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A Call to Friendship
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I think all of us have that one teacher that made an indelible imprint on our lives. For me that person was Patricia Weaver. Patricia was my English teacher my sophomore year of high school. Now, on my first day of class, I must admit that I was apprehensive about English class. I wasn't the best writer, and it was first period, 7:50 the morning. But Patricia had a way of making her students' weaknesses into strengths and turning their areas of disinterest into their places of passion. She made *Beowulf*, *Macbeth*, *Frankenstein*, *Candide*, *All Quiet on the Western Front* and so many other of the great works of literature come to life and captivate us. But it was the time and care she put into commenting on our papers, her immaculately crafted lesson plans, and the effort she made to draw us out in class that truly moved to me. She loved us and cared deeply about us in a way I had never felt from a teacher before.

In my senior year of high school, as I was applying to college, Patricia and I met one on one in her home office weekly as we sharpened my college essays. It was through writing and rewriting that she helped me find my voice and connected me to my deepest passions. As shy and introverted as I am, Patricia cut through that and saw me for exactly who I was, and that feeling of being seen was transformative for me.

After I got into college and left home, I knew that I wanted to keep Patricia in my life, and it was at this moment that our relationship transformed from a teacher-student relationship into a deep and long-lasting friendship. Over the course of college and the years that followed, I would see Patricia once every couple months. We shared an interest in religion and spiritual life, so I would take her to my synagogue for Shabbat services. Or we would go

out for coffee, or just sit and talk in her office. We had endless things to talk about—college and classes, family and friends, literature, theology, politics. We could talk for four hours at a time and still have so much more to say. These moments in time just being with her were precious to me, and she became my most favorite person. A true friend.

Since the pandemic started, I've been thinking a lot about friendship. I know many of you have been as well. We've heard so many of you hungry for personal connection, who feel the loneliness of isolation and the how hard it has been to maintain friendship over Zoom or social media. As hard as we have tried, these past couple of years have taken a toll on our friendships.

The pandemic has highlighted the difficulties we have had in staying connected, but we have to admit that these trends existed long before our COVID times. The trend towards loneliness in many ways is an extension of American individualism. Robert Putnam describes these patterns in the book *Bowling Alone*. His thesis is that American involvement in civic and social engagement has been on the decline for decades. Back in the 60s and 70s, people used to belong to bowling leagues, Rotary clubs, attend city council meetings, and actually know their neighbors. All of these have become much rarer in our day and age. Even engagement with organized religion, including synagogues, is on a significant decline. The net result of all of this is a significant loss of social capital.

COVID is not the source of our disconnection. COVID just came along and asked us, "Okay, you want to be a sovereign self? You want to have no organizational or social ties? You want no one to tell you what to do? You want no one to make any claim on your time?"

Fantastic! You go right ahead, and spend a year and half alone in your house.” The loneliness of the pandemic showed us that we can’t be islands. We need connection desperately.

We all know that friendship is an essential ingredient in our lives, but sometimes it’s one of those things that just ends up on the back burner. And there are many reasons why this should not be the case. Consider the famous Harvard longitudinal study. In 1938, researchers at Harvard began a study 268 college sophomores that monitored their health over the subsequent 80 years of their lives. This research project holds records for the longest study of adult life and is a cornucopia of data about health and well-being. When combing through the data, scientists have come to some rather unexpected results. Some of the things that we would expect to correlate to long life do have some impact—not smoking, exercising, maintaining a healthy diet. But interestingly, those factors actually have a smaller correlation than you would think. The researchers found that the most significant factor that correlates to living a long life is whether the person maintains close personal relationships. Having friends helps you live longer. Conversely, not maintaining close friendships is actually damaging to our health.

