

**“When You Are Here You Are Never Alone:
Making Connections in our Lives”**

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At the age of 10, we moved from Bayside Queens to Fairfield, CT which meant a lot of new things and new beginnings – a new house, a new bedroom, new playgrounds, new schools and, of course, new friends. All of this was great except for the new friends part. As you can imagine, it's difficult to make new friends. It's hard to walk into a new environment and feel accepted. Even in the most inviting circumstances, it's hard to feel a part of what's been going on long before you got there. Just to illustrate, I want to share one of the most uncomfortable moments of that entire transition. I was sitting on the bus, nervous that I would miss my stop and of course not knowing the area, I had no idea when my stop was coming. I sat next to the window looking for markers I might recognize. I would see a store that looked familiar and then the bus would take a turn and I was lost once again. I'm sure you all know the feeling. I was sitting amongst a group of kids listening to their conversation with half an ear. They were giggling so I giggled a little just so they wouldn't think I didn't get the joke. Then they said, “Hey Jay, do you want to hear a really good one?” So I said, “Yes.” After all, they were talking to me and I was being included. For a minute I stopped worrying about my stop. Then they told the following joke. “This elephant was walking through the jungle and he came across a man, they stared at each other afraid to move. Staring straight into the other eyes waiting for the other to blink and show their fear. Then they walked past each other. This happened a second time with another man. This time the elephant opened his mouth and said, ‘No soap radio’.” Then, all of the kids started laughing really hard. I didn't get it – but I thought maybe my mind wandered during the joke and I missed the build up to the joke. I didn't want to look stupid so I laughed also. Then there was a stunning turn of events. They all stopped laughing and asked what I was laughing about. Of course I couldn't explain, since I didn't get the joke at all. Then they broke out into laughter again. This time, laughing at me rather than with me. They successfully made me the joke – and again, I felt like the outsider I was.

I will never forget that moment. It may be one of the most painful memories I have and yet I learned so much about people in that moment. They picked on the weakling. They went after the easy target. They took advantage of the most vulnerable. So I sat quietly biting my lip until I got to my stop. Then, I got off about a block from my house and cried all the way home. When I arrived home, there was my mom waiting for me with some milk and cookies. We talked about what happened and she said something that stuck with me, “Don't worry now, you're at home.” “But I have to go back tomorrow.” “Yes you will, but you'll be fine. For now, don't worry because now you're home and I'm here.” So, I now say to you what my mom said to me, “For now don't worry because now you are home and God has God's eye on you.”

Kids are cruel and we live in a cruel world. What I experienced on the bus that day is something that has been going on in buses and on playgrounds forever. Each of us has felt the sting of feeling like an outsider. Some of us put on a veneer of confidence which says to the world that it doesn't matter to us, but inside we all know the feeling of being left out. The feeling of standing

right there in front of someone else, yet appearing to be completely invisible, or even worse, feeling as though we have been put out with the trash.

When we moved to Penn Valley from New Jersey, we were embraced and showered with love. That was a direct result of the fact that I'm the Rabbi and my family is the Rabbi's family. By becoming the rabbi, I never again had to feel like the odd man out. You have welcomed us into your homes, invited us to the movies, to sporting events and to just hang out and for this we are profoundly grateful. However, I'm still not sure we have done this for each other yet and I want everyone to feel right at home while in synagogue.

This morning's reading offers us a strange challenge. *Ki Gayrim, V'toshavim Atem Imadi*. "But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me." (Leviticus 25:23) *Gayrim, V'toshavim Atem Imadi*. That's an unusual way to put it – You are but strangers resident with Me. So, you can either be aliens, strangers or residents. We are either at home here or we are immigrants. However, the text clearly states that we are both at the same time. Found in context, it is clear what this means. This sentence comes amidst a discussion about the jubilee year in which all land is supposed to revert back to its original owner. It was a way of re-establishing social equality. Over time, an imbalance within society occurs and the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" grows. The institution of Yovel, the Jubilee year, reminds us as Ramban and Sforino both recommend, based on Midrash HaGadol that we lose sight of the big picture – it is not all about us. *Al ta'asu atzmichenm ikar*, it is not about us and what we acquire, after all it doesn't belong to us in the end. Therefore, the Torah teaches that we live here, we inhabit the land but, ultimately, it doesn't belong to us. Yet that leaves me unsatisfied. After all, the Psalmist (128) explains "*Hashamayim shamayim la'adonai, vha'aretz natan livnei adam*." "The heavens are for God and the earth for us."

