

Rosh Hashanah
2021/5782
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Congregation Sha'ar Zahav
A Tree in a Field

As many of you know, I'm zooming to you tonight from Mountain View, California. Before we turn off the chat... Write in the chat where you're sitting.

I am sitting really far away from most of you. Like a tree in a field. I am sitting here alone.

Bring to your mind a tree, standing in a field. It appears to be on its own. It looks self-sufficient. But if only we could see underground, we would know that it really isn't. We'd see the vast network of roots intertwined with other trees' root systems, fungi linking them together. Perhaps in this pandemic time, you read and watched some of the "science for non-science majors" type material out there that has captured my imagination, like *The Hidden Life of Trees*¹, *Be A Tree*², or *Fantastic Fungi*³. These books and films present scientific breakthroughs that reveal trees relying profoundly on one another, forming intricate social networks, communities, even families. They communicate, share nutrients, store water, divide resources, and even alert each other to danger, not only with trees like them, but with their seeming competitors. Trees know, according to author Peter Wohlleben, that, "together, many trees create an ecosystem that moderates extremes of heat and cold, stores...water, and generates ...humidity... Every tree....is valuable to the community."⁴ Old trees give shade to newer ones, and even sick trees are supported until they recover, and the next time, it could, of course, be the other way around with the now strong tree supporting the one that once kept it alive.

We read in the book of Deuteronomy, "A human being is a tree in a field." *Ha-adam etz ha-sadeh*⁵. Like an actual tree, the human being is not alone. Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, and tomorrow to celebrate, we read the opening verses from the book of Genesis, the tale of how all of this came into

¹ See note #4.

² This is a gorgeous children's book based on Wohlleben's work. Gianferrari, Maria, illustrated by Sala, Felicita, *Be A Tree*, Abrams: New York, 2021.

³ A film available on Netflix and other providers. Preview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxABOiy6oA> and see note #7 for other bibliographic information.

⁴ Wohlleben, Peter, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*, Greystone, 2015, p.4

⁵ Dt.20:19

being. G!d says, “It is not good for a human to be alone.”⁶ But we have felt, indeed, very alone. While feeling alone and feeling lonely are very different things, so many have been profoundly lonely during the past year of on-and-off isolation-seniors, young people especially, but not limited to these groups. Some have come to see that they took for granted the constant connections in their lives. Others have realized that they were very alone before, and for the first time, felt that the whole world finally knew what they have experienced as normal life. Forced isolation and disruption of daily, social routines have exacerbated that feeling.

We check social media in the hopes of feeling that connection in a world dispersed. We had been told incessantly for many years that connectivity was hurting us, maybe even making us feel lonelier, but then in a plot-twist, during the pandemic those same devices have saved us from being completely alone. Most of us, at this time of great division in our world, have striven mightily to stay connected. But the back and forth is hard and we’re tired.

“It is not good for the human to be alone.” Jewish mystics in the middle ages went further with this idea. Not only is it not good for us to be alone, in a way, we really *aren’t* alone. For kabbalists and mystics across religious traditions, one of the most profound puzzles to solve is that this world we live in gives us the illusion of separation: you’re there in Boston, in Brazil, I’m here in California. The tree outside my window is its own entity as is the random person walking down my street with their dog, who is separate from them. People suffering in Afghanistan, people suffering injustice here in SF. But here is the kabbalistic puzzle: We look at a differentiated universe-so many colors, living beings, things to see and experience! But the reality is that we are both distinct... and not distinct at all. Because it’s all One - G!d is oneness, one entity with no beginning and no end, no boundary. In kabbalah, an overarching name for G!d is *Ein Sof*-which means “endless.” In the kabbalistic chart that represents the distinct emanations of G!d, aptly named the Tree of Life, every one of the ten emanations is part of this differentiated world, yet at the same time, they are just manifestations of Oneness-because our brains and eyes can more easily understand the experience of kindness, or beauty, or wisdom than the expansive G!d named “endless.”

We are asked to live on both of these planes simultaneously, the plane where I am, indeed, me, and you are you. But also the plane where we’re breathing the same air and made from the same stuff. Just as the trees are all connected underground, we are more connected than we know, sitting in solitude in front of our screens. In

⁶ Gen.2:18

fact, a human-created system, the web, is connecting us all from one end of this earth to the other in this moment in a way we never could have imagined just decades ago. Our tradition teaches us that we breath with one, collective breath- *nishmat kol chai*. As Paul Stamets remarks in the film, *Fantastic Fungi*, “We are a vast network of molecules, energies, wavelengths. The interconnectedness of being is who we are.”⁷

There is beauty and pain in this simple revelation. The air we breath is the air that Tahoe breathes, and the choices we make in our daily lives affect people across the globe. People become sick with a disease born from the reality that our breath is so connected - we have trouble stopping its spread even when we’re trying really hard to stay apart from one another. We are separate, our views are different— everything is differentiated. But for the kabbalists, every once in a while we get a glimpse of a deeper reality, we see that everything is really connected. It might be while hiking, or looking at the moon. It might be watching someone being born, or dying. Maybe it’s when we give tzedakah or help someone survive as a refugee. It might be while reciting the Shema.

