

## GET PROXIMATE

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780 (29 September 2019)

Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Cong. (Bethesda MD)

Shana Tova. You're alone on a small desert island – with provisions; help is coming, but not yet. No one's around; it's just you. Is there anything unethical you can do?

Interesting question, no?! Dr. Paul Root Wolpe asks his students this; the question opened this spring's Jewish ethics conference, in honor of Rabbi Dr. David Teutsch (our shabbaton scholar; past president of RRC; my teacher).

For Dr. Wolpe, short of suicide or ecocide, the answer is basically 'no' – because, quite simply, "ethics is always in relationship."

And these Ten Days of Tshuvah, beginning tonight, are all about ethics –doing better, hitting the mark rather than missing it, turning from sin or shortcoming, toward the right and the good.

[At least in communities like ours! Traditionally, upping your kashrut or shabbat observance is as Rosh Hashanah-y as giving up theft or renouncing racism. Liberal Judaism leaves room for, even celebrates, ritual matters (*bein adam l'Makom*, between people and G!d), but we emphasize the ethical (*bein adam l'chavero*, inter-personal). More on that another time.]

Point is: if ethics is relational, and these Yamim Noraim are largely ethical, then the work ahead of us unfolds in relationship. We should 'do tshuvah' around core relationships – and hold out restored relationship as the goal, the incentive, that leads (past our defenses!) to the apologies and amends we must make, and to the hard, productive, courageous conversations we should have. That's tonight's message -- "just connect" -- for these Holy Days.

Who's with us? Mordechai Kaplan, who put 'belonging' ahead of 'belief' or 'behavior'; since we're social creatures, Jewish community is, well, communal – relational. (Today "Relational Judaism" is its own whole thing; see Ron Wolfson and others).

Martin Buber, in his 1923 classic I-and-Thou, placed relationship at the core of Jewish ethics: minimize superficial I-It connections; go for the deep, transformative 'I-Thou.'

Shoah survivor Emmanuel Levinas transformed philosophy, with ethics at the center: "the face" of the other commands our attention and empathy.

Judith Plaskow, Rachel Adler, and other Jewish feminist thinkers expand these insights, with connection ever at the core.

The list goes on, from ancient to contemporary, of how Jewishly, ethics and relationship go hand-in-hand.

Tonight, we'll explore this a bit through Mussar, and other sources. But first, a Levinas-inspired exercise: picture "the face" of another, someone you're in rocky relationship with – spouse/partner or friend, boss or employee, child or parent or cousin – anyone where the relationship matters, but is strained. Let their face command your attention, your empathy. Despite *their* role in this challenging connection, in tshuvah, we point the finger back inward. What role can *you* own in it? What can *you* do differently? What would real *mechilah*, forgiveness, restoration, look like? Take a moment: \_\_\_ [10 sec: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10].

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Okay; exhale. That's what we're talking about! Relationship, ethics, tshuvah.

Which brings us to Mussar: the early modern movement of ethics as spiritual practice, with roots a thousand years and more old, all about our *middot* or attributes. Mussar is, in a sense, all about relationship. Last High Holy Days we focused on the middah of *kavod* (honor or respect), kicking off our 'year of proactive kavod,' raising voices which deserve extra honor. For *kavod*, says Rabbi David Jaffe, "we need to open our hearts to sense the holiness...in others."<sup>1</sup>

Two years ago, *anavah*, humility – us stepping back, to make space for others, for the sake of relationship.

Really, *all* the middot, *all* our essential attributes, are relational: *shtikah*, silence: so we can hear others! *Savlanut*, patience, with others, however crazy they drive us. *Emet*, truth: to speak honestly with others. *Seder*, order, to make or arrange time for or with others. Even *Emunah & Bitachon*, Faith and Trust, the theological middot, are about relationship with the ultimate Other – G!d – as Buber says, where the Infinite lines of connection meet.

