

Before our sermon tonight, I'd like us to do a quick exercise with one another.

Yom Kippur is considered Shabbat Shabbaton – the greatest of Shabbat if you will, and this year it falls directly on Shabbat. Our sages consider Shabbat to be for all humankind a time of *gan Eden*¹, a perfect place, a respite, a garden to nourish our souls and satiate our appetites. Can this Yom Kippur observance be that for each of us? Can we at TBH be fully present during this time, in this vast garden of prayers, readings, stories, interactions, and capture these moments. Literally collect the leaves of this garden over next 24 hours, hold tight to them, carry them home with us, let the leaves dry out. Then in the year ahead, when we feel spiritually cold or distant, we steep the leaves and brew us some tea. Tea to soothe our souls. I'm curious what words do each of us take home? Is it the melody of *ashamnu*, the nostalgic sounds of the Kol Nidre, the story of Abraham and Isaac, the words of the Prophet Isaiah that tells us our fasts are meaningless unless we take on social justice and repairing our world. Perhaps it is witnessing our teens and adults read the ancient words of Torah. Or the time of reflection and meditation, wrapping ourselves in our *tallitot* on Kol Nidre. What are the leaves we are gathering? What will sustain us? Can you think for a minute about the tea leaves you are gathering, the places of inspiration? Look in your book, close your eyes, and ponder for just a minute.

We are half-way through our process, the High Holy Days are for us an individual journey, but they are also a communal experience, praying, learning, reflecting side by side with one another, being inspired, singing together, and literally confessing out loud where we have missed the mark, a time of such vulnerability, we think it is a good thing to know on a deeper level the people who you are sitting nearby? These holy days we are vulnerable, and we are in community, a place that should feel safe and sacred. I will ask you now to take those prayers, those guiding texts for you, and share with the person sitting in front of you or behind you. The key to this task is to be present for the other person when they are speaking. To be actively listening. Shema Yisrael, Listen Israel. That is our command, to share and to listen. We will spend just a few minutes in sharing about which leaves you are gathering? If someone nearby you doesn't have a partner to share with, then go to them or make a group of three, let us be a listening community for each other.

I thank you for fulfilling this task. It has been an honor to witness these last few moments of holiness. In Judaism, when the collective enables the individual to achieve an experience of prayer that otherwise would be unattainable, we have what we call a *kehilah kedosha*- a holy community.² Thank you for being this sacred community for one another.

I take comfort knowing TBH is a *kehilah kedosha* for all who choose to engage. Yet, I struggle overall with the disconnection and lack of embracing of the other during this distressing time in our country, and add to this the additional burden that comes with the stifling of communication in this digital age.

As you know on Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the darkness that we are experiencing from natural disasters, to antisemitism in our community and across the country, to our polarizing political times, and we ended with a message of hope through a call to action, and a demand to live the moral purpose holding to our moral core that Judaism demands of us. However, I also want to recognize that when we are scared and we are frightened: hope, community and connection are not an automatic response. Typically, we do the opposite, we close our doors and shut out the world. Do the opposite of the

¹Gan Eden and tea leaf drawn from a discussion with Rabbi David Ingber. I believe he has done a similar exercise with his congregation or was considering doing it.

² Max Kadushin, [Worship and Ethics; A Study in Rabbinic Judaism](#)

watchword of our faith that commands us to Listen-Shema. Listen to each other; be there for each other, be present with each other.

It is human nature to want security. It's tempting to stay locked in, closed down in the dark when the world around us is spinning and we feel frightened. When physical or mental storms threaten outside our doors, we literally hunker down. In so many ways, we have never been more secure than ever as a society. Alarm systems on our homes and cars, buzz entry into many businesses, the famous Ring device that alerts us when a person is approaching our home even when we aren't there, video cameras here and there, even video monitors for our little ones. We can literally order any supplies we want online, and it will be delivered to our homes in a day or two. We can order breakfast, lunch, dinner and it too will be dropped at our doorstep within minutes. No reason to go beyond the secure walls of our homes.

But, a colleague of mine, Rabbi Asher Knight, reminded me, like many things that seem too good to be true, the side effect of this security and false sense of reassurance, and this delivery on-demand climate, promotes a furthering sense of isolation and fear.³ "As Jewish commentator, Naomi Klein observes, 'Security comes from community and solidarity. Security comes from how solid our ties are, not what we own.' How solid our ties are, not what we own. That is the paradox: we, who are desperately seeking security in the storm, actually feel more and more insecure, because what we own doesn't protect our (spirit)." The more we hunker down, order in, purchase items at our fingertips, the less connected we are with one another. **The less security we give to our spirit.** We lose the sense of belonging, meaning, and depth in our lives.⁴

This lack of spiritual security and depth of meaning spans across all age cohorts. Teens and millennials are absorbed in the world of technology as their sole communication tool: texts, emojis, bit-mojis are not conversation. They are not effective tools for creating *kehilah kedosha*.

