

Kol Nidre – October 3rd, 2014

I once said to a class of teenagers that to me, the punishment that goes the most against Jewish values is solitary confinement. We talked about how we are a social people, depending on each other and we could not imagine what it would be like to be all alone for so long. To help us understand these values, my class studied the story that we read last week on the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, the troubling but powerful story of Akedat Yitzhak, the binding of Isaac when Abraham nearly sacrificed his son. That night in class, we discussed how both Abraham and Isaac must have felt during the experience, including feelings of loneliness for each of them.

Perhaps one reason this relationship suffered is because it was not based on too much open communication. In fact the Torah does not say much about the conversations this father and son ever had. There is one very short verse that comes a bit into the story. After God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son, they begin their journey. After walking for three days, Torah states simply and dramatically: “And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac’s back, and he took the fire and the knife; *V’yelchu shneihem yachdav* — and the two of them walked off together.

I find those three words remarkable, *V’yelchu shneihem yachdav* — and the two of them walked off together.

When I read this story and think about the details that are omitted in the text, I begin to imagine their conversation. Did they talk about the weather and what Isaac just did that week in school? Probably not. Did they talk about the fact that Sarah was getting older and they knew they would have to take care of her soon? I hope so. Did they talk about their past or perhaps the future?

As they walked off together, I wonder what kind of togetherness could there be at a moment like this. Perhaps that is why the Torah repeats the phrase in a hope that they were somehow together in spite of what was still to come.

V’yelchu shneihem yachdav— and the two of them walked off together.

Why does the text emphasize that they were not alone? Is it possible that the Torah is trying to teach us that there might be something to fear even more than death, that we should fear loneliness? This fear of loneliness may be as old as father Abraham and it is clearly still prevalent today.

Fast-forward a few thousand years to the 21st Century. We are no longer in ancient Mesopotamia but now at a Commencement Address a few years ago at Middlebury College delivered by the noted author Jonathan Safran Foer. And the story he told about a mother and daughter could not have been more different than our Biblical story about a father and son.

“A couple of weeks ago,” Foer told the class that day, “I had an experience that others may have had – I saw a stranger crying in public. Waiting for a friend to meet me for breakfast – I was early, sitting on a bench, scrolling through my email on my phone. A girl, maybe 15 years old, was sitting on the bench opposite me crying into her phone, I heard her say, “I know, I know, I know,” over and over again.

What did she know?

Had she done something wrong?

Was she being comforted?

Was the person on the other end angry or forgiving or sympathetic or loving?

And then she said, “Mom, I know” and the tears came harder.

What was her mother telling her?

Never to stay out too late, a message that so many parents tell their children?

And where was her mother calling from?

“Momma I know,” she said as she cried harder as she hung up and placed the phone in her lap.

As Foer told this story to the commencement students he said, “I was faced with a choice; I could make her life my business or I could respect the boundaries between us. Intervening might make her feel worse, or might simply be inappropriate but then it might ease her pain or be helpful in some way. A 15-year old crying in public is not the same as a 40-year old. So I chose to approach.”

“Instead of asking what was wrong, I commented on what a nice day it was.” “It’s cold” she said, “That’s true,” I said, “I don’t know why I said it was nice.” She laughed. “I said, look, I don’t want to bother you and if you tell me to mind my own

business I will - but if there is anything I can do..."

She said, "I'm embarrassed"

I said, "You need not be embarrassed.

And she said, "I'm not the kind of person who cries in public."

And I said, "Nobody is," She picked up her phone then put it back on her lap.

"I'm going to meet my birth mom today," she said.

"And you were just talking to your mother about it?" I asked

"No," she said, "I wasn't talking to anybody, I was just practicing. I haven't told my mother I'm going, I was practicing telling her."

I pushed a bit further sensing she was making room for me to.

"Well you kept saying, 'I know I know' - was that an imagined response?"

She said, "I imagined that my mom was telling me that she loved me."

Then Jonathan Safran Foer paused and looked at his audience at commencement and said, "No, she never actually said that, in fact none of that happened. Oh, the part with me overhearing the girl on the phone? That happened. But the truth is that I chose not to approach. I decided it would be an unwanted intrusion and possibly even exacerbate her sadness, so I kept my distance and kept an eye on her. I didn't know what I was doing exactly — waiting to see if she had somewhere to go, if she might hurt herself, I felt ridiculous, that I was somehow protecting her.

After a few minutes a car drove up — and a woman — presumably her mother — reached across the car to open the passenger door from the driver's seat — As she got in the car the girl passed me she said, "Take care." "No she didn't say that — none of that happened either."