'Connection' or 'link' in Hebrew is *kesher* – itself a *middah* (says Rabbi Marc Margolius) – the "energy within us rendering us conscious of and uncomfortable with disconnection, and *generating an instinct to reach out and foster connection*. We manifest *kesher* by growing in awareness of and fostering greater connectedness and wholeness ... with others."<sup>2</sup>

There's *vertical kesher*, "when we reach out to connect with the Divine Presence in each moment, place, and person;" and *horizontal kesher*, "when we reach out to connect with others... and engage in acts of *tzedek*, justice and righteousness, and *shalom*, fostering peace and wholeness."<sup>3</sup>

We might see *kesher* as where *kavod*, honor, meets *chesed*, lovingkindness. Traditional *chesed* practices include "smiling warmly, judging others favorably, and bearing another's

burden” with them – “actions that weave the fabric of a community” as *Chesed* puts us in regular, intimate contact with those around us,” and “builds the world”.<sup>4</sup> And when *hesed* & *kavod* work together, there’s balance (writes Shelly Nelson-Shore): We can “respond to the needs of others in ways that honor their wholeness and autonomy, and at the same time...recognize our own needs and ask for help in sharing our own burdens.”

Last middah: *Achrayut*, Responsibility. The Alter of Kelm (head of one of three leading Musar schools) called it “bearing the burden of the other”<sup>5</sup> I MUST bear your burden: ethically; in the mitzvot; and, for my own personal growth.

The Alter of Kelm had studied under Yisrael Salanter, founder of modern mussar. “Spiritual needs are more elevated than material needs,” Salanter had taught – “But the **material** needs of **another** are an obligation of **my spiritual** life.”<sup>6</sup>

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Bearing the burden of the other: think not just Simcha Zissel Ziv, but Bill Withers! “If, there is a load, you have to bear, that you can’t carry -- I’m, right up the road, I’ll share your load, if you just call me.”

(Erev Rosh needs some lightness!). Lots of oldies invoke mussar, and relationship. Consider this playlist a musical interlude!

Bob Marley – “One Love, One Heart, Let’s Get Together and Feel Alright” – his Rasta background borrowed heavily from Hebrew tradition, by the way.

The Beatles – All Together Now! Come Together. Heck, even We ALL live in a Yellow Submarine!

Babs – People, Who Need People, are the Luckiest People!

The Hollies, 50 years ago, literally the burden of another: “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother.”

And the Youngbloods: “Come on people now. Smile on your brother. Everybody get together. Try to love one another [right now].”

NPR had a great “American Anthem” spot on this.<sup>7</sup> Turns out, one Dino Valenti wrote it; it went big only after a 1969 PSA for the National Conference of Christians and Jews used it!

Another fun fact, on The Youngbloods' line, ‘when the one that left us here returns for us at last:’ Dino’s lyric was, ‘when the *wind* that left us here.’ Dave Freiburg likes “that best because it symbolizes the cosmic wind and the interconnection of everything. But then I’m a Buddhist...” And I’m a Jew, who prefers saying *Ruach*, ‘wind’ or ‘spirit’ to saying Melech, King, a corporeal (and masculine) “One”! So next time you sing along, remember the wind, the *ruach*, that left us here.

And, returning us toward tshuvah and mussar: Lizz Wright also recorded it; her favorite verse: “You hold the key to love and fear all in your trembling hand. Just one key unlocks them both...it's there at your command.” She adds, “in our uncertainty, we are still choosing: to learn by love, or to learn by fear, as we go. And I just love how this verse puts it back in our court as individuals.”

Lizz Wright is right: It's in *our* court, as individuals -- to learn by love, or learn by fear. To live by love, or live by fear. Look around, see what happens when fear is the great motivator. Instead, let's choose togetherness, and love – Ahavah Rabbah, great love – love big enough for us to bear one another's burdens.

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Even non-musician, non-mussar folk speak to the centrality of relationship. Three quick teachings, emphasizing the spirituality of connection, and its place in our tshuvah --

One, from local Buddhist and all-around teacher, Tara Brach: “The spiritual path is not a solo endeavor. In fact, the very notion of a self who is trying to free her/himself is a delusion. We are in it together, and the company of spiritual friends helps us realize our interconnectedness.”

Two, George Bernard Shaw: “The true joy in life [?!:] ... being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.”<sup>8</sup>

And three, Martin Luther King; you surely know this: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” It's all relationship, from interpersonal to international.

