

Acquire a Teacher, Make a Hevruta, Give the Benefit of the Doubt

One of the most awesome parts of this summer was watching all of the JRC babies on the grass at Lakefront shabbat services. The baby minyan crawled across the grass and practiced clapping, exploring from person to person. Most of their parents were JRC babies, and it's been delightful to see them grow from their babynamings and blessings into their developing personalities. When we welcome new life into our community, we bless them with covenant: a life of *"Torah, Chuppah u'Ma'asim Tovim"* - Learning, Loving and of Changing the World for Good. A lot of babies we've welcomed these past 18 months - in backyards, on zoom, around dining room tables, all sanctuaries in homemade sacred spaces.

On these 3 things the whole of our world stands. Learning, Loving and Changing the World for Good. A complete blessing, 3 parts, a Jewish recipe for a life well lived.

When we're at the beginning of our lives, and when we make the commitment to raise or parent a person through their lives, the road ahead is long-term. In the future there will be school, learning traditions, a trade or new skills.

Developmental growth and knowledge is a lifelong pursuit. Building relationships, experiencing love, finding friendships and a partner, happens over time. Repairing the brokenness in our world is for many of us our essential teaching: be a good human, seek justice, work for freedoms. All aspirational, the wishes for a life of meaning and blessings.

At the times of major life transitions - having a baby, starting a new job, moving to a new house, sanctifying our love, these are moments when we need big aspirational blessings.

But at the head of a year such as this one, the transitions to newness aren't so clear. This year is so uncertain. We didn't think that we would be here again. The pandemic seems to be getting worse, not better. We had a few moments, weeks of relief this summer, and now the dread of the virus variants is putting our optimism on the shelf. I don't have to list for you what feels heavy and wrong right now - across the world, such as we heard from Iman, climate crisis, attack on reproductive rights, threats to democracy, voting rights. The instability and unpredictability is ever present. As my friend and colleague Rabbi Josh Lesser said to me, "this moment feels like standing on Jello." Just when we find our balance, a foot sinks, the ground too wobbly to stand firmly.

How do we get unstuck? How on this fresh new year, when we say “today the world is born, *hayom harat olam*” can we find new ground to stand on when everything feels uncertain? How might we feel the real renewal we need?

Pirkei Avot, the sayings of the ancestors, teaches that foundation. It’s found in the Mishnah, the 6 books of “oral” law, which follows the written Torah text. The Torah prescribes Rosh Hashanah and other holidays and observances and laws, but the Mishnah is the text which teaches how we’re actually supposed to live that calendar in reality. As we grasp for a foundation more solid than the Jello, we stand on our Judaism.

יְהוֹשֻעַ בֶּן פְּרַחִיָּה אוֹמֵר

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachiyah in Pirkei Avot 1:6 taught,

עֲשֵׂה לָךְ רַב, וּקְנֵה לָךְ חֵבֵר, וְהוּי דִן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת

Make for yourself a rabbi, and acquire for yourself a companion and judge every person favorably.

These three things: a teacher for learning, a friend for love and relationship, and the benefit of the doubt for everyone.

Asey lecha Rav

Make for yourself a rabbi, a Rav, a teacher. Who have been your most significant teachers this year? What did you learn and how have you grown?

Teachers help us become our best selves; they inspire, they show us we do not yet know everything and that is a good thing. They also remind us how much we do know, that we can do, inspiring confidence and security. Great teachers and mentors are the mirrors who show us both our own potential and our own reality.

The mishnah's verb choice here is particular. It doesn't say 'get' or 'find' or even 'listen to' but 'aseh', make. It implies that we have the ability to turn anyone into our teacher, we just have to be open to learning from them. As Ben Zoma is quoted in Pirkei Avot, Who is wise? One who learns from everyone.

Learning a new thing - be it a skill, an instrument, or a new understanding or perspective is essential to the evolution of our brains and our capacity to grow.

The pursuit of learning, not the idea that we have gained all the knowledge and are done - is the lesson. Each time we engage our brains and stretch our skills, we are pushed out of uncertainty and into knowing something more solid. This is about small goals, not an advanced degree.

As we take care of our bodies and our hearts and our brains and our souls this year, let renewal be found in learning: a craft, how to fix something in your home, to cook a new recipe. Learn about what Judaism says about how to donate money and then give to help; learn how to tie tzitzit or build a sukkah. Join our new adult brit mitzvah cohort, this 100th anniversary of the bat mitzvah year, each Tuesday night starting in October. Ask a friend to recommend one book or a podcast that will open your mind to a new way of understanding a concept you've struggled with this year. Learn something new in a new way - Torah, or learning, is the tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and it's supporters just might be... happy.

U'k'neh l'cha chaver – acquire for yourself a friend

Chaver can be translated as friend, as it is in modern Hebrew and summer camp. It can mean a member of an organization or of government, but its meaning is much deeper. The mishnah is not instructing us to create a social network or a group of dinner companions or people to play games with, but rather to bring into our lives a profound relationship. The verb “*kaneh*” or to acquire, is the same we use in a wedding ritual when we exchange rings. We don’t acquire people in the sense of ownership and obeying, but we make a public, mutual commitment to receive and to give.

