,000 a year. (Now I have no idea how he calculated this figure but I like it) So think about this: If you come to shul every day and see your friends at minyan, that is worth an extra \$100,000 to your happiness! Deal? Of course, if you come on both days of RH and Yom Kippur to see your friends that's still \$821.92 to your happiness! And you still have a whole year to earn the rest!/? Whether viewed from the practical,

emotional or spiritual perspectives, it turns out that friends can give people the connection they need to stay happy and well.

Yet we might not need mountains of science or even great Jewish texts to teach us about the incredible power of friendship. We can learn this from individuals in our own lives and from the powerful stories of others. I experienced the truth of the power of friendship for myself this very summer. I have a very close friend, Brian, whom I have known since fifth grade, who was my Ramah friend, USY buddy, college roommate, I officiated at his wedding, etc, etc. You get the picture – we are close and share lots of history. Yet, despite this closeness or maybe better, *alongside* this closeness, we actually don't see much of each other anymore. He lives in northern NJ and like me has a big family and a busy life.

However, this summer his life was turned upside down. His father, who had been recovering from an illness took a sharp turn for the worse and sadly died shortly after. What made it more difficult was that he died literally minutes before Brian's son's bris. On a day of what should have been pure joy for my friend, the *brit* of his son, mixed in was a terrible sadness – the death of his father, the baby's grandfather. The funeral was scheduled for less than two days later. Without hesitation (after putting a few work things in order) I booked my ticket and called our other childhood friends. Before I knew it our childhood crew came from Chicago, Atlanta, Philadelphia and New York to be with Brian in New Jersey on

the day of the funeral and for the first day or two of shivah. To some it may seem strange to say it, but it was one of the most meaningful and uplifting, even while sad, experiences I have had in a long time. Being together at that moment in Brian's life, we all re-experienced our deep bond of friendship in a palpable way – a way we could have only experienced because of our shared history together and because we showed up. And the experience of that connection we shared with each other gave us a true appreciation of how precious our connection is and how difficult it is to reproduce. And therefore we felt a sense of blessing that I know sustained Brian during that difficult time and as you all know now, sitting here, clearly also had a lasting effect on me, so much so that I am speaking about it today.

Apropos my experience this summer, I recently read a beautiful article that you may have read yourself, written by a woman who – at her father's prodding - built a life around the rule: always go to the funeral. She exhorted her readers to “show up” for other people even when it's least convenient, even when it means getting a babysitter, even when you don't know anyone else there, even when you have to travel or even when work is crazy. Several years ago, the author's father died from cancer on a cold April day. She wrote, “His funeral was on a Wednesday, middle of the workweek. I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The

memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful and humbling thing I've ever seen was a church at 3:00pm on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral”.

Thus, one way to develop friendships is by shared experience and by being with people during important times in their lives. Regarding a lifecycle event, those times are easy to identify – you know when it is happening and you show up for the event. However, often being “present” can’t be strategically planned. Frank Bruni wrote an article published in the New York Times just over a week ago entitled *The Myth of Quality Time*, which illustrates that point powerfully. He says, “EVERY summer for many years now, my family has kept to our ritual. All 20 of us . . . find a beach house big enough to fit the whole unruly clan . . . And we fling ourselves at one another for seven days and seven nights. That’s right: a solid week. . . I used to think that shorter would be better . . . But in recent years, I’ve showed up at the start and stayed for the duration, and I’ve noticed a difference. With a more expansive stretch, there’s a better chance that I’ll be around at the *precise, random* moment when one of my nephews drops his guard and solicits my advice about something private. Or when one of my nieces will need someone other than her parents to tell her that she’s smart and beautiful. Or when one of my siblings will flash back on an incident from our childhood that makes us laugh uncontrollably, and suddenly the cozy, happy chain of our love is cinched that

much tighter. There's simply no real substitute for physical presence. . . [for] people tend *not to operate on cue*. At least our moods and emotions don't. We reach out for help at odd points; we bloom at unpredictable ones. The surest way to see the brightest colors, or the darkest ones, is to be watching and waiting and ready for them. . . [thus] sustained proximity is the best route to the soul of someone; unscripted gestures at unexpected junctures yield sweeter rewards than scripted ones . . . That's also when the truest confessions are made, when hurt is at its rawest and tenderness at its purest. . . I can tell you that I'm even more tightly bonded with [my niece] now, and that's not because of some orchestrated, contrived effort to plumb her emotions. It's because I was present. It's because I was there." Spending time with others during the normal rhythms of life deepen a friendship in powerful ways that cannot be predicted.

Therefore, one way *Judaism* reinforces the notion of friendship is through the continuous presence of community – a literal *milieu* for sharing our lives with one another. It is often hard to make friends, especially the way contemporary society is structured. Yet, Judaism, through institutions like the synagogue, gives us that sacred place and space to form bonds, to exchange significant ideas, to participate in meaningful experiences with others and to *be present* with them during significant times. Further, as many experts will tell you, sharing experiences with others that *have similar passions and values* can lay the

groundwork for forming deep and lasting friendships. That is why for many developing friendships in the synagogue, or more generally in a Jewish communal context, can be so successful. And even for those that *already* have many close friends and are good at connecting, these very same qualities of community help *strengthen* friendships, can provide a *meaningful context* for connecting with those you love and it can also give those who *are* socially connected an opportunity to help others who may not be.

“What’s required,” writes Dr. Cacioppo of the University of Chicago, in order to be a good friend “is to step outside . . . our own situation long enough to ‘feed’ others. Real [connection] begins with doing.” So next time there’s a funeral: show up. Next time there’s a *shiva*: show up. Next time someone is going through a divorce: call. Next time someone gets engaged: get up and celebrate. Next time someone has a baby: go to the bris. Next time there is a wedding: go dance. Next time someone is sitting alone: go share your presence. Next time there is a program you know someone will love, invite her to go with you. The next opportunity you have to spend time with someone you care about – do it.

That is one of the great powers of holy community – the ability to encourage and facilitate connection in meaningful ways. *Lo tov heyot ha-adam levado* - it’s not good for a person to be alone in the world. When we trumpet our friendships over the staccato of our lives the world becomes a better place for us and for

others. So this year, try to reach out more. Meet someone new or spend time with someone you know by joining a new committee, taking another class, volunteering for the cause you have always loved, signing up for a new exercise group, inviting someone over for a meal, going wherever it is when you are invited by someone you want to know better, coming to another program despite your hesitations. And *share* with others while you are there, let people in and allow others to reach out to you. Get in touch with yourself, your needs and what makes you happy and use that to deepen your relationship with the community. Become a friend and provide friendship for others. Judaism teaches us, and science agrees, that life is better, healthier and happier when we have friends and are good friends to others. What a wonderful and rewarding way to make the world a better place: to be a true friend, to have a true friend and by doing so to help perform Tikkun Olam, one relationship at a time. And there is no better time to start than at this time of new beginnings. Shanah Tovah – May this be a year of friendship, connection, blessings and love for all us, Amen.