(A timely aside: in the same paragraph of that letter from the Birmingham Jail, a 1963 rebuke of our 2019 government. Dr. King: “Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.”)<sup>9</sup>

Dr. King's call is updated today by top civil rights lawyer and organizer, Bryan Stephenson -- who insists that we “Get Proximate.” In short: By getting to know lots of others, from lots of backgrounds, we broaden our empathy and sensitivity, make friends, strengthen the civic fabric, and do tikkun olam.<sup>10</sup>

Simply, to *bear* the burden of the other, we must first *know* the other, and *understand* their burden. So, let's get proximate in 5780.

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Nothing revolutionary tonight; you know this already. A meaningful life is a connected one. Relationships get top priority; these Ten Days, starting now, are our annual

chance to reset them, a plausibility structure for our own deep reckoning, then for reaching out. Make the most of it.

Tomorrow we'll expand the time-scales, to "intergenerational solidarity" – rooted, also, in relationship. But now, for those around us in real time, remember: relationship is love. And proximity matters. Back to our Top Hits, we might say (agape-only), "Love the One You're With" – while extending ourselves to be "with" people we've not broken bread with before.

Focused as we are on ones we're with, love and relationship should extend outward, ever further. The topmost 'hit' is the golden rule: *v'ahavta l're'acha kamocho*, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). But who's your neighbor? Modern Mussar master Rabbi Ira Stone explains:

"...it must be that our 'neighbor' is a constantly expanding category. The one is who is closest to us, literally our beloved, is our first neighbor. But the very experience of such a responsibility itself increases our need for such responsibility, driving the list outward to include family, friends, ethnic and national affinities, and, ideally, ultimately all of humanity and all of creation."

Stone channels Israel Salanter, who simply (and obviously and beautifully) said -- "first a person should put their house together; then their town; then the world."<sup>11</sup> Yes, a person should. We should.

So: next time you're on a deserted island, no one nearby, help on the way – go wild! But the next time others are near – which is to say, almost all the time – only connect. Give the other all your best middot: love; honor; humility; patience. Emphasize right relationship. Get proximate; stay proximate. Shanah tovah.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi David Jaffe, *Tikkun Middot Curriculum*, 2017, Institute for Jewish Spirituality. Without the ellipses, the original holds that we must identify the holiness "in ourselves, in others, and in the world" – a nested order of interconnected, ever-broader forms of relationship which we introduce at the end (and focus on tomorrow). Note: for the middah of shtikah/silence, consider "Praying," by the late Mary Oliver: *"Just pay attention, and then patch a few words together, and don't try to make them elaborate. This isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak."*

<sup>2</sup> These citations are from Rabbis Marc Margolius (who also, pre-ellipses, wrote more broadly of connection "within ourselves, with others, and within the world"), Jonathan Slater, and Shelly Nelson-Shore, all appearing in the <https://www.jewishspirituality.org/june-2019-newsletter/>. Following Ms. Nelson-Shore's article are these "*Tikkun Middot Practices for Chesed and Kavod*, excerpted from the IJS Tikkun Middot Curriculum," which Rabbi David Jaffe wrote a few years back. Rabbi Rachel, Fran Zamore, Marla Zipin, and I were trained together by Rabbis Marc Margolius and David Jaffe; we can vouch for the value of these exercises and spiritual practices:

1. Give your best, warm attention and a smile to at least three different people each day. Try to really notice the people  
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2. Once each day, notice someone else doing something good, or doing something well.
3. Choose one 30 minute period during the day during which you do something to honor anyone who comes your way.
  4. Focus Phrase: *Haveh Mekabel et Kol Ha'adam b'sever panim yafot* (Pirkei Avot 1:15) / Greet each person (the whole person) with a warm smile
5. Questions to consider:
  1. How do you like to receive love?

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2. In what ways do you find yourself showing love to others?
  3. In what ways do you seek praise and recognition?
  4. Is it easier or harder to give respect to certain people? Why do you think? What does that resistance feel like?
  5. What experience do you have with the relationship between self-*kavod* and giving *kavod* to others?

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Slater, in the same IJS newsletter, adds that *kesher* “comes first from reaching in,” deeper inside ourselves – and then, “in reaching out we open ourselves to others.”