In 2018 former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Teresa May called loneliness the sad reality of modern life for too many people and established the world’s first ever “Minister of Loneliness” to combat it. Japan reports that older people commit petty crimes because they are so lonely that that going to prison is the one way they get contact with other people. In 2017 US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy wrote that loneliness is a health epidemic. A 2018 study about loneliness in American adults conducted by the health insurance company CIGNA found that 47% of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone or left out. 27% of

Americans rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand them. 43% of Americans sometimes or always feel that they are isolated from others or that their relationships are not meaningful. Only about half of Americans have meaningful in-person social interactions such as having an extended conversation with someone or spending quality time with a friend on a daily basis. The statistic that saddened me the most came from a 2019 study of 2000 Americans that showed that 45% of Americans, nearly half of us, have not made a new friend in the past five years.

These statistics are sobering and point to a larger cultural problem in our lives—lots of us are lonely, and we have to change the way we approach friendship if we are going to change this. In a midrash from the Sifrei, the rabbis comment on a verse of Torah where God tells Moses “Take for yourself Joshua son of Nun” and appoint him as your successor. The rabbis are perplexed by the verb in the verse “take,” a verb that is very forceful, and might even convey the sense of “seizing.” The rabbis then go on to say that the Torah says “take for yourself Joshua son of Nun” because it is only through a tremendous amount of effort and difficulty that a person makes a new friend. The midrash comments further that a person must eat with his friend, drink with his friend, and tell his secrets to his friend, for when he does so, he is strengthened by his friend.

The truth in this midrash is one we must take to heart. Friendship is not something that we can passively expect to come to us. Friendship requires effort. It requires time. It requires energy. It requires planning. It requires vulnerability. And it must be acknowledged that none of these things come easily to us. In our day and age when both heads of the household are in

the work force and where people who have kids spend countless hours schlepping to extracurricular activities, who has the time or the energy at the end of the day to do anything but plop down on the couch and watch tv?

But we cannot allow ourselves to be the victims of our own busyness and stop nurturing our friendships. Rabbi Devorah and I have been preaching for years about the need to carve out time to commemorate Shabbat. That we must find pockets of time to make the day of rest sacred and special, because rest is not something that passively comes to us. True rest requires us to actively pursue it. The busyness of our lives will always impose on us, always encroach further and further on our schedules until there is no space left for us. The key to actually having a Shabbat is that we have to make space for it and ritualize it in such a way that it becomes the architecture of our time.

I would argue that building and nurturing friendships requires the same mentality as Shabbat. Adults don't get unstructured time built into our schedules to play with our friends. We aren't in school, and we don't get recess. So that means the responsibility falls to us to build our lives so that friendship is part of the architecture. And the best way to do that is by ritualizing the time we carve out for friends. Whether that looks like monthly havurah gatherings. Or Wine Wednesdays. Or Saturday movie night. Or weekly walks around Lake Murry. Or season tickets to the Padres with our buddies. We have to be the ones to make it happen for ourselves.

Making time to see Patricia was always a challenge. Between my busy schedule as a college student, her busy schedule and health issues which depleted much of her energy, it was

never an easy task to make time for each other. The ritual of Shabbat services with her followed by long conversation at her home kept us going. Even so, we both had to say no a number of times to invitations to see each other, even when we wanted to say yes.

Friendship requires persistence and even after a no, we always came back to each other. Because we knew how precious we were to each other. When I graduated from undergrad and moved across the country, Patricia and I kept up an email correspondence. We talked about books we were reading and ideas we were pondering. Over the distance our friendship grew deeper as we talked about some of the most important things in our lives.

In July 2010, she wrote me this email: “Dear Benj, In a novel I finished yesterday, Margaret Atwood focused a good deal of attention on the way children are losing language. And with every word that goes, so goes a thought. We so desperately need words to form sentences, and sentences to form thoughts, and thoughts to challenge or affirm the world we have inherited. When language is lost our cultural memory goes as well. So also does our relationship to the past. And when we lose our relationship to the past, so too we lose the deep pool or wisdom or stupidity from which we can, if we choose, learn. In my opinion stories form the core of what it means to be a human being. Anyhow, just know as you go to graduate school across the country, I know how to be your friend, your confidant, your sounding board, and your cheerleader. I do, as well, know how to walk beside you in any capacity that you need or wish me to have me walk. I love you. –Patricia.”