Our American culture's emphasis on consumerism, being busy, and rushing from here to there is not developing genuine relationships for our Gen X or Gen Y crews. They are not finding fulfillment with their ability to purchase the best vacations, the newest gadgets, and what-nots. And the fleeting moments on the sidelines of a soccer game followed by the hurry up and go to the next scheduled event does not build a sacred community.

For baby boomers, whose children and grandchildren are often scattered around the globe, deep connection with family suffers and fulfilling conversations after retirement becomes increasingly harder to find. When we are not in conversation with each other, isolation, meaning, life satisfaction, the feeling of safety and security all diminish. We put our well-being on the line.

I did not forget about our elderly for whom this risk is far more severe. Our elderly are all too often alone, scared with no partner to navigate this dramatically fast paced changing world of ours⁵.

³ Rabbi Asher Gottesfeld Knight, High Holy Day sermon delivered on Rosh Hashanah 5778 "Sh'ma Koleinu: Hear Our Voice. We Do Not Need to Face This World Alone"

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Interesting relevant point found in sermon delivered by Rabbi Lisa Grushkow. Sherry Turkle in her book, Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age, describes research into robots as companions for the elderly. The robots are not designed to perform tasks, rather, they are designed to listen – or at least, to look like they are listening, enough to provide comfort and support. Turkle describes watching an older woman speaking about her loss of a child to a robot in the shape of a baby seal. The researchers were enthusiastic at how well it seemed to work. But Turkle writes, "That day didn't reflect poorly on the robot. It reflected poorly on us and how

I want to share with you this heart wrenching story. It's written by Dr. Louis Profeta an ER physician who captures the depth of loneliness in this season of life. He writes:⁶

I couldn't get him out of my mind. He woke me up at 2 a.m. and I paced the room, blew my nose and stared into my bathroom mirror studying my own aging features. He wasn't my patient. He belonged to my emergency physician colleague, Dr. Brian Thomas Fletcher, who posted the case for some of us to read. It simply stated, "Saddest case ever." *95-year-old male comes in for suicidal ideation. When asked why, he said, "My last friend died last week. I don't know one single person on this earth anymore. Not one."*

My heart stopped when I read it, pausing a few beats perhaps, but I'm fairly certain it stopped. Now, the words woke me up. I tilted my head under the faucet and took a long drink and laid back down. I didn't take care of him but I could see him. Thin, balding in a shirt and slacks that once covered a robust six-foot frame now five-nine, a face etched by more than 34,000 sunrises that perhaps saw the decks of a destroyer, or the inside of a bomber somewhere over the Pacific or Italy. His silver, wire-rimmed frames magnify eyes with wrinkles that held tears for perhaps the first time in years, the last being when he buried his wife.

He looks off to the side, staring past the wall and reaches in his pocket and wipes his face with a handkerchief, and I hear him say to the wall since it will **listen**:

"I don't know a single person on this earth anymore, not one."

And the wall stays silent, but I can see Dr. Fletcher as he lowers his clipboard, swallows hard and briefly holds his breath trying to figure out the words. What is there really to say? Like all of us, he thinks to himself, "We failed you."

Some years back, I wrote a piece that went viral, "Your Kid and My Kid Are Not Playing in the Pros," and I got more than a thousand e-mails about the article. Most were supportive, some not, but what I was completely unprepared for was the correspondence I received from grandparents. For the most part, they were all absolutely heartbreaking. The central theme was that they did not know their grandchildren because travel sports had robbed them of weekends and Sunday night dinners and countless other opportunities to interact. Going to their baseball games in the middle of the summer — or sitting in a loud gym — was just not a bonding experience for them; it was physically exhausting. Besides, you can't talk about rationing sugar during the war, or marching on the mall, or sitting through the Watergate hearings between timeouts. It doesn't work like that, that's not enough.

"I want to teach him how to make pickles, just like my grandmother taught me...how to needlepoint, how to build a chair, or change the oil. I want to tell her about the time I was a

we think about older people when they try to tell the stories of their lives...when you think about the moment of life we are considering, it is not just that older people are supposed to be talking. Younger people are supposed to be listening. This is the compact between generations.

⁶ Dr. Louis M. Profeta is an emergency physician practicing in Indianapolis. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/i-dont-know-single-person-earth-anymore-one-louis-m-profeta-md>

little girl and made my own clothes, or how to play gin rummy. I want to go fishing, or show him the books I read when I was 10 because I still have them. I want to tell them about stamps, and record players, and how Elvis took the world by storm. I want to talk about Jim Crow and Tuskegee, and jazz, and how to make greens, and about the time we all sat transfixed trying to figure out who shot J.R.”

But as worlds do, the world changes, but it seems of late that while we spend our days lamenting the fracturing of the polar icecaps, we pass over the fracturing of the generations and we are leaving many staring at the wall and thinking to themselves: “I don’t know a single person on this earth, not one.”