<sup>4</sup> R. David Jaffe, *Tikkun Middot Curriculum*, *op. cit.*, in his section on *Hesed*, citing Rav Shlomo Wolbe (1914-2005). The subsequent thought, from Shelly Nelson-Shore, about the value of comingling *Hesed* and *Kavod*, continues: “We can see the ways we need our communities to nourish us and seek out that care, and simultaneously act with love when others ask for nourishment from us. When the burdens of others cause us to feel discomfort or resistance—or when we notice our own resistance to reaching out for a helping hand—the cultivation of these *middot* allow us to respond to that resistance with tenderness. Through the work of [*chesed and kavod*], we can build holy, connected communities: for ourselves, for others, and for the world.”

<sup>5</sup> Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, p. 203. The Sfat Emet (late 19<sup>th</sup> century) teaches similarly, as summarized by Rabbi David Wolpe in “Jewels of Elul” 4 Elul 2017: “the first tablets were broken by sin, but on Yom Kippur Moses returned with the second tablets, all of one piece. Teshuva, repentance, had created wholeness again. We create distance when we are afraid, and even more when we are ashamed. Just as sin is a pushing away, love is a drawing close...”

<sup>6</sup> In Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, p. 205. Morinis explains why even mystics, spiritualists, and ascetics must focus on interpersonal burden-bearing: “My soul cannot develop, refine, and ascend except through caring for the needs of others. Why? The logic is not obscure. An elevated soul must be a sensitive soul, and you couldn’t possibly be sensitive without feeling the pain and suffering endured by others. And if you were (and hopefully are) a sensitive soul like this, and so you did feel the burden that others bear, you couldn’t possibly hold yourself back from taking a role in helping them out.”

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/10/711545679/get-together-youngbloods-summer-of-love-american-anthem>, heard on Morning Edition, April 10, 2019. Actually it was “written in the early '60s by Chester Powers,” stage name Dino Valenti. Many played it, but it made no splash. Then in 1969, “The Youngbloods’ version was used in a public service announcement for the National Conference of Christians and Jews. People started calling their radio stations requesting the song. The band’s label took the unusual step of reissuing the single, and it went to No. 5.”

<sup>8</sup> Contained within “Jewels of Elul” (from CraigNCo), 19 Elul 2017, 9/9/2017 – this entry from Rev. Edwin Bacon, former rector of All Saints Church in Pasadena, California, who concludes: “That’s what I have learned thus far: joy comes from giving oneself to the whole human community.”

<sup>9</sup> Text at [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html) & elsewhere. Dr. King’s teaching is timely amid all today’s anti-immigrant sentiment, including the rescinding of Temporary Protected Status for, and heartless crackdowns on many more of, those who already live here – and, unethical (and probably illegal by international law) limitations on asylum-seeking. Just this week (Mark Hetfield, HIAS.org email, 9/27/19): “As we enter this season of reflection, we also call to mind the growing difficulties faced by more than 70 million refugees and displaced people worldwide. Just yesterday, the United States announced it will slash by 40% the number of refugees whom we will accept next year. While this year has brought many such relentless attacks on refugees and asylum seekers, we have also seen the Jewish community rise up with a loud and clear voice to say that we will not stand for fear, indifference, or hate. [P] Our New Year hope is that, just as the Gates of Repentance remain open to us, so too will the gates of this country remain open to those in need of a safe place to call home. Together, let us stand firm in our moral obligation to welcome the refugee and asylum seeker. [P] May this new year be one in which we work toward peace and justice for all.

<sup>10</sup> Bryan Stephenson, of the Equal Justice Initiative, whom I first heard at the Bend the Arc conference in 2016. Notes from that session follow – but much of this is in his excellent *Just Mercy*, and elsewhere. “1, Get Proximate: One needn’t have all the answers; just get proximate to those in the margins, and great things will happen. 2, Change the narrative, the paradigm – e.g., his effort to put markers at all lynching sites – not to punish, but to liberate, so the trauma is named and dealt with (see South Africa’s Truth & Reconciliation model). 3, Instill hope – identify it, work toward it. 4, Do what’s uncomfortable – it may break you, but we’re all broken, and must absorb that brokenness... it’s the only way. And 5, I believe we’re all broken. If you stole, you’re not just a thief; even if you’ve killed someone, you’re not only a killer...”

<sup>11</sup> Ira Stone, *A Responsible Life*, p. 26. Salanter via Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, p. 208. And “only connect” is from E.M. Forster, the end of *Howard’s End*, it turns out: “Only connect: that was the whole of her sermon...”