When Jews study text, we do so in pairs. Chevruta - the relationship in which we sit together to explore teachings - is this committed relationship. The house of study or Beit Midrash - picture scenes of Yentl and yeshiva students loudly debating over talmud points - is its locus. A chevruta, more than even a best friend, is someone who sees the world from a different place than you do, and who is committed to you anyway. When we each bring our own perspective to the matter in front of us, the goal is not to try to change your chevruta's mind, but to allow yourself to be vulnerable enough, ego-less enough, for your own heart to be opened and your own mind to be changed. How often do we enter a relationship like that? Who could be your chevruta?

Chevruta is about dedication - to a common cause; shared goals, vision, ideals.

That common cause could be our own survival or our own mental health or our own growth - for on this profound day, this Rosh Hashanah, we plead for our own lives. To be in a chevruta relationship is to invite someone into a deep and exposed part of our own heart, and to trust that they will be there to do the same.

In the writings of Avot d'Rabbi Natan, the instructions are direct: "*How does one acquire a friend? A person should acquire a friend for himself by eating and drinking with [them], by studying Torah and debating with [them], by lodging with [them], by sharing private thoughts with [them]... And when they debate matters of Torah and importance, this friend will respond, and thus the bonds of friendship and truth will be strengthened.*"

It's hard for adults to make friends, especially new friends. You might have someone in your life who will be your chevruta, or perhaps this year you will seek someone new, or engage in our Adult learning at JRC to find a chevruta. Our framework for learning at JRC will focus on this partner learning, to engage with issues like spirituality, resiliency, racial justice and antisemitism and privilege, grief, Israel-Palestine, and other topics that are meaningful and passion-filled for us. Do you have something you want to study? Let me know. Sometimes you might know your chevruta, or perhaps you'll want us to pair you with someone, perhaps even with whom you've had conflict. Rabbi Rahel Adler, feminist theologian and scholar writes, "the very structure of the [*chevruta*] relationship and the nature of its boundaries present a Jewish model for relationship between self and other. In this relationship, people experience each other as whole, rather than fragmented beings... To be *chaverim* is to be neither fused nor counterposed, but to be juxtaposed."

The root of the word *chaver* means to join together at the boundaries, the sacred space where edges rub, or spark, or soften - a grounding force in this uncertain time we live in. Let “connecting” be one role that being Jewish plays in your life; Judaism’s core teachings show us that we can’t be Jewish alone. JRC member CeCe Lobin taught our JRC Board as part of the congregational Antiracism audit and task force, “***the relationships we have with each other are the foundational elements of creating an equitable world.***” Whether we are working for justice and equity, looking to grow in our Jewish knowledge or secular learning, or to be less lonely, the chevruta relationship helps get us unstuck. As Ecclesiastes teaches, “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up their fellow; If one forgets, their friend will help them remember. What one misses, the other will help them reveal.”

Ve'chevei dan et kol ha-adam l'chaf z'chut – judge each person according with a compassionate hand. In other words, give everyone the benefit of the doubt.

Be kind, for everyone is struggling right now.

I don't know anyone who isn't having a hard time right now. Anyone. Everyone is struggling.

On my bookshelf in my home sanctuary - the corner of my home where I have led Shabbat services almost every week this year - is an embroidered painting that Chai Wolfman made for me, inspired by a high holiday sermon a few years ago. It reads "In a world with no humanity, be human."

Be human.

Judaism was a radical invention in its time for many reasons, but one of its radical creations was to center our values around love. At the heart of the Torah we read *“v’ahavta l’re’echa kamocho”* - you shall love your fellow human as you love yourself. This verse compels us to act with kindness, and implies that we are commanded to love ourselves.

There is a natural human tendency toward defensiveness, to jump to conclusions, to judge. I know that feeling - perhaps you do as well - of wanting to be right, or believing in the “right way” I learned to see a situation, such that I become blind to seeing it differently. But our texts which teach a new way to be, and break with the status quo, would not center the Torah in kindness and love if there weren’t examples when it was written of the opposite. I wish those trends were different now.

Rabbi Tamar Elad- Applebaum comments on this teaching: “Find a place in your heart dedicated to believing in the inviolate worth of the human being, with all its inherent foibles and flaws. This does not happen on its own, but only as one devotes oneself to the slow and deliberate construction of palpable connection to a fellow human being.”

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav taught that we must train ourselves to look for the good parts of other people... But after honing this practice on others, he said, we must then use it on ourselves as well (Likutei Moharan, part 1:282). Love you fellow human as yourself.

In this year of uncertainty and struggle, have you looked for the good in others? Have you given people whose lives you have only seen on the outside the benefit of the doubt? And in this year of incredible challenges, have you "looked for the good parts" in yourself and judged yourself kindly? On this first day of a new year, this first step into a clean slate dedicated to accountability, mindfulness and working for wholeness, how might you challenge yourself to more compassion?

Learning, Loving, and Changing the World for Good. Call it a recipe, or a seed that we plant. Learn how to water it, hold onto it concretely.

Seek a chevruta - a person to open your heart with, in struggle and in stretch and in trust.

Presume good intentions and kindness, for we all need compassion and life is hard.

As we reach for solid ground, let the sweetness come from apples and honey and learning and loving and doing good, not from sticky and wobbly Jello. May these ancient Jewish foundations be the firmness that holds us as we stumble into this new year.

May we do so together - learning, loving, and changing the world for good.

Rabbi Rachel Weiss
Rosh Hashanah 5782/2021