

Alone-Together is Good (When We're Really Alone and Really Together)

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Earlier, Blanca said the *beracha* for her tallit and kissed the edges of the *atarah*. Why? In fact, why is this called an *atarah* at all? An *atarah* is a crown and, I don't know about you, but I think a crown is usually worn on the head, not the shoulders. Perhaps you've seen some Jews wear their tallit over their head? There are different opinions as to why or when and for how much of service one should do this. (Minimally, it's for the *Amidah* or *Barechu* through the *Amidah*). And there are different opinions as to whether the *tallis*, even assuming you drape it over your head, should have an *atarah* at all, because a pretty crown may distract from the truly important part of the *tallit* which is – the *tzitzit*!

Whatever the case, I want to consider today, not the custom of placing a *tallit* on our heads per se, but the impetus to do so, an instinct which could be construed, in some ways, as completely normal human behavior and in some ways is completely odd. For anyone who's ever *davened* in a place where this is common, it feels like there are a bunch of people praying together, more or less on the same page, but alone, isolated.

What's normal about this? Wanting to focus on one's task, one's own prayers, one's conversation with God, even in a crowded room is reasonable. It's not all that different from going to a restaurant where everyone is talking but to one or a few other people. We are together, but we are also alone. And just as some restaurants have dividers or booths that cordon off space so these dinner conversations are more intimate, so too, the custom in some Jewish circles is to create a space, under one's tallit, in which we can have some measure of privacy and therefore some measure of focus.

But, on the other hand, it is a bit weird, a bit off-putting, to have a bunch of people all saying the same thing at (approximately) the same time but saying it to themselves. Add to this, as I described in my *drasha* last week, everyone is facing the same direction, toward Jerusalem, so we're not even making eye contact. In point of fact, not everyone does it this way. The Reform Judaism of my upbringing – especially at summer camp – was all about the circle. We stood around, we sang together in unison, we harmonized, we made eye contact, sometimes we made *eye contact* (we were teenagers after-all!). Sephardi Jews don't, for most of the service, do this quiet, mumbling thing; they sing aloud, in unison. Even here at Beth Am, our *Keshet* Shabbat and *Keshet L'Neshama* next week is a time for us to focus more clearly on the community, experiencing God, hopefully, in relationship with the other. Think of Buber's insight, that we need proximity, personal interaction to see another as Thou and not It. Or of Levinas who said God is seen in the face of our fellow. We humans are communal by nature. Even the introverts in the room crave human contact, crave attention, crave connection – though admittedly not as much nor as often as the extroverts among us.

It's this need for community that has led to expansion (some would say metastasis) of electronic devices. So let's talk about our smart phones a bit. I want to make a distinction here between social media specifically, including IMing, DMing and texting from other uses of devices. There's a conversation to be had about whether having basically the wealth of human knowledge

available at our fingertips at any time is actually a good thing. I think on balance it is – so long as we can distinguish between real and fake. (I for one am willing to go on record saying CNN is real news, not fake. Not good, but real). But there's a difference between being able to instantaneously read the *New York Times* or an E-Book on your device or learn the major export of Finland (which is paper, by the way. I googled it); there's a difference between information gathering and social media. You see, there's a chemical reaction that occurs in our brains when we hear whatever sound our phone's make to tell us there's a text or a message or a tweet or a new facebook post. That release of oxytocin in our brains can be, for many of us, addictive. And like any other addiction, we begin to crave those affirmations.

But remember there's a difference between a real, flesh and blood human affirming who we are, our truth worth, and a device filled with *avatars* of real flesh and blood humans doing the same. It's completely natural to crave social interaction. We want to be seen, we want to be heard, we want to liked and loved and challenge assumptions and make others think. Wanting to feel relevant is a natural human impulse. The problem is our minds are not entirely able to distinguish between the device making us feel these things and the person writing or saying them on the other end. Tweeting or texting releases oxytocin. What else does that? Hugs. So getting a nice message from a spouse, our parent or our grandkids, is just like a big warm hug – except it's not. Because we are embodied creatures whose brains are different, in many important ways, from computer motherboards.

It's been said that the fundamental problem of existence is human loneliness. In Genesis, after days of creation, much of which is described as *tov* (good), the Torah tells us about something that is *lo tov*. "*Lov to he'ot adam l'vado*, it is not good for man to be alone." So it's completely understandable we would want to create more opportunities for more of us to feel less lonely. Enter the complex cocktail of the smart phone and the social network. Someone who researches and writes about the ubiquitous cell phone is Sherry Turkle. She's worked with countless people who, like many of us (myself included) are on their phones, their laptops, their tablets all the time, in chatrooms, responding to threads and posting photos, videos or articles – and then checking back to see what kind of reaction we get. I've got an OpEd about MLK day and the inauguration, a rework of something I wrote for the shul bulletin, coming in the *Sun* paper this Monday. I know I'll be checking to see, was it picked up by the Tribune? Did it get shared a lot on social media? I, like many, will seek validation of my work, my opinions, my values, through the strangers on the other end of my phone. Seeking validation isn't new. Authors have always had fans and critics. What's new is instantaneous feedback – from anywhere in the world. And what's also new is that what we often post is not our own work. We retweet and repost and people judge us and make assumptions about us based on that content.