And then this is how Safran Foer concluded his story to his audience:

It's harder to intervene than not to. But it is vastly harder to decide than to retreat into the scrolling list of emails or whatever distraction may be happening at the moment. Technology celebrates connectedness yet it also encourages retreat. Ignoring people is as old as empathizing with them."

Unlike Abraham and Isaac, the author and young girl on the bench did not walk off together. Two stories, separated by 5,000 years — a picture of a primitive world that celebrated togetherness, a picture of our modern world that wrestles with loneliness and isolation.

I try to imagine Abraham and Isaac living in a time of smart phones. What that three - day journey together might have been like if they could get on wifi. Maybe their GPS could have saved a few hours off their trip. How much would they have said to each other? How "together" would they have been? I can almost picture them – Isaac, the young boy pre-occupied with his Facebook page, tweeting and texting his friends. Abraham, the father, busy answering his emails – checking the stock market, "I'll be with you in a second Isaac, just a few more emails to catch up on..."

Safran Foer believes that his daily use of technological communication has been shaping him into someone more likely to forget others, to not be present when he is needed. Our cell phones, and our ever-present Internet access may provide us instant connectedness but it also comes with a price. Everyone wants his parent's, or her friend's, or partner's undivided attention — even if many of us, especially children, are getting used to far less.

V'yetchu shneihem yachdav— they walked together. We - not so much.

Maybe the Torah was teaching us something very important in these precious few words – they were together, united, present for each other in ways we are not, certainly not in the ways we need to be or want to be there for each other.

Much of modern technology was created to make life easier. We could not always see one another face to face so the telephone made it possible to keep in touch at a distance. Online communication originated as a substitute for telephonic communication, which was considered ultimately too burdensome and inconvenient. And then texting which was even easier and faster - then Instant Message and now Instagram and I am sure something else has been invented that the kids are using that I haven't even heard of yet. And with each of these steps forward – we understood that although something was being gained, something was also being lost.

There are houses of worship in this country, mega churches and even some not so mega synagogues that provide ways to participate in the service online. Some of my colleagues tell me how great it is to stream all of their services so that people who are recovering from illness are able to join in on-line. My concern is if we expand that, we may find ourselves beginning to prefer watching the service on line than to being together as a community – we may begin to prefer the lesser substitutes to the real thing.

The problem with accepting and preferring diminished substitutes is that over time we too become diminished substitutes:

It is easier to “friend” someone than to be someone’s friend.

It is easier to “like” things online than to love them in person.

It is easier to say nothing to a young girl crying on a bench.

And people who choose to say nothing in critical moments become used to saying nothing when they are needed.

There is a great video that illustrates this point. You can find it on YouTube. It is called, “Please Put Down your mobile phone” — it shows a man walking on a beautiful beach — occupied with his phone — then the same man, sitting on the couch, occupied with his phone and so it goes. The video continues to show that when he puts down his phone each scene is repeated— but this time, we notice, he is not alone, he was just so pre-occupied with his phone that it seemed that he was alone. Now we see him walking on that same beach and actually there was a woman walking next to him, we see him sitting on his couch — next to his daughter who was drawing a picture — it captures the things we miss, when we pay attention to what is around us and not our phone. It is called “Please put down your mobile phone” and it challenges us to think about how much we depend on our devices and how for nearly all of those moments we are alone. I think when Abraham and Isaac were walking together they understood this. I am afraid that today, too many of us do not.

Both last week on Rosh Hashanah and tomorrow on Yom Kippur we recite words of the magnificent U’netaneh Tokef in which the poet reminds us that life is fleeting —like a passing shadow, a fading cloud, a fleeting breeze, a vanishing dream. And it is precisely this sense that life is like a breath that departs, that preoccupies so many of our thoughts and prayers on these High Holy Days.

And given that we have a finite amount of time to learn who we are, to be with those people we love, to make our marks on the world, a finite amount of time to find and create meaningful experiences, a finite amount to learn from others who may have a different view than we do - then nothing is more valuable than the precious number of life moments we have left. We must use them wisely.

V’yelchu shneihem yachdav — Abraham and Isaac walked together. But that was then, and this is now.

Can we create relationships that walk together, celebrate together and experience life together?

Can we create families that walk together, celebrate together and experience life together?

Can we help people who are lonely so that they have someone to walk with together?

V’Yelchu Shneihem Yachdav – let’s walk together, celebrate together and experience life together. When we do, I am sure we, our families and our community will all benefit in so many ways.