When I think about the ways that my friendship with Patricia transformed me as a person, I think about a verse from the book of Proverbs. Proverbs says “as iron sharpens iron,

so does a person sharpen the wit of his friend.” A midrash in Genesis Rabbah expounds further on this verse by teaching that “a knife can only be sharpened at the side of another.” Without our friends to help us, we can become dull and complacent. But when two friends stand together, “the Shechinah, the presence of God, attaches herself to us.”

Proverbs and the rabbis teach us that friendship is not only about companionship, but also is the key towards our self-actualization. Just as a knife can sharpen another knife, so too do friends sharpen each other. They sharpen each other through words of encouragement. They sharpen each other by providing each other an outside perspective on the situations they are going through. They sharpen each other through advice. And they sharpen each other by calling each other out on their nonsense. A true friend is someone who can be completely honest with you, tell you the things you don't want to hear but you need to hear, share feedback in a loving manner, or simply be a pillar of support when you need it. And when a person can play that kind of role in your life, they can help you transform into the person that you are meant to be.

I know from my friendship with Patricia, we sharpened each other and became better people from having known each other. One of the reasons we were able to do this so well for each other was the fact that our friendship was multigenerational. Patricia was 44 years my senior and came from a very different cultural upbringing. She often told me that our friendship enabled her to understand things she never would have otherwise. Our conversations helped her appreciate the perspective of my millennial generation and helped her know better the experience of someone from the Jewish and the LGBT community, so that

she could be a more understanding and empathetic presence for others of different background.

From Patricia's life experience, I learned much that helped me with my own struggles in my 20s. When my parents went through a divorce, I was distraught and felt profoundly betrayed. It was Patricia who normalized my feelings and then helped me understand the situation from the perspective of her years' of life experience.

Patricia was also willing to share her honest feedback with me. I remember when I was in rabbinical school and I wrote a sermon for my student pulpit. I was proud of this work and felt I had poured myself into it. But when I shared it with Patricia, she took me to lunch and said, "Benj, you know how much I love your writing. This wasn't your best work." The words stung in the moment, but I came to see that she was right. And I came to be thankful for her honesty, because it helped me become a better writer and a better rabbi.

That's the thing about friends. Their honesty makes you a better person. The way that they make you feel seen as a person transforms you into the person you are meant to be.

Beyond the effort we put into our friendships and the ways that we use our friendships to self-actualize, there's one more image of friendship I want us to consider today. That image comes from the book of Ruth. The beginning of Ruth compounds tragedy on tragedy. A woman Naomi has a husband and two sons. Her husband dies, and soon after both of her sons die. And Naomi is left only with her two daughters-in-law. On the road back to Bethlehem, Naomi turns to her daughters-in-law and tells them to return to their families, wanting to release them of any obligations they have towards her as their mother-in-law.

But Ruth refuses. She implores Naomi, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn away from you, for wherever you go, I will go; wherever you will lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die and there will I be buried.” It is perhaps the Bible’s most beautiful statement of love and solidarity. It is also a statement that Ruth does not see her relationship to her mother-in-law in terms of obligation, but rather in the terms of friendship and devotion.

We can speculate why Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi instead of returning to her people and her family. Perhaps the shared loss between them of their husbands and sons binds them together. Perhaps Ruth simply loves her mother-in-law as a cherished family member and friend. Perhaps Ruth sees Naomi as an older woman in need of care and support and finds ultimate meaning in having the privilege of being that care giver for her. Whatever it is, Ruth binds herself to Naomi and in so doing, self-actualizes in a way that transforms her tragedy into a story of love and fulfillment.

Ruth and Naomi’s image of friendship is a powerful one. It is one that reminds us that friends are where we turn when our life falls to pieces. They are the ones that can help us pick up those pieces and begin to rebuild. They can give us hope. They can give us comfort. And they can help us see the path to continuing to write the story of our lives.

