

Rabbi Ken Chasen
“Thick Relationships”
Leo Baeck Temple
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Thirty years ago, when I decided to go to rabbinical school, I remember being filled with anticipation, and harboring only a few very real regrets about the consequences that would result from that choice. The biggest one: Allison and I were already engaged to be married back then, and we planned, if so blessed, to become parents. And I knew – being on the *bima* for the High Holydays meant not being in the congregation with the kids I dreamed about raising.

As a child, I remember feeling the softness of my father’s hand upon my own, as he thumbed along to the tempo of the cantor’s melody. I remember feeling my mom’s gentle tracing upon my shoulder... that unspoken “language of the mother” that reliably translates to “I am here, and I love you.”

Becoming a pulpit rabbi meant that I would never sit next to my children on the High Holydays – unless, of course, a worldwide pandemic were to cause us to pre-record our holiday services in an empty sanctuary. Not an exception I had ever remotely considered until it became our reality. And then I got my chance to do all those things regular worshippers do. I got to muse about how gray the senior rabbi’s hair had become. I got to mutter to my loved ones about how long the sermon was. I got to try my hand at counting the little golden squares on the wall behind me. There are 116. And I got to stroke my children’s hands and their shoulders, and observing these holiest of days alongside them will be a memory I will forever cherish.

Of course, that memory came at a stark cost. Being with them meant not being with all of you, which felt stranger than I can even hope to describe. I knew you were out there. But I couldn’t see your eyes. I couldn’t hear your voice. I couldn’t feel your energy – our energy that we create together. I couldn’t touch your shoulder and wish you a Shanah Tovah.

One of the 20th century’s giants of Jewish philosophy, Joseph Soloveitchik, took note that the biblical Adam – the first human – is described in two very different ways in the Torah. In the first chapter of Genesis, we see him grandly created in God’s image, possessing dominion over all he surveys. But by the second chapter, he is already wracked with loneliness. “*Lo tov hey’ot adam l’vado*,” says God – “it is no good for a human to be alone.” This is where creation had already proven to be incomplete. And Eve joins Adam, who discovers that his capacity to thrive depends upon escaping isolation.

Rabbi Soloveitchik taught that neither Adam the First nor Adam the Second is better or worse; we are all both of them. Part determined individualists, seeking to control our world and make it work as we wish. Part lonely souls, craving companionship, through which we find meaning, belonging, our connection to all that is Eternal and greater than our finite selves.

Lo tov hey'ot adam l'vado – it sure was no good to be alone, wasn't it? Can you remember how bizarre it all felt at first – the streets almost completely empty, everything closed, travel an impossibility, grandparents and grandchildren demonstrating their love by *not* seeing one another for more than a year.

To the rescue came Zoom, a technology built for business meetings. We learned how to mute and unmute... and forget to unmute while talking anyways. And we felt profoundly blessed whenever we thought about the previous pandemic a hundred years earlier, when it was impossible to see other people on a screen with the click of a button. How terrifyingly isolated everyone must have felt back then.

Indeed, web-based technologies – from streaming platforms to Zoom, from Facebook Live to YouTube Live to Instagram Live – they saved us during these past two and a half years. Our offices became our computer cameras, bringing us together with our workmates. We got to see our loved ones, even if we couldn't touch them. Circles of friends reunited onscreen. And we here at LBT were able to be a congregation without congregating. We Bubbled Up in small groups via Zoom. We prayed on Shabbat and the holidays on our laptops and televisions. We continued to teach and preach and counsel and comfort. And after a while, it began to feel less bizarre. We even started convincing ourselves that it was just as good – even better in some ways – than gathering in person.

A natural, self-protecting response to trauma... to seek security in normalizing that which isn't normal. But the next time you're thinking the world was just as well or even better when every business meeting could be taken in a coat and tie and cargo shorts, go ask a child who went to school every day in their bedroom how they felt about it. Go ask a filmmaker how their comedy worked without the momentum of a theater filled with laughter. Ask a Dodger fan whether there's any real difference between watching the big moments on TV and being at Chavez Ravine when it all happens. Ask a symphony fan if those amazing box videos that made the rounds have supplanted their love of being at Disney Hall. Ask a collegian who watched themselves graduate on TV. Ask someone who was hospitalized how it felt to receive no visitors. Ask someone who witnessed the burial of their parent on their laptop.

