

**Connection: Defining and Developing the Space Between
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How I Met Your Mother, a show that ran for 9 seasons from 2005 to 2014, is one of my favorite television series for the balance it strikes between humor and wisdom. The main characters often share thoughts that many of us may have considered in private but have not gone as far to discuss with other people. For example, an episode in season five begins with Robin telling her friends Lily and Ted that referring to Barney as her “boyfriend”, which she has said 100 times in a row, still sounds “weird” to say. Ted responds, “Anything sounds weird if you say it 100 times.” He then proceeds to look at the bowl he is holding and begins repeating the word “bowl” to prove his point. Bowl, bowl, bowl, bowl. At the same time, Robin and Lily discuss what might be making the word “boyfriend” seem inadequate to describe Robin’s relationship with Barney. At this point in the show, Barney does not seem to represent what Robin, in her heart, believes a boyfriend can and should be. The show is making an important point: Sometimes we employ commonly used words to describe something important in our lives, like boyfriend, but ultimately, the word may not really make clear what we hope to express.

There are many words in the English language that exemplify this phenomenon. Can you think of any? I have one: connected. This word is widely used in a variety of contexts, though, it isn’t always clear what it signifies or what people are trying to express through its use.

I am not sure I realized just how many times connected gets used until I completed a listening campaign this past spring at Temple Sinai. The goal of the listening campaign was to hear from families who have children in kindergarten through sixth grade. Last year, the education committee and I deemed it critical to take a pulse of our Temple Sinai community. How were families feeling now, especially two years into Covid? What were their hopes in terms of Jewish education for themselves and their children?

My committee took verbatim notes during these listening sessions. When I reviewed them, I found that the word connected, and its antonym, disconnected, came up more than 100 times! Spoiler: In the months following our campaign, we decided to rename our K-6 religious school program to *Kesher*, the Hebrew word which means “connection.” I believe that the congregants we spoke with have a deep-seated longing for connection. The challenge, though, is this frequently used word may mean different things to different people. We need to develop a common understanding of what we collectively mean when we say, “connection.” Only then will we understand how to build and measure connection.

Dr. Ron Wolfson, professor of Jewish Education at American Jewish University, has devoted much of his career to writing and teaching about the significance of connection in Judaism. In his book, *Relational Judaism*, Wolfson claims that another Hebrew word, *brit*, does the best job of expressing the Jewish idea of relationship. *Brit* translates to “covenant,” a pact between two or more people, a social contract in which each party has an obligation to the other. In Judaism, the pact is not between one individual person and God, but rather, an entire

community and God. When God formally establishes the *brit* with Abraham, God promises to make him AND his offspring a great nation provided he follows God's instruction to *lekh lekha*, go forth to a land that I God will show you. The covenantal model, however, can be traced back all the way to the creation of the first two human beings, Adam and Eve, the anniversary of whom we celebrate today on Rosh Hashanah.¹

In Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's important theological work, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, he presents two different versions of Adam in the Torah. Adam One, who makes his appearance in the first chapter of Genesis as the first and only human, is given control of his dominion and environment. According to Soloveitchik, Adam one sees the world and his relationships as functional and transactional. His motivation stems from his own domination of the world. Adam two is different. In Genesis chapter two, God says, "It is not good for a person to be alone" and goes on to create Eve. Soloveitchik teaches that this version of Adam is covenantal in nature. From Adam 2 we learn that living in a connected community, a community where we form not only a relationship with God but also with other humans, is the path to a meaningful existence.²

Dr. Arnold Eisen digs deeper into what a meaningful human to human connection looks like in his book, *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America*. He writes, "The strength of community, as of ritual, lies in its potential to bring people together

¹ Vayikra Rabba 29:1

² Wolfson, *Relational Judaism*, 33-39

despite differing backgrounds and beliefs: to take them out of themselves into a space “between” and then return them to themselves, to their private spaces, transformed.”³

Community has the potential to bring diverse people together in a way that lets them step outside of their individual selves and into a space between that is filled with uncertainty and new possibilities. When they return to themselves, to their private sphere, they will be transformed. This “space” between is where connection occurs. To maintain our *Brit* with God, a central component of what it means to be Jewish, requires us to connect with other people in our communities.

So how do we, as people, build connections-leaving our individual spaces for communal ones that are built between people, that enable individuals to escape themselves for a moment and then return changed? Wolfson provides a compelling four step model:

1. Listen: “When people feel heard, the connection is deepened.”⁴
2. Share: “tell the story of who we are. “We Jews are good at telling stories”⁵
3. Do: “The experiences of doing lead to the sharing of feelings, a further revelation of the innermost self. In a way, these are *lekh lekha* experiences, a “going out of oneself” that both heightens self-awareness and fosters engagement and connection.”⁶

³ Wolfson, *Relational Judaism*, 40-41

⁴ Wolfson, *Relational Judaism*, 43

⁵ Wolfson, *Relational Judaism*, 42

⁶ Wolfson, *Relational Judaism*, 44

4. Trust: The ultimate payoff for building deep connections with others is the knowledge that YOU are NOT alone.⁷

I believe Jewish ritual, at its best, can exemplify the building of connections in the way Wolfson suggests. I recently had the opportunity to learn from Rabbi Sara Luria and Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman. Rabbi Luria is the founder and executive director of a Jewish organization based in Brooklyn called Beloved. Their mission is to create spaces for sacred connection and belonging. She shared, “Let peoples’ state of being, however they feel when they walk into our doors, inform our liturgy and let our liturgy inform peoples’ state of being, so that there is a weaving of immanence and transcendence.” In other words, by listening to people in our intimate spaces and sharing how they are feeling by way of the larger themes of our transcendent prayers, the two are entwined together.

