

ROSH HASHANA 5772 – FIRST DAY  
September 29, 2011

This summer, while browsing through a Harvard Yard bookstore, a little book caught my attention. Featuring a picture of a dinosaur on the cover, it was called “All of My Friends Are Dead.” As I flipped through the pages of this book of illustrations and humorous captions, one, in particular, caught my attention. It said “I have 1,038 friends and I’ve never met any of them.”

Rosh Hashana is a time when we confess and while it’s not a sin not to be on Facebook, I’m not on it, have never had my own account, nor do I plan on it any time soon. But it doesn’t take a Facebook outsider to realize that very few of us really have 200, 500, 800 or 1,500 friends. Some of us know this many people, but friends? Only if one accepts a watered-down definition of the term. Of course, we live in an age in which most everything has been devalued. Half gallons of orange juice have shrunk to 59 ounces, Ice cream has gone from 64 ounces to 48.

News alerts used to relate to information which changed the world; now they tell us that unemployment went up or down .2% or that someone we never heard of has decided not to run for president or is pregnant (and sometimes both). For those of us who grew up always finding something good to watch on TV despite having only three or four channels, it is astounding that we live in an age of hundreds of TV channels with very little worth watching.

But this is not some old geezer's sermon about how things were better in the old days. Truthfully, many things were, but others weren't. Yet what of friends? Clearly, only a fraction of any person's Facebook friends are much more than acquaintances. However, in an age when disposable people and a la carte relationships form the basis of our increasingly frenetic lives, I think it is time to remind ourselves of "what, truly, is a friend?"

Most of us are familiar with the verse in the Yom Kippur afternoon Torah portion, v'ahavta l'rayakha kamokha," You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And yet the word "Raya" does not only mean "neighbor," it means "friend," as we see in the Biblical Book Song of Songs, where the word means someone with whom we have a meaningful relationship, someone whom we are to treat in the same way as we hope to be treated by others.

The Hasidic Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov taught: I learned how we must truly love our neighbor from a conversation I overheard between two villagers.

The first man said "tell me, comrade Ivan, do you love me?"

Ivan replied "Of course, I love you, my friend."

The first man asked "do you know what gives me pain?"

Ivan replied "how could I know what gives you pain?"

The first man responded "if you don't know what gives me pain, how can you say that you truly love me?"

That question was one of the favorite teachings of Rabbi Syme, the rabbi I grew up, who inspired and encouraged me to become a rabbi. The point is that a true friend is not judged by the amount of time they spend with us. A true friend is someone with whom we connect at a deeper level, someone to whom we feel an allegiance and for whom we are willing to make a sacrifice. We not only know what makes a true friend happy, we also know what brings them pain.

Just as many of us have lost sight of what makes for a true friend, we have done the same regarding the concept of community. So many of us look for what we can get out of an interaction or a relationship, without considering what we will give. We treat people as transactions and view ourselves as consumers in many places, including a temple. We pay our dues, we get our tickets, our access to clergy, education and Bar/Bat Mitzvah lessons for our kids and much more.

This consumer mentality is not a Beth Am phenomenon, it is a national problem and it has affected and afflicted both religious and secular organizations. The term “consumer” however, is really a euphemism for what is really going on: selfishness. Many people are focused on what they want and really don’t care about what they can do for other individuals or for the community at large. To modify JFK’s famous challenge, “they ask what the community can do for them, not what they can do for the community.

However, in a true community, we are not consumers. We are a part of the community, not apart from it. In the kind of community we say we want to be a part of, we do more than drop kids off for Religious School, come to the High Holy Days, pay dues and show up for life-cycle milestones. In the kind of community we say we want to be a part of, people help other people and give willingly of themselves without deriving personal benefit. True community is about the quality of the time, not merely the quantity.

Frankly, ladies and gentleman, we at Beth Am are not the community we were ten years ago, twenty years ago or fifty years ago. Back then, friendship was not defined by clicking a screen, it involved a commitment to doing for others, to caring for others. We may have advanced technologically, but communally, we have regressed. Being a community is not about making a series of pit stops throughout the year when needed; being a community involves caring, it means knowing what causes others pain and then working to alleviate that pain.

Two thousand years ago, the sage Hillel taught “if I am not for myself, who will be for me?” And he was right. However, Hillel’s message continued “But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”

The reality is that as our temple prepares to enter its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, we have strengthened the budget, we have strengthened the physical plant and we have strengthened our staff. However, it is increasingly difficult to get people to

give of themselves for more than their own child's education and their own religious experiences.

Yet Judaism is not about the Bar/Bat Mitzvah; Judaism is about the community. While we can pray as individuals, to lead a complete service requires a minyan, at least ten Jewish adults. The point of becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah is that the young adult is now able to take his/her place within the community. Thus, the concept of a private Bar Mitzvah is as ludicrous as a Hanukkah bush. We are judged on these High Holy Days not by what we do for ourselves; we are judged by what we do for others.

Beth Am Temple has never been about Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Our name says it all: Beth Am, the House of the People. We exist to serve people, to serve our local Jewish and general communities, as well as Jewish and other communities around the world, including Israel.

There is so much more that we can be doing to strengthen our congregation and these various communities. While finances are always a factor, the primary issue is not lack of finances; it is lack of people.

This morning, I am asking you to make a change. Not all of you, but lots of you. If your interaction with Beth Am is limited to attending services or attending or providing transportation to and from Religious School, I want you to do more and

almost all of us have the time. Like people who complain about having no money, but whose kids talk about their new vehicles, vacations and purchases, many of us who complain about having no time are addicted to talking, texting, watching the traditional boob tube or our latest electronic one.

