

Rabbi Rachel R. Saphire
Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5772
Wednesday, September 28, 2011
Temple Beth Elohim

A young rabbi stood on the *bima* delivering his *Yom Kippur* sermon. Wanting to make a strong impression he banged on the lectern as he loudly delivered the first line of his sermon, "Every member of this congregation will die someday!" He paused and looked around at the somber look he had put on everyone's face. His eyes settled on one man in the front row who responded differently from everyone else. This man was grinning back at him! Certain the man in the front row had not heard him, the rabbi again thundered, "I tell you that everyone in this congregation will one day die!" He looked down at the front row and saw that the man was still smiling. One last time the rabbi shouted, "True it is that eventually everyone in this congregation must die!" Seeing that the man's grin had only grown larger, the rabbi paused and asked, "Excuse me sir, are you amused by that idea?" "Oh no," replied the man, "I'm not amused. I'm relieved... You see, I'm not a member of this congregation!"

There are times, even when surrounded by hundreds of others, when it is easy to feel alone and separate from the community, when it's easy to say, "I don't belong." Sometimes we may want to feel alone, but most of the time, we yearn for connection, an inherently human need. It is not simply being in the company of others or paying a membership due that satisfies this need for connection. It's much more complicated!

Lately, I've been pondering the questions: What *does* it mean to be connected to our temple community? And what's the benefit?

As adults we might overlook the rewards of being connected to others. We encourage our children to be involved and are committed to helping them find connection. With our community organizing team, *Koach B'yachad* and our Growing Up Healthy campaign, we have helped our teenagers realize a sense of connection at school and here at temple. I have asked the teens what it feels like to be connected and why it's important. I've heard them say, "We all need to find a place where we don't have to pretend, where we can be ourselves and be appreciated for that. There's nothing else like feeling connected. It's like "feeling at home," only with people."

If we think back to our youth, many of us could probably recall an experience of strong connection, so strong that we felt a serious loss or sadness when it ended. (pause) I, personally, will never forget my final NFTY (Jewish youth group) event. We always concluded an event with Havdallah and friendship circle, a ritual separation from our Shabbat together. As we passed the candle, wine, and spices around the room, we also shared personal reflections

and memories. I remember telling my friends that I didn't want to leave them. I didn't want to go back home or on to college where people might not understand and appreciate me. It was with them that I could let go and be myself. That Havdallah and friendship circle was not only an emotional separation, but an ending. During the closing song, I remember putting my face to the ground, in the dirt. And with a hollow feeling forming inside, I sobbed – I was afraid that I would never find this sense of connection again.

(What does it mean to be connected?) Let's consider the modern Hebrew word for connection, "KESHER." "Keshet" in Rabbinic Hebrew, meaning a "knot," K.N.O.T – something that we tie. The word "keshet" appears in the Talmud¹ in an argument related to the laws of Shabbat. According to Rabbi Yehudah, a substantial *keshet*, a knot, is one that joins together something that has broken. But the other Sages consider the validity of a slip-knot. Rashi (an 11th century scholar) comes to explain. What is important in classifying a *keshet*, a knot, is its DURABILITY (*kayama*). Thus, a real *keshet* is defined as "a knot which is meant to be LONG-LASTING." Maimonides (of the 12th century), considers two factors: the *keshet's* PERMANENCE (agreeing with Rashi) and its CRAFTSMANSHIP.

This is the perfect metaphor for understanding how our connections in this community can be meaningful. Our goal is not to craft a slip knot that can be quickly created and easily undone, but rather a solid knot, a true *keshet*/connection that is strong and lasting.

Building connection is the act of getting to know and understand someone else, sincerely learning another's self-interests and perspective on life. Building connection can be achieved when we share something that we value with someone else. In the end, it's about feeling known, understood, recognized for our unique gifts, and valued for our role within the community. Connection brings a sense of purpose and meaning to our lives. Being connected to someone else and being engaged within a community directs us to pay attention to the blessings in our lives.

Just a week ago, I experienced this sense of connection in an extraordinary way within our community. I received an invitation to Shabbat lunch at another congregant's home. No one knew exactly who was coming or what we shared in common. When we arrived, our hostess invited us to join her at a beautifully set table. We were touched by the amount of effort she had put into preparing such a lovely gathering for us. Before we ate, our hostess wanted to tell us the story of why we were all there. She began, "My intention for this afternoon is in the phrase, 'You should know.' I remember something very specific from my childhood. There was something very special about Shabbas evening. Light, warmth, and joy filled our home as we spent time together talking and eating. You should know that as an adult, I searched for this same sense of connection in the Jewish community. But, it was not easy to find. I looked around for a long time, visiting many shuls. As this year begins, 'you should know' that I will celebrate my fourth year of membership at TBE. AND YOU SHOULD KNOW that each one of you has given of yourself and helped me achieve a deep sense of connection here." One by

¹ Pesachim 11a and Shabbat 113a

one, she proceeded to recall how she had met each one of us, saying “you should know...” (There was the one who greeted her and sat next to her when she attended services for the very first time, a neighbor who’s Passover *seder* she’d been invited to, and classmates from adult study that she had attended regularly) She did not only share our stories, but spoke about what makes us unique and why she is thankful for our friendship. ‘You should know...’ After enjoying her stories and thoughts, we all jumped in to share the things we value about her. Not only were we able to acknowledge our connection to her, but we formed a whole new, deep connection between everyone that sat around the table. We all decided that we should meet again. What our hostess did for us was so simple. But the experience was profound. I am grateful to her for modeling what it is that ALL of us can do and achieve.