Yes, it is convenient and traffic-free and fabulously time-efficient. And it is not better – at least not for those gatherings aimed at the heart and soul. And we all know that, and yet a part of us rebels against that knowledge. Why? Because our inclination to

devalue what the social scientists call “human capital” has been escalating for a very long time – for much longer than the pandemic, which only turbo-charged it.

This is my twentieth Rosh Hashanah at Leo Baeck Temple, so most of you are newer to our community than I am. But those who go all the way back to my first Rosh Hashanah in this sanctuary were there when I cited a sociologist from Johns Hopkins by the name of Andrew Cherlin, whose research revealed that 21st century Americans would be in search of “intimacy at a distance.” And of course, I marveled at that turn of phrase. “It seems to me,” I said back then, “that you either get intimacy or you get distance. Intimacy *at* a distance is, really, just another way to say distance.”

Mind you, this was two decades ago – so Professor Cherlin was describing a society without smartphones, without social media, without FaceTime, without online conferencing technologies. Even without all those tools, we were already seeking to put a little distance into our intimacy with one another. Is it any wonder that we turned Mark Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs into multi-billionaires?

What’s noteworthy, of course, is that as we’ve perfected the implements needed to make our intimacy more distant, the evidence that our sociology is at war with our psychology is literally everywhere. That is to say, we’ve mightily built the world we thought we wanted, but our souls are feeling mighty malnourished. Or to put it another way, we’ve fed and nurtured Adam the First to the hilt... and Adam the Second is desperately searching everywhere for Eve.

Much has been made of the explosion of mental health needs in our time. I have never, in my career, received so many requests for referrals to therapists as I do now. Particularly suffering are our young people, who are much more native to the tools of “intimacy at a distance” than we are. Just this past April, the New York Times described the life-and-death crisis facing American teens, who report feeling dramatically lonelier than we were at their age, even though they possess so many more means for connecting with each other than we did. Said psychologist Bonnie Nagel, “They’re hanging out with friends, but no friends are there. It’s not the same social connectedness we need, and not the kind that prevents one from feeling lonely.”

Might we learn a little something from our kids, who have already tried convincing themselves that gathering on screens was as good or better for us than gathering in person?

One of America’s most respected cultural commentators, David Brooks, thinks we should. Perhaps you saw his essay just last month, entitled, “Why Your Social Life Is Not What It Should Be.” The photo atop the article is of a filled subway car. Twenty-four people appear in the photo. Not one is talking to another person. It’s just smartphones and headphones, books and newspapers. Brooks opens by telling a story

about Nicholas Epley, a leading behavioral scientist at the University of Chicago, who experienced exactly this on a rail commute to his office some years ago. And because it was already well known in his academic field that social connection makes humans healthier, happier and more successful, he became curious about why we seem so determined to avoid that which we know improves our lives.

So his research team spent years studying this, and the data couldn't be clearer. We consistently underestimate how much we would enjoy a social interaction – with a stranger, with an acquaintance, or even with a family member or friend. We underestimate how much an expression of support will matter to someone else. We underestimate how much we'll learn from another person. We underestimate how much we prefer longer conversations to shorter ones, deeper conversations to shallower ones, personal conversations instead of text exchanges. We underestimate how good a kind word, spoken to someone we care about, will make them feel. We sell every aspect of our soul-to-soul humanity short of its actual value. This is why we tell ourselves a Zoom meeting is as good as the real thing, even though we know it isn't.

David Brooks believes this has consequences beyond personal meaning in our lives. “My general view,” he writes, “is that the fate of America will be importantly determined by how we treat each other in the smallest acts of daily life. That means being a genius at the close at hand: greeting a stranger, detecting the anxiety in somebody's voice and asking what's wrong, knowing how to talk across difference.”

