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Book of Jonah

In his thoughtful and engaging sermon on Rosh Hashanah eve, Rabbi Dan quoted a comedian's observation that "Everything is amazing right now and no one is happy."

This D'var Torah is my dispatch from the field.

Around this time last year, between my financial sector job in the middle of the economic crisis and a presidential campaign that I followed obsessively, my days and nights were notable for the extent of time spent staring at screens.

From my Blackberry and my iPhone poured messages that demanded an immediate response.

My Google Reader collected the opinions of opinionators for me to read, contextualize and comment on.

I was, it seemed, permanently available.

My plugged in, always on, super-connected lifestyle left me feeling irritable and uneasy.

I was connected, and yet missing connection – to other people and to community.

I arrived at The New Shul for Rosh Hashanah last year, grateful: for two hours when it was OK not to have to check my Blackberry. I wondered how I and many people I know had gotten into this predicament.

Today I would like to tell you about the year that ensued, and discuss some aspects of our spiritual community that have helped me to make sense of these things.

The Hafatarah for Yom Kippur afternoon tells the story of Jonah. Jonah went out of Nineveh and built a shelter – a sukkah. God lent a hand, by appointing a plant to shade Jonah. However, the next day, God took the plant away, ended Jonah's comfort and forced him, yet again, to acknowledge God's presence.

I picture Jonah sitting in his shaded sukkah, looking out over Nineveh, then becoming unsettled when his illusion of comfort disappears.

Last year, I sat in my sukkah, Apartment 6B, on 21st Street, staring into my Macbook, a glass of wine at hand. I was connected and comfortable, but also disconnected and uncomfortable.

At High Holidays last year I learned about The Shabbat Project, the New Shul's year-long quest to reclaim Judaism's original "stress-free" zone.

The Shabbat Project seemed to offer a different kind of connection than the one that was wearing me down.

On Shabbat, I began experimenting with stepping away from my Blackberry and avoiding work, chores, errands and transactional things. My wife and I lit candles and said blessings. I attended Shabbat services.

I found that the more I observed Shabbat, the better I felt.

I felt myself becoming more aware of the significance of time.

I read "The Sabbath," a book by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in which he separates existence into worlds of space, on the one hand, and time, on the other.

Judaism writes Rabbi Heschel, is a religion of time – it aims to sanctify time. Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time. Space, on the other hand, is the realm of dailiness and things.

I wanted to truly inhabit time, and to leave behind things of space that define the rest of the week.

This relates to the essay on living, "I and Thou," by Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher. Buber writes that the primary pronouns "I and Thou," together, connote relations.

According to Buber, I and Thou, being spoken, brings about existence.

A different relation, which Buber terms, I and It, signifies our relation to things. We travel over the surface of things, according to Buber.

But when "Thou" is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object.

I and Thou – signifies a boundless present – what Buber calls "a lived relation."

The bits of information that fly across our screens, the promise of online social networks cannot substitute for the lived relation, which is a relation that defines our spiritual community.

In the Times recently one person who quit Facebook said she felt fairly detached from her Facebook buddies because she rarely directly contacted them. She felt as if she spent hours a day looking at their pages without actually saying hello.

That's how I feel sometimes when I'm online. I feel like it doesn't substitute for the lived relation, any more than playing Guitar Hero substitutes for the joy of playing guitar chords.

Whatever your opinion of Facebook, friendship takes hard work, time and attention, and is enduring when it's right.

There's something else I observe, which is a creeping emptiness to our interactions. I wonder if spending so much time staring at our cell phone screens, instead of actually talking and listening, means that we're less practiced at taking each other in.

If enough time online can cause our handwriting to wither and re-wire our brains, it also can impair our ability to give someone our complete attention.

This summer, my wife Karen and I were passengers on a ferry to Block Island. Another passenger, a woman pulling a roller board suitcase through a narrow passage, pulled the case over Karen's foot. "Sorry," the woman called over her shoulder without stopping. Karen said nothing. "She said she's sorry," chided the woman's companion, also without stopping.

What do we discern in the power of the word "sorry?"

Or in the question: How are you?

How many of our everyday encounters are notable for their emptiness?

I will tell you that even on occasion here at The New Shul, I have left some Shabbat evenings regretting that I allowed my conversations to lapse into talking about work or routine things that on reflection, felt like a missed opportunity for connection.

According to Buber, things, events, actions – comprise the elements of our ordered and detached world. We like their reliability, which we can survey and bring out again and again, and verify with our eyes open or closed.