How does this work on a practical level? Rabbi Luria tells the story of how she prepares to lead a service. She stands at the door, conversing with a few of her congregants. She then weaves their stories anonymously into the prayer experience. One person might share, “I experienced a loss. Another might say, “I celebrated something special this week.” Rabbi Luria’s way of leading prayer highlights Wolfson’s four step approach to building connection. The rabbi listens to the congregants and then shares the stories she hears with the congregation. The rest of the congregation then has an opportunity to listen. Collectively, the rabbi and the congregation engage in the age-old Jewish ritual of praying, together. The congregants learn to

⁷ Wolfson, *Relational Judaism*, 44

trust each other, knowing they are not alone in this journey we call life. This kind of prayer experience has the potential to move people, to build deep connections among congregants and clergy alike.

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, professor emeritus of liturgy at Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, helps us to understand why Rabbi Luria's technique can be successful at connecting us on a deeper level. "We live in a world of chaos," he states. "As humans, we strive to give order to the world in which we live. Judaism can help us to do so through rituals such as prayer. Ritual can bring order into our chaotic world." Most importantly, he adds, "when ritual works, it connects our little story to a much bigger one." That is, the weaving of the immanence and transcendence. When we do this important work, together, outside of ourselves in the space that exists between us, we feel less alone and more connected in our human endeavor.

Looking specifically at the Mourner's Kaddish, it becomes clear why this prayer is important to the Jewish community. Many Jews will come to a service just to say the Mourner's Kaddish, which had nothing to do with mourning at all until the 8th century CE. The core of the Kaddish consists of the congregational response, "*Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varach l'alam ul'almei almaya*- Blessed be God's great name in all eternity."⁸ At some point, this kaddish became a popular way to evoke a response in a setting of public prayer, but the words themselves are not explicitly about comforting mourners. The power of this ritual instead comes from the connection between a mourner and their fellow community members. Traditionally, Mourner's

⁸ Hofman, *My Peoples' Prayer Book*

Kaddish is only recited by the mourner and in a place where there is a minyan present, 10 Jews total. Mourner's kaddish builds connection in the following way:

1. Listen: We listen as our fellow community members share the names of loved ones who are no longer with them.
2. Share: We share the names, sometimes even the stories, of our loved ones who are no longer with us.
3. Do: We engage in the traditional call and response, a back and forth between mourners and the community.
4. Trust: We show up to the temple, knowing that we will not be alone. As a mourner, we have a community who will support us, who will show up and enable us to engage in this prayer, together.

Understanding that connection connotes a transformational space where people dwell together, outside of their individual selves and that Judaism requires us to build such connections in our communities, how now might we build such connections in our everyday lives? No matter who you are or what you do for a living, we can all approach our gatherings with a goal of connecting. For those of us involved in the designing of gatherings, we can find inspiration in *The Art of Gathering* by Priya Parker. The first chapter is titled "Decide Why You Are Gathering." At the surface, it seems obvious, but Parker points out most people skip this important step when they plan gatherings. The biggest hurdle, she says, is that often the purpose of the gathering is confused with the category. A helpful way to ensure that we plan

purposeful gatherings, Parker says, is to employ what we call backwards design in the education world. When we know our desired outcome, we can then design our gatherings in ways that are in alignment. If our desired outcome, for instance, is to build enduring connections among a specific group of people, then the gathering should involve some form of listening, sharing and perhaps an activity that the group can do together. From there, all the choices you make should keep the purpose of connection in mind, including who we invite, the size of the group and the venue for the gathering.⁹ If successful, the gathering or series of gatherings will bring people in this targeted group together in a way that lets each of them go outside of themselves and into the space between, so when they return to themselves after the gathering, they are different in some way.

The responsibility of connecting is not solely on those that plan gatherings. Participants have an important role as well. We must prepare ourselves to listen as others speak, to be willing to share pieces of our story, to openly engage in joint activities, and finally, to trust our fellow humans. What is so challenging about these steps, as a participant? In one of her most well-known Ted Talks, *The Power of Vulnerability*, Brene Brown directly answers this question: shame! Often, we do not believe we are worthy of connection. For those of us that participate in gatherings, we need to approach others with openness and vulnerability. To let ourselves be seen, she says, is a choice we can make every day.¹⁰

⁹ Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 1-24

¹⁰ Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*, Ted Talk

I feel lucky to be Jewish. I am part of a religion that addresses one of the fundamental truths of being human: we have an inherent desire to be connected to one another. We do not want to be alone in the chaos that is life. To be Jewish means to be part of the *brit* or covenant with God AND our fellow humans. On Yom Kippur we will read the following verse from Deuteronomy: "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before our God and with those who are not with us here this day."¹¹ The covenant is maintained by our connection with both God AND other people. Our Jewish tradition reflects our covenantal responsibility in the holidays we celebrate, the rituals we enact, and the actions we commit ourselves to. Building connections, the space between ourselves and others that enable us to temporarily leave our own self constraints and enter a place of uncertainty and new possibility, so that we leave transformed, is not limited to our Jewish sphere. We can build connections wherever we go. May 5783 be the year that we not only speak of our desire for connection, but where we find the strength to go out into the world and create these sacred bonds.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 29:13-14