I fear that too often, when we are going through hardship, we don’t turn to our friends in the ways we should. We worry about burdening them with our emotional baggage. We worry about being vulnerable with each other. We worry about being too much of a bother. But the thing is sometimes we have to break through these resistances. Sometimes we just

have to be real and raw with our loved ones. Because Ruth shows us that giving others the opportunity to care for us can be an act of supreme kindness.

One afternoon in 2005 before I had an appointment to visit Patricia, she called me to cancel, I could tell by the frantic tone in her voice that something bad was happening. She went to the doctor's office that afternoon and they found a giant tumor at the base of her spinal cord. Patricia had long been in remission from a case of breast cancer, but now the cancer had spread and was in stage 4. The prognosis was good, and she had lots of options for chemotherapy and radiation. But I knew that she was in a fight for the long haul.

Patricia handled her cancer diagnosis with as much grace and dignity as I ever could have imagined a person capable. She was committed to not letting cancer change who she was and what she loved doing. Patricia deepened her faith and was more spiritually fulfilled than ever, as she saw her cancer as the opportunity to spread kindness, love and empathy wherever she went. Whenever she went for her chemotherapy treatments, she learned everything she could about the nurses—their names, their families, what was happening in their lives—and she developed deep relationships with them, such that whenever she left her appointments, they were the ones who felt that they had been treated.

Over the years, I continued to see Patricia, and I always checked in on her health. The first five to seven years after the diagnosis, her health was stable, and other than the side effects of chemo, she was able to continue working and continue living life as she normally would have. She still had energy and enjoyed experimenting with different wigs when she lost her hair.

Then things became more difficult. The chemo stopped being as effective and Patricia had to switch to experimental treatments that caused her a tremendous amount of pain. Her vocal chords would become paralyzed and she had difficulty talking. Her skin would burn easily and her bones became fragile. As the years wore on she slowly lost her energy, and though she continued to work and tutor, it was apparent that she was losing her fight with her cancer.

When I asked her about how she was doing in 2015, she responded in email with this: "On a practical, everyday level, I permit my mind to hold incongruent viewpoints. I can deeply despair some piece of news but also feel the opposite emotion and declare another reality: that I have gratitude and hope and feel empowered. Sitting in a paradox space, without seeking to put perfect little words around it, helps me see my freedom. I see that I can take action in the midst of paradox. I can choose to blame the doctor for not having discovered the problem earlier. I can choose to hate God who allowed me to be sick in the first place. I can choose to love God. I can fall into despair and feel powerless to cope. Or I can say simply that this is real, this is authentic, that this is beyond all the words that are running in my head."

The last time I saw Patricia was August of 2016. I drove to her house in Palo Alto, and she was wheelchair bound. She had broken her leg because the cancer treatments made her bones so brittle. She was taking morphine to control the pain, so I didn't have much time to see her before she would fall asleep. She asked me if I would take her on a walk around the block, and so I took her to a park that I used to play in when I was a little boy. We talked about how she was doing, and she told me that she was ready to make the next transition. While it saddened me to hear, I knew that she had fought as hard as she could, and that it was time for her to stop fighting and accept that her time had come. And I

knew what a privilege it was for her to share her vulnerability with me, and I was grateful for that chance to bring her to the park for a brief moment in the sun.

Patricia died two weeks later. Her husband Richard asked me to give a eulogy at her funeral, and I can say that of all the eulogies and all the sermons I've given in my career, this is the one that will forever bring me the most pride. Being able to share with others my friendship with Patricia was a privilege and a blessing. I know that I am forever changed as a result of knowing her. All the things she taught me, all the ways that she showed love and care to me, and all the ways she opened herself up to me and let me be a friend to her are forever etched on my very being.

As Rabbi Devorah so often teaches us, the first time God says that something is not good is when God sees Adam's loneliness. The meaning of our lives is to alleviate the loneliness of others. The meaning of our lives is to be friends with each other. To reach out across our vulnerability. To learn and rejoice and grieve and love with each other. To support each other when life is hard. And to become the people we are meant to be through having touched each other's lives.