Turkle calls this "I share, therefore I am." We feel lonely, cause like Adam it's normal to feel lonely, so (unlike Adam) we reach for a device which gives us that neurotransmitter, that hormonal reaction we so crave. The paradox, though, is when we have a device that helps us never feel alone, we don't learn how to be alone. More than this, our devices are attractive, she explains, because they give us the illusion of control, over our relationships and even over ourselves. Smart phones fulfill three fantasies, according to Turkle: that we can give attention to whatever we wish, that we will always be heard and that we never have to be alone. Raise your hand if you've ever woken up in the middle to night, let's say to go to the bathroom or to get a

snack, and before you go back to sleep, you check your phone. Think about how often we see people texting in meetings, at red lights, in line at Starbucks, in front of a urinal. It happens all the time. Perhaps we ourselves have been guilty of some of these! We're afraid to be alone, but more than that we're afraid to be bored. The problem is that being alone and being bored are important facets of a healthy life. As Sherry Turkle puts it, while "...we use conversations with each other to learn how to have conversations with ourselves," we also need solitude to figure out who we are so that we can have constructive relationships with others. Which is why it's a problem, she says, that so many people are never alone, they are what she calls "alone-together."

So what's to be done? What are the models to which we can look to find solutions to this growing problem, one sociologists and researchers say is radically reshaping our behavior and our society in at least some ways that are not good, but that we cannot yet fully understand. What will it mean, by next Shabbat, for America to have a relentlessly tweeting president? One possible response is Shabbat itself. Think about unplugging for a day each week, putting your phone somewhere other than your pocket and practicing ancient behaviors like "making eye contact." You know in the corporate world people are talking about the importance of learning how to make eye contact – while texting?! So, I mean without texting. The radical notion – and I don't mean to sound smug, because I know this is hard even without beeping, vibrating devices – but the radical notion of giving someone our full and undivided attention. Do that. Put your phone away for a while day, once a week for a month, and see how it changes your life. See how it changes your relationship with the people in your life. Shabbat reminds us to keep things in perspective, that life should be lived in moderation. The regular week isn't bad. Our devices aren't bad. They're just devices, not people, and we should be careful not to give them more attention than they deserve

Another strategy is to look for models of effective "alone-together." Which brings me back to the *tefilah*, prayer, and the *Amidah* in particular. Because whether you put your tallis over your head or not, traditional davening has us being effectively alone-together. We are talking, but not to each other. We are thinking, but not necessary about the person standing next to us. We are silent, but not so silent as to be completely shut out from the rest of the *kehillah*. And there is a methodology to the so-called private *Amidah*. Do you know what it is? It's based on Channah, mother of Shmuel haNavi, who is caught praying alone by Eli the priest, one of the few times our tradition learns specific ritual behavior from a woman. The Talmud in *Berachot* (31a) says:

אמר רב המנונא

Rab Hamnuna said :

כמה הלכתא גברוותא איכא למשמע מהני קראי דחנה

How many significant laws there are to be learnt from the passage relating to Hannah!

וחנה היא מדברת על לבה(שמואל א א, יג)

"Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart (to herself)" (I Sam. i. 13)

מכאן למתפלל צריך שיכוין לבו

— hence it is deduced that one who prays must direct ones heart (meaning, focus one's thoughts).

And another thing...

"רק שפתיה נעות"

"Only her lips moved"

מכאן למתפלל שיחתוך בשפתיו

Hence, one who prays must pronounce [the words] with his or her lips.

And finally....

וקולה לא ישמע

"But her voice was not heard"

מכאן שאסור להגביה קולו בתפלתו

Hence, it is forbidden to raise the voice when praying.

So we have here a model for effective prayer, said with *kavanah*, with focus and intention, not just scanned with the eyes, but also pronounced ever so quietly with the lips. And that's how we pray, is it not?

What I want to suggest is that the discipline of prayer offers us two rewards which help shape us for the better. First, it's important to remember that sometimes, maybe even a lot of the time, we *are* praying together. Beth Am is a participatory place. We encourage singing and not performance-based *tefilah*. The *chazzan* has said many times that it is written into his contract that he's to cultivate a singing community.

But there's also space, and the Amidah is a great example of this, for a sort of dialectical silence, a private conversation with God, if you will. Alone together. And, unlike social media, that conversation is in real time – first, because we're reading from a prepared text which means that our words are not simply our own but reflect our collective Jewish aspirations over many centuries. But also, there is time within the Amidah for spontaneous prayer. In fact, this is the moment in the service where it's encouraged! The reason we move our lips, I would claim, is that we wouldn't want to allow ourselves to think we're just reading a book or thinking a thought, because we're supposed to be having a conversation. Most of our lives those conversations are with people, face to face, but in *tefilah* it's with an invisible presence. And that's weird and counter-cultural and I would say essential, because, as social media shows us, we humans crave quiet spaces in which to converse. But, unlike Facebook, prayer is hard because it's not about instant gratification. Perhaps your experience is different, but I've been *davening* my whole life in some form or another, and I have yet to receive any sort of emoji from God! Not a smiley face, not a wink, not a heart or a frown – nothing!

But, here's the thing: what solitary prayer – granted, as one facet of prayer – but what it can do, is help us focus our minds, temper our hearts, rediscover our purpose, maybe even change the

world. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate this weekend, wrote the following in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail:" *"Never before have I written a letter this long -- or should I say a book? I'm afraid that it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?"*

In his solitude, Dr. King was seeking God, but he was also fostering community. His yearning for connection became his followers' cry for justice. And I hesitate to think what his message would have been if he had to say it in 140 characters.