

Erev Rosh Hashanah:

A Way Forward Together

Rabbi Chayim of Zans, a great Hasidic teacher, told this tale on Rosh Ha-Shanah:

A man once lost his way in a great forest and wandered alone for a long time. After a while, he saw another person! His heart lifted – surely this traveler could tell him the correct way forward!

When they both met he said, “My brother! Tell me the right way through these woods, because I’ve been lost here for days!”

“I wish I could tell you,” replied the traveler, “because I’ve also been lost here for many days. What I can tell you that the way I came from doesn’t lead out of the woods; it’s only thickets and rocks and mire. So now that we’ve found one another, let’s find a way forward together.”

After finishing his story, Rabbi Chayim used to say: “My community, I can only tell you this – now that we have united, let’s find a way forward together!”

This is story could well be about us. This is who we are right now. We’re wandering in the woods, trying to find our way forward in uncertain times. While we might not know exactly where we’re heading, this new vantage point of 5782 is a moment to review the wilderness through which we’ve been passing.

Speaking for myself, I’ve been dragged down more than once in the mire of loneliness during COVID. I’ve gotten tangled in the confusing thickets of trying to connect online. And I’ve tripped over the rocks of trying to make everything feel “normal” for myself and for my children. I know that I’m not alone in having experienced these challenges.

One powerful lesson from the story is that we are on this journey together. Each of us has wisdom to offer our fellow travelers. Everyone has insights into difficulties and “thickets” that they have encountered that might trip up other travellers. And when we decide to go on together – when we offer the best of ourselves to our companions – we weave ourselves into a profound gift: we form a community.

Jewish tradition teaches us, from the Torah through the Rabbis, from medieval teachings to Hasidic stories, that one of the greatest resources that we have in tough times are the relationships that we share with one another. This is our strength.

Lisa Breit made this point about our community clear to me in a recent email:

I've been reflecting on the work of the Visioning Team, the musicians of Shabbat Rinah, the Shir El event, the tunnel of messages for Lorel...and much more. This made me reflect on the depth of heart, talent and cooperation in our community. We all worked on things remotely during a pandemic...conceived, created, trusted each other, communicated, with nary a face to face meeting, and the result was far more than the sum of the parts. This happens all over Beth El all the time. It deserves to be articulated.

Amein v'amein. And even more, it deserves to be celebrated! When we collaborate, when we reach out to one another, we strengthen the relationships that are the very fabric of our community. And as we do so, whether it's for study or a shared project, we often find a deeper sense of meaning and delight.

One of our spiritual tasks in 5782 is to recognize that creating and maintaining our connections to each other and to our community is more than important. It is a profoundly holy aspect of Jewish life that has been a sustaining thread through the challenges faced by each generation. Lisa makes the additional point that this work is all the more challenging – and all the more rewarding – when we accomplish it in the shadow of COVID.

Let's come back to the story of the two people in the woods. Part of its elegance is that there is no single hero. The two people are on the same level. Both are lost, and both have equally valuable information to share. Each one knows about a place where they've stumbled.

When these travelers decide to unite – to become a fellowship – they complement each other. They support one another along the way, each from their own strengths and perspectives. And as we navigate the dark forest of our own day, let's hold close to their example.

The deep gift of being in community is that we both give and receive. Sometimes we can offer our guidance to others. And, sometimes, it's our role to receive another's support. There's a beautiful story from the Talmud¹ that illustrates this idea:

Rabbi Yochanan had a student who fell ill. He visited him and spoke with him. Rabbi Yochanan said, "Give me your hand." They joined hands, and Rabbi Yochanan helped his student to stand...now returned to health!

Some time later, Rabbi Yochanan fell ill, himself. His friend, Rabbi Chanina, visited him and spoke with him. Rabbi Chanina said, "Give me your hand." They joined hands, and Rabbi Chanina helped his friend to stand...now returned to health!

The other Rabbis wondered: why didn't Rabbi Yochanan heal himself? Why did he need Rabbi Chanina to come to him?

The answer, they said: prisoners cannot free themselves from prison.

Everyone depends on someone else to lift them up from their low points. To paraphrase one of the great British social philosophers, "we get by with a little help from our friends."

The strength of our community flows from the relationships we share. We know that the true measure of a congregation's longevity – what keeps it strong – is the connections between its members. It's how our joy is magnified when we celebrate together. And it's also how we lend each other our strength in hard times, times like these, when we might feel lost in the woods.

Beth El is a community of people who have chosen – with mindful intent – to accompany each other on a shared journey. To engage and to grow together as we learn about ourselves. To explore the history and the lessons of Judaism. To open our hearts as we lend the best of ourselves to our *davening* – to our rituals. To open our hands as we engage in *tikkun olam* together, healing the world. To dare to grow beyond who we **are** to who we dream we might **become**...

¹ Berachot 5b

In 5782, we must continue to invest in the relationships that form the foundation of our community, both for our own sake and also for the sake of those around us. Let's keep sharing our strength and not hesitate to speak up when we're in need. There's any number of ways we can do this. Here's just a few to inspire your creative process.

Each day, choose a specific person – or family – to whom you could extend your care. Drop off a surprise meal. Send a card. Give a call. While the weather lasts, invite a group for a backyard gathering. You could even start outdoor *chaverot* – gatherings! And I, along with leadership/ staff, are more than happy to offer guidance and support.

In this new year, let us draw ever closer. Let us affirm all that we share – the connections that have sustained us so well for so long. And let us continue to lend one another our insights as we continue to navigate the many challenges of the woods that we are traversing.

As Rabbi Chayim said, let us look for the way forward together. *Shanah tovah u-metukah* – may this be a sweet new year for you and your loved ones, for our holy community and for all who dwell on earth.