Managing to pull ourselves away from our various screens can be as challenging as getting some of us to stop watching a game on TV when we're supposed to go somewhere. However, if we can make this very positive change in our lives this year, we will discover hours of free time every week and every month which we were convinced did not exist. Electronic devices were intended to serve us, not for us to serve them.

Today, I am asking everyone to commit to taking two hours per month, that is an average of four minutes per day, to benefit our community. Frankly, we need people to help us to live up to our potential. We need people who will help with social action, with Israel programming, with caring for the most vulnerable, with guiding our school, with organizing fun, social activities for adults and for kids. We need people who will give four minutes a day.

Now, frankly, I know one of the red flags that comes with this request. The word "committee" turns lots of people off. Having sat through 26 years of committee meetings at Beth Am, I can tell you that they should not inspire as much terror as they often do, but as a Temple, we too need to do better.

And so, today, I am issuing a challenge, not only to those of you whose Temple involvement is minimal; I am issuing a challenge to the many good people who chair our many committees and work on our many programs. The community will come to your meetings, we will even create new committees, we will breathe life into some which have been stagnant. However, we also expect meetings to end after no more than ninety minutes and preferably less.

It is not necessary for every person to comment on every statement. Use your prerogative as chairperson to politely, but firmly, move things along and you will keep those new members and enjoy a revitalized committee.

Yes, we have Temple committees whose members emerge from meetings upbeat, yet we also have other committees whose members trudge out of meetings exhausted. Our goal needs to be creating more of the former and getting rid of the latter. We need greater efficiency in our committees so that they and their good work can continue and thrive.

It takes a partnership between the veterans and the newer members. Frankly, if you are a Temple member and are not involved with a committee or a program, this is your open invitation. Between our president, our cantor and me, we will be glad to steer you to where your interests might best serve our community. In about two weeks, all of you will receive a letter from me making a suggestion as to where you might best serve Beth Am Temple. Of course, you

can serve wherever you please, but please make your presence felt.

Today, we are a congregation of six hundred people, but fannies in the seats are not the same thing as a community, just as names on a screen are not friends. So much of what our community, of what every community depends on, is people interacting and building relationships, as so many did at the Temple picnic less than two weeks ago. A community shares joys and sorrows, it does not merely read, click and leave.

A big part of the reason we are here today is to acknowledge our shortcomings and to affirm that we can do better, not only as individuals, but as a community. To succeed in that task will take all of us giving just a little time, a little effort.

Not long ago, a family left the Temple. Their children had already celebrated becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah and they wrote a lovely note about how much they enjoyed the Temple, but they had gotten what they wanted out of it.

This was a lovely family, good people. However, the reason we are here as a community is not merely for what we can get out of the Temple. We are here to help others in the bad times and to rejoice with them in the good times. We are here to feed the hungry with our Food Pantry and by participating in last Sunday's Walk4Change. We exist to clothe the naked with our Midnight Runs and to show compassion for the elderly and the infirm with our newly-revived

**Caring Community Committee.**

**Of course, we will always be there for our own Temple members, but as Copernicus, no relation, declared five hundred years ago: we are not the center of the universe. This morning I ask you to commit to giving more of yourself this year to strengthen both our Beth Am community, the local and international Jewish community and the general community through your personal involvement. As with any living organism, improving one part improves the health of the rest.**

**In less than a year, Rockland County will host the Maccabi Games for the first time, as you can see from the poster and brochures outside. It will be a massive undertaking, involving thousands of Jewish teen athletes and hundreds of volunteers. Beth Am will be a part of that community experience and we need you to join with us for those big events, as we need you to be part of the smaller, yet equally vital functions, such as returning the grocery bags outside with food for the hungry, donating to MAZON and the Food Bank of the Hudson Valley and participating in Temple activities.**

**In Biblical and in medieval times, Jews paid a tax to be part of the Jewish community. This is the basis for Temple dues which, by the way, are less than most Christians pay to be part of their churches, despite our naive image of churchgoers placing some coins or bills in a collection plate as their total**

obligation.

We can help you, you can help us and together we can accomplish more than we ever have to participate in the mitzvah of “tikkun olam,” repairing the world.

Touching a keyboard and wishing “happy birthday” does not make one a friend or a meaningful member of a community. It is by truly touching people’s lives, by connecting with and caring for one another that we bring meaning into our lives and the lives of those around us.

In a synagogue in Europe, every family had a candle in the chandeliers above the Sanctuary. When every family came to Temple, they put their candle in the chandelier and when they were absent, the Sanctuary was dimmer. As a temple, as a community, we only shine as brightly as the sum of our parts..

We can sit in front of the TV or the computer on Friday night or we can come together as a community. We can drop our kids off on Sunday morning or we can participate in a committee meeting or breakfast program. We can take what we want, when we need it from the Temple or we can come together to create something greater than ourselves. All it takes is two hours a month, four minutes a day.

We can do better, we can be better and that, after all, is the reason we come together. This year, may we fulfill God’s command to Abraham, which we read

above the Ark, “veheyay v’rakha” “and you shall be a blessing.”

Today, we have spoken many words and recited many prayers. Now, is the time to put them into action. Judaism stresses action over words, deeds over creeds. Today, we have talked the talk; tomorrow, may we begin to walk the walk.      **AMEN**