But to truly meet others, to hold your ground when you meet them, to have a present, without knowing what comes next – that, asserts Buber, is to glimpse eternity.

This rings true for me because of what I learned in an Improv class.

If you've studied improvisational acting, you know that "Yes &..." is the most important rule. By following this simple rule of agreement, two players can build a scene before they know it.

Let's celebrate Shabbat.
In a bar!

Let's install Rabbi Dan.
And have him hold court at the Repentance Café!

We are a "Yes &" community.

Last week, when the location of The House of Awe & Repentance Café changed at the eleventh hour, it occurred to me, after I put aside my vexation as an active volunteer on the project, that this is what life feels like when you don't know what comes next.

Attachment

Another aspect of our spiritual community that is meaningful to me is attachment.

There are two points of view from which time can be sensed, writes Rabbi Heschel: from the point of view of space and from the point of view of spirit. Looking out the window of a swiftly moving railroad car, we have the impression that the landscape is

moving while we ourselves are sitting still. However, when we learn to understand that it is the spatial things that are constantly running out, we realize that time is that which never expires, that it is the world of space which is rolling through the infinite expanse of time.

Last spring we celebrated Shabbat at an art gallery. I was there, listening to Melanie singing. The week had melted away, and I was feeling present in one of those infinite expanses of time.

As a fan of time travel stories, I have long wondered about faster-than-light information transmission, and super-luminal particles that travel backward and forward in time.

Sir Isaac Newton said that “Absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external.”

In that art gallery on Shabbat, I felt attached to time that never expires, and, by extension, attached to one who consecrated Shabbat 1,000 years ago, or who will do so 1,000 years from now.

The three of us – separated by millennia – inhabit the same eternity.

That attachment – I don’t know whether it’s God, but it is something other than what happens every other day of the week, in every other place. And I did not need a mountain or a resplendent building, or any other thing of physical space to experience that attachment.

I needed a spiritual community.

The Torah tells us to hold fast to God.

The famous scholar of Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem, writes that the supreme religious value which the whole of Jewish mysticism places in the center of its ethical system is Devekut, the continuous attachment or adhesion to God.

In his story titled Crazy Glue, Israeli writer Etgar Keret writes of a husband and wife who have an argument. The husband goes out, and later returns home to find his wife hanging upside down, her bare feet clinging to the high living room ceiling.

“Don’t worry,” says the husband. “I’ll get you down,” as he pulls some books to stand on, off the shelf.

“Fine,” she laughs. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“By then,” the husband says, “I was laughing too. She was so pretty, and so incongruous, hanging upside down from the ceiling that way. With her long hair dangling downward, and her breasts molded like two perfect teardrops under her white T-shirt. So pretty. I climbed back up onto the pile of books and kissed her. I felt her tongue on mine. The books slipped out from under my feet as I hung there in midair, not touching a thing, dangling from just her lips.”

The Hebrew word for glue is Devek. Devekut is the glue-ness of it all.

Devekut and the lived relation – I and Thou – reinforce one another, and lead us to spiritual, mystical experiences, like my time travel, or the couple in Etgar Keret’s tale.

Heschelian time and the lived relation – these building blocks of a spiritual community, give us crazy glue.

Framework

Over the past year, I set a goal of availing myself of as much of our community as I could.

I joined the Rabbi’s book club, Sunday study brunch, the Torah Tisch, Spa Shabbat and Klezmer Brunch. I attended Shabbat services, a Bat Mitzvah and every holiday celebration. I was down with the Tu Bishvat jam, and up on the High Line. I attended a program for people sandwiched between the needs of children and aging parents, even though that’s not me. I also joined the Va’ad.

These things provided a framework, which gave structure to my week. They gave me something that wasn’t work or play, but a framework for doing.

When God brought a great storm to the sea on which Jonah and his shipmates sailed to Tarshis, the old sailors grew terrified, and each one of them cried out to their own god, and heaved baggage into the sea.

They did not know what to do.

If no one is happy right now, it may be because all too often we do not know what to do.

In our super-connected lives, we have all these nifty gadgets and all this connectivity, yet we wonder how to make our way.

In a spiritual community we find a framework for experiencing the amazing and the everyday. We find a framework for living in relation with our world and with each other.

The lived relation, Devekut and a framework – these are elements of community, and, it seems, building blocks of our spirituality.

They are a part of me now.

Here in our spiritual community, is where we find each other and ourselves.

To which I say, “Yes and....”