The Shema, our statement of monotheism, is so much more than that. The great revelation is not that there is just one G!d, but that this G!d, all existence, is just one. EVERYTHING is One. The people on my street and the people in Afghanistan and Louisiana and New York. And the trees and their root systems and the mycelium that keep them alive. The joy and the pain of life and death and rebirth. That is the Shema. “Listen, you people who struggle with, well, everything: all is One.”

If everything is One, then why is it so hard to feel connected? To G!d, to others, to ourselves? Unlike the systems at work underground in *The Hidden Life of Trees*, linking nourishment from root to root, connection between humans doesn’t just...happen. For the majority of us, we don’t just wake up and find ourselves surrounded in our lives by loved ones, supported by community. We have to *make* it happen. Under the trees that are so interconnected we find a flurry of activity. So many forces busy at work sustaining a complicated system. Likewise, we have to make decisions, be vulnerable, set plans and structures in place. Perhaps this is why our tradition is so hyper focused on community. Not because it’s a given, but precisely because it’s NOT! Maybe our ancestors knew how easy it is to slip into the lure of that illusion - that we’re separate and alone. They wrote in one

⁷ This quote is from the documentary, but see also Stamets, Paul, *Fantastic Fungi: Expanding Consciousness, Alternative Healing, Environmental Impact*, Earth Aware Editions, 2019

commentary, Pirkei Avot, “Don’t separate yourself from the community⁸.” They wrote a good deal of our prayers in the plural, so they wouldn’t even make sense to say alone. We think we’re only responsible for our own wrongdoings? Think again—our actions are all so interconnected that what I did last year made it onto the list you have to atone for! Our ancestors named human beings (adam) with the same word as earth (adamah), to remind us every time we read this story in Genesis that we are created from the same atoms as everything else on earth⁹.

We have had many months of having to redefine what relationships are all about. It’s hard to connect—even in non-covid times. Maybe we should add an addendum to the verse from Pirkei Avot: “Don’t separate yourself from community— even when it’s hard. Especially when it’s hard.” Right now, in our liminal Covid open/not open world, there are a lot of added stressors associated with seeing people in person (what do I do if their mask falls down?) And likewise on zoom (I need time away from screens, but that’s where my communities are flourishing right now).

And let’s be honest. Community hasn’t even always worked when we hoped it would, pre-COVID. We float in and out of communities, hoping we’ll find something we’re looking for, sometimes finding it; sometimes not. Sometimes not being honest with ourselves about what exactly we’re seeking. So...in this coming year which promises to be once again steeped in uncertainty, it might help to get in touch with what YOU are hoping for.

- What is the definition of connection or community for you?
- Is it that someone will say prayers with you if you lose a loved one?
- That you’ll better the world with like-minded people inspiring you to keep on working at it?
- Be more present for people in your life you’ve loved for years?
- Are you looking to feel grounded in an unsettling time?
- Or the opposite—are you looking for ways to break boundaries and chart new paths?
- What are you doing to make these happen?

Once we have thought about what kinds of interconnections bring meaning, grounding or inspiration to our lives, we might shift from “what can I get from this person or community” to “I’m curious—what might unfold here?” Whether it’s sitting in a zoom breakout room at *oneg* (post services social time), bumping into someone grocery shopping or starting a new friendship, can I let go of my agenda

⁸ Pirkei Avot, 2:4. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/47323?lang=bi>

⁹ Gen.1:27

and see what is happening in this moment I can be open to? How we might feed each other like those trees? Can we be as adaptive as the root systems underneath our feet?

As we enter a new year, we just don't know what it's going to look like. We can't possibly know. Frankly, we *never* really know but our current landscape has just come to remind us of that. There are going to be times when it is so easy to curl up alone. And we might, sometimes, need to hide from the world. But how will we not cut ourselves off from people at a time when we are desperate for connection?

Marge Piercy wrote:

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
You cannot always tell by looking at what is happening
More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet...
Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.
Live a life you can endure: make life that is loving.
Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but to us it is interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.
This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always.
For every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.¹⁰

As we enter the year 5782, know that you are not a solitary tree standing alone in the world. Even if it feels that way sometimes. We need each other, and we know that connections don't magically happen until we weave them.

¹⁰ Full poem <https://localcircles.org/2011/05/31/connections-by-marge-piercy/>