Yet the lessons of reading this verse begs for a more textured response to the feelings it promotes. It is clear we all feel like resident aliens in our own lives. We feel right at home and distant all at the same time. We feel moments of connections with family, friends, work, community, God and with ourselves, while at the same time we are completely absent in every one of those circumstances. We need to work on how to minimize the latter and maximize the former.

Jack Reimer and Harold Kushner once wrote, "The man who listens to words of his friend or wife or child and does not catch the note of urgency: 'Notice me, help me, care about me,' hears but does not really hear." (found in Siddur Likrat Shabbat, page 74)

All of us have sat in these pews wondering where God is? The estrangement is palpable and we feel we have lost God – or at least that God has lost us. We have all arrived home to the sounds of voices, yet no one greets us – so the sense of being invisible grows. We feel we have lost our family or at least they have lost us. Each of us has had a special birthday, anniversary or a milestone that has gone unnoticed so we feel as though we don't even exist. We feel as though we have lost our community or, at least, they have lost us. Each one of us gets so harried by work and obligations that we can't remember the last time we had a moment to ourselves, seen a movie we like, or read a book we enjoy – and we have lost our self.

However, it can be recaptured. All it takes is a little effort. All we have to do is offer it and accept it. We get so caught up in the *mishagas* of being human, that we make our interactions so complicated, so difficult, and so tethered. The helping hand is turned away because of pride. The offer of assistance is snubbed in the name of insincerity. We wait for the invitation rather than picking up the phone; we wait for the note rather than asking for what we want. We would opt for the appearance of being self-sufficient over needy any day. Or worse, we don't want to appear self-centered, or self-absorbed, choosing rather to be left out. We say they should have known, they should have thought of me, while we sit home alone or we miss the conversation we want.

We may become a part of many organizations over the course of our lives. Some we'll be born into and some we'll choose to join. Some will invite us to join, while some we'll take the initiative to join. Some might expel us and some may ask us back. Some we'll return to and some we'll never rejoin. This is the time of year when school is ending and the summer is beginning. As a result, there will be many conclusions and many new beginnings. I have spent the past week going from one closing event to another. There are many graduation and confirmation ceremonies taking place at this time. Some will graduate and some will simply get a much needed break from the rigors of tough academic and social pressures. Some will begin an entirely new life. So, we remember the words of the Midrash, *kol hatchalot kashot* (Mekhilta Yitro, "Bachodesh" 2) "All beginnings are difficult." Whether it's a new job, a new project, new friends, new home, or a new community, please recall what our Torah teaches and my mother told me. "For now don't worry because now you are home. And God has God's eye on you." In a few weeks our son will graduate high school and make his way into the world. We could not be prouder and to him I say, "You can always come home, and I hope you will. Never feel as though there is no place for you. You may lose your room but there will always be a seat for you at the table." I'm sure you say the same to your children and if not, now is the time. Tell them when life is hard, you can always come home. I say it to you, when life is challenging you, you can always come home, because now you are home. And God has God's eye on you.

The words I offer today I believe to be holy and I ask you to make them your own.

Let us go forth in confidence from this sacred place. And may the blessing of God go with us. Let us take with us the words we have just heard, and may God give us the resolve to fill our desires. May God's spirit be with us and with those we love, and may we be granted health and contentment. May God give us strength, hope and vision – in a world at peace and let us say Amen.