Rosh Hashanah is all about connecting to others. We think about those with whom our connection is weak, perhaps those we’ve pushed away through our deeds or those with whom we haven’t become close for lack of effort or time. Making *teshuvah*, repentance, literally “a return,” is the process through which we build connection to others during this High Holy Day season. In fact, we can ONLY repent when we are in deep connection with others. We can’t atone for hurting others unless we connect with them. And our prayers suggest that we can’t utter confessions except in the plural (We will recite - *ashamNU*, *al cheit she’chaTANU*- for the sins that WE have committed) Making *teshuvah* requires sincere reflection on our part. It is a multi-step process. **First, we must recognize that we have room to grow. Then, we must seek to change our actions so that we might realize our potential. This step requires a plan. Finally, we can celebrate that we have changed for the better. This process of *teshuvah* results in a renewed investment.**

With the arrival of this New Year, I’d like to *suggest a plan*² for us to form more solid, lasting relationships to those sitting around us, the members of our community. On the main page of our Temple website, you will find a KESHER/CONNECTION icon with a link to tell us about how you would like to become more connected at TBE. We ask you, each and every adult, to fill out the interest form. (We will also have printed copies available on your way out of services and later in the temple office.) Please fill them out! It will only take you a few minutes and will give our staff and leadership a greater understanding of how we can help you in building a strong *kesher* (connection) to others at TBE. Tomorrow you will also be receiving a *Guide to Jewish Living at TBE* explaining all of the ways you could connect with others this year.

TBE is made up of dozens of small communities – there are many ways people gather and many reasons people enter our doors. As the *Guide to Jewish Living at TBE* indicates, connection can be formed through people that ACT together – healing our world by performing deeds of social justice, serving on our caring community team and reaching out to others, or working on a temple committee or task force. Connection is formed through prayer, song, and celebration. Connection is formed through learning. Connection is formed when we share life’s joys and

² Click on “Connection” link on www.tbewellesley.org

disappointments. We know that everyone in our diverse community connects in a different way and we want to hear from you.

In the end, these connection tools, the *Guide* and the interest form, will link more of us to existing communities within TBE and help us experience the joy of Jewish living. I hope that this plan will not only invite you to engage, but create ongoing paths of connection with no dead end. I can just imagine the knots forming.

Our Sages teach that when two people share words of Torah together, God is present. We are not supposed to study alone; for, it is not alone that we create purpose and meaning, but in relationship. And when we share a deep connection, it is elevated. A Higher Purpose is present.

I'd like to close with a story from a friend of mine, an active congregant in his own congregation.

Years ago, there was a young man in our congregation who had a terrible accident. He had extensive brain damage, and it was weeks before we knew whether he would ever regain consciousness. He went through months of grueling therapy in the hope that someday he would fully recover. Every few weeks I would call up his mother to ask about his progress, and every time I would ask the same question – because I knew it was something very important to him. He loved participating in services. I knew that even if he couldn't [participate] in the same way, it would still bring him joy and dignity. "Is John ready to have an aliyah? When he's ready, we'd love to honor him." And each time, her answer was the same. "He's making progress, but he's just not ready yet".

Winter turned into spring and spring turned into summer, and on July 1st, our new rabbi started. Like any new rabbi, he was nervous about the High Holidays, and as chair of the Religious Committee, it was my job to help him. One of my responsibilities was lining up all of the people for the High Holy Day honors. By the beginning of August, all the honors were filled - all except for one, that is. I still hadn't chosen someone to read the opening reading on Rosh Hashanah and to light the candles and say *Shehecheyanu*. The rabbi became frantic - "Don't worry", I told him, "the right person will occur to me".

The day before Rosh Hashanah I called John's mother. "Is John up to reading the opening reading?" I asked her, "and would you and your husband light the candles and say *Shehecheyanu*?" "No", she said, "He's making progress, but he's just not ready yet". **I had known this woman for years, we had worked together on many projects and committees and I had invited her to do many things. Over time, I had learned to interpret her tone. I knew when "No" really meant no and when "No" meant "I kind of want to participate, so if you ask me one more time, I'll do it." This time, I heard something different in her voice, so I asked her again. This time, she said yes.**

As services started, John came up to do the opening reading. At first, he read in a deep clear voice, like the strapping young man he used to be. But gradually, he got slower. You could tell that he was struggling to complete the reading. At every pause, you could feel hundreds of people encouraging him, praying that he would, for his own sake, have the strength to continue. John finished the reading, and as his parents got up to say *Shehecheyanu*, his father

stopped and softly said to the rabbi, "I didn't realize it, but this is the first time John has read aloud since his accident."³ (pause)

It was the father's way of saying, "I am so thankful for our connection, that you knew us well enough to reach out and help us return to this safe, supportive, and sacred community".

(pause) *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha'olam – sh'hecheyanu v'kiyamanu, v'higianu, lazman hazeh.* Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe who gives us life, who allows us (*v'kiyamanu*) to sustain meaningful connections, and who brings us to rejoice in this moment together.

As we begin the New Year, 5772, and reflect on the value of connection in our lives, I pray that our engagement in our beloved synagogue community will help us each forge deeper connections with each other. May these lasting knots that we tie, these *kesharim*, bring us much joy, comfort and blessing as we begin this year together.
Shanah tovah!

³ Adapted from "A Rosh Hashanah Miracle" <http://blogs.rj.org/reform/2009/09/by-art-grand-years-ago.html>
Submitted by Art Grand, Sept. 15, 2009.