These are hard things to do when we're looking straight into each other's eyes. They're damn near impossible to do when we're all on screens, paying half attention to one another while checking our phones, making dinner or doing the laundry.

I want to be clear about something: I am not declaring war on Zoom. I need it. I use it. I cherish the things it makes possible. The same goes for attending this service via livestream. I want to say directly to those of you streaming this service: I am thrilled you are with us. There is a robust conversation going on in the church and synagogue world about whether it's time to end online worship services – that will not be happening at Leo Baeck Temple. There are immunocompromised Leo Baeckers who can only join us safely on screen. There are hospitalized or homebound Leo Baeckers who want to be here more than anything. There are elderly Leo Baeckers who cannot drive or face other physical limitations. There are traveling Leo Baeckers who are joining us from hundreds or thousands of miles away. And there are parts of what we do at this temple that are better and more inclusively done onscreen than in person. It's not that there's no place for onscreen connection to one another. But if you're counting on your screen to replace the nuisance of in-person gathering at work, with your friends, with your family, at temple – if you've tired of the shlep and are telling yourself that it's much the same thing to click the button as it is to get in the car – there's an avalanche of evidence to the contrary.

You see, there's just too much of the in-person experience that can't be simulated onscreen. It's not just that *you* can't be fully seen or felt or experienced... or loved. It's that you can't fully see or experience *others* – and that's what Adam the Second inside them craves. We need others to detect the anxiety in our voice and ask what's wrong. We need to hear that kind word, to share that warm laugh, to feel that knowing hug. We don't want our intimacy at a distance, even if we think we do.

The award-winning Israeli philosopher, Avishai Margalit, refers to what our souls seek with one another as “thick relations” – the kinds of bonds that are deeper than empty nostalgia about what once connected us or the mere fulfillment of my own perceived need. Thick relations are those sustained in mutual care between loved ones, friends, coworkers, communal partners who cultivate an ongoing shared history. The memories are constantly being built and grown, so that the currency remains real. And “without (these) shared collective memories or with (only) a very tiny bit of it,” we are left with “a bad recipe for thick relations.” Says Margalit, “Meaningful thick relation cannot be based only upon the pleasure principle lest it be delusional. (The) myth needs some doses of reality in a form of true memory to serve for true thick relations.”

For much of the past two and a half years, we did the best we could. Separated by circumstance, we reached out to those who matter most to us on screen, and it enabled us to get a little of what we needed, and give a little of what they needed from us. But it only worked because those relations already *were* thick. Do we think we will grow the next set of thick relationships in our lives on our computers?

Your being here tonight offers the first hint of an answer – at least as regards our collective future as a congregation. You see, there's a fair amount of truth in that old story of two Jews, Schwartz and Rosen, who are on their way to synagogue when someone stops them to ask Rosen, “Why are *you* going to shul? Schwartz here is a believer, I know – but Rosen, you don't have a religious bone in your body.” Replies Rosen, “Schwartz goes to talk to God... I go to talk to Schwartz.”

We're all here to talk to Schwartz – because it's the only way Schwartz will know he really matters to us... that when he's sad, we'll notice, without him having to tell us, and we'll embrace him, and we'll say something kind... that when he becomes sick, we'll bring a meal to his home and pray for his recovery. Onscreen, I can hear all of the beautiful music and all of the poignant words – but I cannot talk to Schwartz, and my thick relationship with him depends upon it. And I depend upon my thick relationships – here at LBT, and everywhere else in my life.

At the peak of the pandemic, I had a pastoral obligation to urge you to isolate yourselves, even from this place, even on the High Holydays for two straight years – to push away Adam the Second for the sake of preserving life. I now have an equal pastoral

obligation to urge you to show up for one another... yes, here, but not just here... everywhere there are eyes that need your eyes, hands that need your hands – for the sake of preserving life... your real, fully lived, fully felt life.

The longtime Chief Rabbi of England, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, wrote: “We cannot order our children to be Jews... All we can do is show them what we believe, and let them see the beauty of how we live.” This temple... we specialize in thick relationships, don’t we? It’s what we exist for. That’s the beauty of how we live. To that holy purpose, welcome back.