

Toldot 5775: The Mutual Support of Tefilla and Chevratit

We look at our calendars and we see events, meetings, tasks to be done. They speak of lives of constant responsibility, and are often color-coded according to these areas of unrelenting demands -- work, family, financial, community, and others.

I don't know about you, but what often gets left at the bedside from my calendar, undone, by the time I go to sleep are my periodic, typed-in reminders to call friends and family members who I haven't spoken to in a while. As it looks on my iphone, it's as if these people are tasks to be done -- non-urgent responsibilities that we can easily shunt aside in the fatigue of the end of our day.

This past Shabbat reminded me in spades just what is lost when I treat regular communication with friends and family as a task to be handled. The Shabbat of Adina's bat mitzvah reminded me that such regular communication is not a task, but rather a life-giving source of joy, support and perspective -- exactly the antidote to burnout with which our exacting schedules threaten us.

Regular, meaningful communication between congregants is also an essential part of our self-definition as a B'nai Israel community. We work hard as a synagogue community to integrate fellowship, **חברתיות**, into the regular schedule of our weeks. Our times for fellowship come before and after minyan, at morning minyan breakfast, and, for a larger chunk of our community, during kiddush lunch on Shabbat -- not to mention the webs of friendships between congregants that are consistently nurtured outside the walls of the shul. On Shabbat, our community's intense desire for **חברתיות** stands out to me especially, and I always hesitate to interrupt conversations to introduce the birkat and the time for mincha.

There's a desire amongst our congregants to tarry, which is a wonderful thing, to hang out and socialize for longer periods than just a 45-minute kiddush allows. Saturday Night Learning also tapped in to that desire for fellowship, in the context of Jewish study. Still, we need to create even more avenues for **חברתיות**, such as a more organized program of welcoming guests for Shabbat dinners and those Shabbat lunches we don't have together at shul.

We are family, and to the extent that we individually shunt aside these communal moments of fellowship, we imperil the joy, support and energy they provide us.

Communicating with family and friends, being in constant fellowship with members of community -- they are life-sustaining in the sharing and listening which are at their core. And they also help sustain our communication with God. We come together to pray, not just for ourselves, but to support each other's outreach to God, our individual quests for relationship with God. Without a communal presence, it is much harder for us individually to reach out to God with questions and to seek God's answers. Therein lies the importance of robust minyanim and services, filled with people who are pulling for one another, and mechanisms within tefillot like the repetition of the amida, wherein we turn our hearts outwards from our own individual silos and have the opportunity to look left, right, forward, and behind, and to acknowledge the needs, desires, and prayers of those with whom we pray. To express quiet empathy with the quests of our fellow daveners.

The extent that we depend on communal support in our quest for relationship with God, and to sustain our faith in God's good graces, is supported by this week's parasha. At least at the beginning of their marriage, Yitzchak and Rivka are truly a team. They are a team in love, and they are a team in prayer. Take a look at Genesis 25:21.

וַיַּעֲתָר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנִכְחַ אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָהּ הוּא וַיַּעֲתָר לוֹ יְהוָה וַתְּהַר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

"And Isaac entreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD let Himself be entreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived."

The Midrash Bereishit Rabba translates נִכְחַ differently. Not, "Isaac entreated God for his wife," but rather, "Isaac entreated God opposite his wife."

In the words of Rabbi Mimi Feigelson of the Ziegler School for Rabbinic Studies, the Conservative Movement's rabbinical school in Los Angeles, "For the Midrash, [נִכְחַ] is a staging instruction - Yitzchak is standing in one corner of the room and praying, and Rivka is standing in the opposite corner and praying." She compares the usage of נִכְחַ here to the usage of the same word in Megillat Eyicha: *Pour out your heart like water in the presence of God (no'chach pnei Hashem)*. As Rabbi Feigelson says beautifully, "there is a unique quality of beseeching that happens in the presence of / in the face of / on behalf of, when you pray *no'chach* another person or God."

Rabbi Feigelson also raises Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev's understanding of **נכח**, which brings the understandings of "for" and "opposite" together. Yitzchak prays for and together with Rivka, understanding that, to realize the potential of their relationship, Rivka needs to feel complete, which she will only do once becoming a mother.

Rivka demonstrates her faith in God beyond a shadow of a doubt with her Avramic-like willingness to leave Charan and come to Canaan. Yet, in the thick of life experience, trial and travail, she needs support to cling to this faith and then to ultimately seek out God for the reason for the tumult in her womb, which she does in the next verse. And she gets this support from Yitzchak. She is ultimately rewarded by God with an explanation for the tumult, and the major responsibility for navigating the continuity of the dynasty through Yaacov. Yitzchak busies himself, on the other hand, with staking claim to the land through the uncovering and digging of wells.

We support each other through fellowship, **חברתיות**, and we express that fellowship also in the context of tefilla, as do Yitzchak and Rivka. Our presence, and our support, helps other individuals in the community become more complete in their petitioning, praising and thanksgiving of God in tefilla -- and enables them both to raise with God their burning questions and, perhaps, through intense contemplation, receive satisfactory answers. As we listen, God listens. As God supports, we support. Such communication is a priority, which we nurture for each other. And certainly, it is not a task to be noted as "incomplete" on our smartphones, or to be avoided as non-urgent as we bring ourselves to the end of the day. It needs to be a vital part of the everyday.