(not delivered----- I know sadness. I know depression. Who hasn’t? I know fear; real fear and the feeling that there is no possible way things can get better (although they usually do eventually). But what I realize is one thing I do not know is loneliness: true deep, dark, all-encompassing loneliness of our senior generation has blessedly never been with me.” Brian’s words burned into my eyes and I thought of the thousands of elderly we see in our ER every year and the millions that must be shuttered behind countless doors that we drive by every day, how many of them are sitting in faux leather recliners, peeking through the shutters perhaps and watching a neighbor they do not know, play with their child and wishing to themselves: “I’d like to tell her about Elvis or teach him to make pickles.”)

I imagine there are many people in this holy gathering tonight who feel connected to this story. Many probably long to share their stories of their families struggles through the Holocaust, or participation in marches to end segregation, what it was like to be alive when Israel was declared a nation, or when Robert *Kennedy* was assassinated. And others, long to spend time teaching their grandkids how to braid challah, make kneidlach, matzo balls, or noodle kugel ensuring the passing on of traditions. I imagine this longing to be very real.

Why don’t we afford the time in our lives to ensure such important sacred relationship building? Teens, Millennials, Gen X, Gen Y, Baby Boomers, Elderly all of are deeply affected by loneliness, lack of real conversation, and sacred connections, friends.

Friends, a few minutes ago, I asked you to turn to your neighbor and share something of depth. To go beyond the superficial, “Boy it sure was hot today” and the sweetness of a “*shana tova*” greeting to engage in a more in-depth vulnerable conversation.

I won’t ask us to raise our hands, but I want us to think...when is the last time you had such a conversation with deep sharing and deep listening, yesterday, this week, last month, not sure it’s been that long? When is the last time, someone in our family or in our community sought us out to share a cup of coffee or tea just so we could talk face to face on the things that trouble our minds or to share the stories of our lives? I wonder who in this room sits lonely at home waiting for a phone call, a visit, a conversation? I ask, when we last afforded our grandparents and great grandparents, the opportunity to teach our kids their life lessons?

I am not standing in any place of judgement. Trust me I understand, as a parent of four busy kids, one a serious competitive athlete, and in a home with two full time working parents, boy do I get it. My family fits right in here too. We hop from place to place, finally arriving home, locking the door behind us, getting dinner on the table, tackling homework, sometimes running back to work for meetings, then there is more homework, baths, and bed, rewind and repeat. With our crazy schedules we miss opportunities. We miss facetime calls with grandparents across the continent. As the adults in our home, wrapped up in so many busy details, we miss making time spent with other adults, with friends.

Giving us a chance to move beyond surface conversations at the countless drop offs, towards creating deeper connections and sacred relationships.

Yet, it's here at TBH, where being a part of this congregation affords us the perfect space to push ourselves beyond our closed doors and erected walls to find spiritual security. Being here most Friday nights of the year, I can tell you the room is never this full. Why not? Trust me I get the being too busy, too tired after a hard week, and being too full of too many excuses. But I know it's worth being here. I hear all the time, wow this service was so beautiful, really needed this tonight. I should come more often it really makes me feel so good. Most Shabbat evenings, we celebrate the good things that have happened in our lives over the past week from a good grade on an exam or project, to the birth of a grandbaby, to a new job, or achievement of a long term goal. We share in blessing birthdays. We sing with joy over 2 years of marriage or 60 years of marriage. We share blessings for healing for those in our community who needs strength of mind, body, and soul. We learn about one another, we connect with one another, we celebrate with and mourn with each other, and we work on ourselves. We meditate, we clap our hands and raise our voices. We celebrate Shabbat and heal our souls. We collect new tea leaves to steep for the week ahead, and we do it all together.

In a world where the American culture is being radically redefined as it dramatically warps from what we have known into something we cannot yet imagine. I implore us to not stay in a place of fear, loneliness, and insecurity. But rather, to be a part of creating a *kehilah kedosha* through your Temple, through our Temple community. Our staff will do all we can to bring thoughtful learning opportunities, engaging activities, and meaningful prayer experiences, but this will never be sufficient unless you invest. Temple and Judaism must be something we choose not just to consume, as we roll through carpool line or sign in our youngsters, or stop in to the office once a year to receive our High Holy Day name badges. Temple life and our Jewish life must be nurtured and cultivated by us. In order to build this sacred community, all of us must move from the sharing we just had with one another, and continue to create these deeper connections with those around us. You play a significant role in creating the meaning within these walls, so it can transfer outside into our everyday, providing us with that spiritual security we all need. I encourage you to sign up for a Shabbat Babayit experience on October 27th, and literally walk into an **open front door** of a fellow congregant. Invest in yourself and your community.

I, like you, have many worries for our country, our future, my children's futures, my mother and grandmother's generation's future. But my hope lies within kehila kedosha communities like ours. This year let us commit to fostering relationships with one another, across the generations, and through your **partnership** in developing a vibrant Jewish community at Temple Beth Hillel. A place that should be a safe haven against the storm, a place of spiritual security, filled with friendships and community, not locked doors and privacy walls. A place where our voice can be shared and our thoughts listened to and witnessed. May TBH be for us a home providing a sense of belonging, meaning, and adding depth to our lives. Amen.