

One Spring afternoon, a man came home to find two little girls on the steps of his building. Both were crying hard, shedding big tears. Thinking they might be hurt, he dropped his briefcase and quickly went over to them. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Still sobbing, one held up her doll. "My baby's arm came off," she said.

He took the doll and its disjointed arm. After a little effort and luck, the doll was again whole. "Thank you," came a whisper from the girl as he handed her the doll back.

Next, looking into the tearful eyes of her friend, he asked, "And what's the matter with you, young lady?"

She wiped her cheeks and said, "Oh I'm okay, I was just helping her cry."

Really being there for other people.
That is what we learn from these two girls.

Nice lesson, but we don't do it enough.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the need to listen to one another.

Tonight on Kol Nidre I want to go one step further and explore the Al Chets of Neglect and Silence. Note that the second little girl taught us to validate, honor and care about another person's feelings.

Not only that, she went one step further and tried to help her friend through whatever was hurting her.

Silence can hurt us. The unspoken, the ignored, the dismissed feelings hurt even deeper because the pain is compounded: first there's the pain from the initial wound/incident, and then there's the pain of being not heard, not seen, by the Other.

- Who among us wants to cry out but is afraid?
- Who among us will never share our pain because nobody notices us suffering?

Do we have the ability to hear the silent cry (PAUSE) of our fellow community members? Of our families? Our friends? Our co-workers? Our children / our parents / our siblings?

As local boys Simon and Garfunkel sing: "Silence like a cancer grows..." It is everywhere. It starts locally and then spreads out.

We must listen, just like the man passing by the two girls did. Listen. Consider. Respond, if appropriate.

We must start with those closest to us.

What are we almost able to hear, but not quite? What quiet messages do you sense, but ignore, from those closest to you?

If we don't show up for those most intimate in our lives, then kal vachomer we won't have the tools to do so for members of our broader community, our neighbors and fellow citizens in the world.

Add to this the fact that community as we used to know it, no longer exists as it once did. So few of us go over to one another's houses to borrow a cup of flour or milk.

When did you last listen to the story of a stranger, a check-out clerk at Target, a barista at Starbucks, a security guard? For those of us who go to Sinai Chapels more frequently than we would like, how many of us know the name of the parking attendant? His name is Sal. It is written on his shirt. Say hi to him next time.

There something in each of our stories, each of our lives that connects us to everyone else. Not just to everyone else in this sanctuary, but to everyone else in the world.

But by and large, we all stay in our silos, in our dalet amot. There are rarely enough people in our cars to qualify for the carpool lane and we don't interact with others...Unless there is a crisis. And if that is the way we are living, then we are not living full lives and we are missing out.

Two thousand years ago, in Pirkei Avot, the great teacher Hillel taught-

אִם אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי.
וְכִשְׁאֵין לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי

If I am not for myself no one will be
but if I am only for myself what am I?

Today, I fear, we have forgotten the second part of Hillel's teaching. We focus too much on our selves.

How can we relearn to be committed to others?

Hillel taught that the universal and particular, the external and the internal, the focus inward and the focus outward, are not mutually exclusive.

וְכַשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי

If I only focus on the people in my house, my own family or my own shul, I have missed the bigger picture of why we are here in the first place.

As Jews, we learn “kol Yisrael arevim ze bazeh” -all Jews are responsible for one another. This includes those Jews with whom we don’t agree. It includes those who are members of our shul, members of another shul, and those who don’t go to any shul at all. And it includes those Jews living here in North America, in Israel, and throughout the world.

I would say we need to expand Kol Yisrael arevim ze bazeh to Kol Haolam arevim ze bazeh. We are ALL responsible for each other. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that “No religion is an island. We are all involved in one another.”

I was privileged to be part of an AIPAC rabbinic mission to Israel in the summer of 2014. As part of a delegation of 20 rabbis, I visited the Ziv Medical Center in the mystical city of Sfat.

At the hospital we met Dr. Tal Solomon, head of the Vascular Surgery Unit. In this hospital in Israel, Dr. Solomon treats wounded Syrians, performing vascular bypass surgeries on children, allowing them to avoid amputation. This was three summers ago, before conversations about settling refugees even began here in the US, and the media was not yet sharing photos of refugee children being washed up onto the shore.

I remember clearly a three year old boy that we met. He was there with his father. The boy had been shot in the foot-he could barely walk. At Ziv Hospital, the boy’s foot was being reset properly. An Arab Israeli social worker translated for us so that we could talk with the father and the son. We asked a lot of questions, including: Will you ever tell your son that Israelis treated him?

The father told us that he may tell his son the entire story someday if it is politically safe. And no, people will not really know where he got the treatment.

וְכַשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי

If I am only for myself what am I?

Dr. Solomon and the staff at Ziv could have easily ignored what is going on in neighboring Syria, like so much of the world is doing, but instead they reached out to their neighbors.

We all know that Syria and Israel are have never been best of friends. But three years ago, innocent Syrians were feeling very alone.

The importance of not being alone is a long standing tradition for the Jewish community. Most obviously, we have a requirement that there be a *minyan*, ten people, for the recitation of many of our prayers, including taking out the Torah.

This is not just a Jewish idea. Self determination theory holds that humans need three basic things in order to be content. We need to feel competent at what we do, we need to feel authentic in our lives, and we need to feel connected to others.

וְכַשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מֵה אֲנִי

Another piece of wisdom found in Pirkei Avot is *al tifrosh min hatzibbur*, “do not separate yourself from your community.” This clearly informs us of the importance of being with others. We know that tonight. We are here.

הִנֵּה מֵה-טוֹב וּמֵה-נְעִים שְׁבֵת אַחִים גַּם-יְהִדּוּ.

How good it is, and how pleasant, when we dwell together in unity.

But many people tonight are here because they are in crisis mode. A lot of people take the metaphor of the Book of Life literally and want to make it in, so you fast and come to shul tonight.

We don't come together enough for the joyous moments of life, like Shabbos, or to enjoy our lives together. According to a 2012 Gallup Poll, those who regularly go to a place of worship are the happiest people. I am just saying.

Being here tonight is a great first step. But we can always do more.

Charles Fritz teaches that *modern society has gravely disrupted the social bonds that have always characterized the human experience and that disasters thrust people back into a more ancient, organic way of relating. Disasters, he proposes, create a community of sufferers, that allows individuals to experience an immensely reassuring connection to others.*

Think about it.

Many people view Yom Kippur as a day of crisis. I don't, but many people do. Our Sanctuary does not expand into the Ball Room on a weekly basis. On Shabbat mornings, when people do not feel like they are in crisis mode, we have a much smaller crowd.

Think about Israel. We come together about Israel when terror is amplified or war breaks. Right now the Hizbollah arsenal in Lebanon is not in use. But it will, and then we will rally, flood social media and raise money again.

Human beings are wired to help each other and we enjoy enormous social satisfaction from doing so¹, but we don't do it enough anymore on a day to day basis.

In the book Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging, written by Sebastian Junger, the author explains that the beauty and tragedy of the modern world is that it eliminates many situations that require people to demonstrate a commitment to the collective good.

Our friends in Florida and up the coast came together and got to know their neighbors last week because of Hurricane Matthew.

I too lived through a hurricane when I lived in South Florida. I was evacuated from my apartment in Aventura. Strangers bemoaned the lack of water and other supplies with each other in the empty aisles at Publix. Young people checked in on the older folks a few doors down--people who they never had a conversation with until the rains and winds began.

A crisis brings people together.

Throughout Yom Kippur, we have ample opportunities to recite the Al Chet litany of things we missed the mark on this past year. Add to this list the Al Chets of Neglect and Silence. We are not engaging enough with each other and in community and public life.

We can all admit a lot of bad things happened this year. But let me share with you the saddest event for me.

I attended a funeral of a man who was a member of this congregation, who came to shul every week when he was in town.

There were eleven people in total present at the funeral at Sinai Chapels. Eleven people including his daughter and son in law.

Think of all the people he interacted with on a daily basis for the 80 plus years that he was alive, how many lives he might have impacted, but we will never know because we did not pause to hear his story.

When you think of your funeral, how many people do you think will come for you?

¹ Tribe, p. 55

וְכַשְׁאֲנִי לְעֵצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי

A woman in Chicago taught preschool for decades. She died this past year, also in her early eighties. She started her career in her young twenties. At her funeral, people lined up on the side of the room. Not only were her most recent students there, but many from her first class of students were there too. What kind of teacher and person must she have been, and what type of students must she have had to remember her as well. This rarely happens. It is the exception.

But maybe it should not be the exception. Think about where you work or worked? What will happen when you die? Who will come to your funeral? Will the people sitting three rows in front of you tonight be there?

How many people in this room have you spoken to beyond a casual greeting. How many times were the words "how are you doing" simply robotic.

We might think we are naive to say that these little interactions could change the world, but they can. They are a pure form of tikun olam, of making the world a better place.

Just last week my family and I were shopping at Amazing Savings, getting our disposable goods for Sukkot. It was dinnertime and Ariella was not very patient. As we were rushing through one of the aisles, a woman without a head covering, a Spanish accent and brown skin stopped us and said "were you calling your daughter Ariella?" We said yes, and she said her daughter's name was Ariella too. It was the first time I had ever met someone with that name who was not Jewish. We had a great conversation. She told me Ariella meant Lioness. I knew that, but I connected with someone I otherwise might never had exchanged words with.

וְכַשְׁאֲנִי לְעֵצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי

Life is full of concentric circles. In the smallest circle we place those closest to us. Our goal in life is to be like the little girl who cried with her friend who was crying. The second little girl was not sad for her own self. She sat next to her friend and kept her company in her tears.

In the next circle, we can place the man in our story. We have all been him. He had several options. He could have walked by and not done anything. He could have made sure there was no blood and nobody was lost. Or, he could have found out her story.

How many times do we choose to find out someone else's story?

Tonight is Kol Nidre. We have nothing to rush home for. We are not going out for dinner. Most of our friends will not be updating Facebook. There is no presidential debate. All our shows can be DVRed. We are fasting, so we are not going to work out. After services end tonight, I encourage everyone to stay 15 minutes longer and take the time to get to know someone here better.

I have cards with questions you can ask. These are the questions:

1. What are you passionate about?
2. What would you like a second chance for this year?
3. What is the most pressing thought on your mind tonight?
4. Why is Yom Kippur important to you?

Take the cards home with you, and after the final blasts of the shofar tomorrow night, call someone and ask them these questions too.

וְכַשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מִה אֲנִי

Remember: If I am only for myself, what am I?

Starting with tonight, let's learn more about the others in this sacred space, and resolve to make more connections in the inner and outer circles of our lives.

Gmar Chatima Tova.